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Shifting sights: civilian militarism in Israeli art and visual culture

Roei, N.

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CHAPTER IV

KEBAB IN THEORY: MAPPING VISION

David Goss's *Lebanese Kebab* (1998; figure 4.1), an oil painting on parquet wood, depicts a plate with pita bread and three kebab sticks topped with sauce, laying on a flat surface at the center of a square composition. Colored in a grainy green monochrome, the plate is portrayed from a bird's-eye view. The flat, decorated background that covers most of the wooden base is processed in a similar tone of intense green. A film of white dots partly veils the top right quarter of the image, and prevents potentially mimetic qualities of the second, smaller circle that it covers to emerge. A segment of the wooden base along the left edge of the painting is left bare.

This chapter will offer a close reading of *Lebanese Kebab*. I will ponder its various possible interpretations, and tease out some of its aesthetic and political insights. The painting, part of Goss's series *Table Maps*, allows me to expand on some of the issues treated so far in this study, such as the way that images compel viewers to reflect on their perceptual limitations, but it also opens up to the related question of the distinction between "art" and "non-art" objects, a question that will become more pertinent in the chapters that follow. Most importantly, *Lebanese Kebab* allows me to elaborate on my understanding of how critical images participate in a socio-political discourse by way of straddling conflicting frames of reference. Naturally, the frames in question – the still life, the map, and the border – will take up a major part of my investigation.

In the previous chapters I have discussed how civilian militarism operates as a naturalized framework for national identity in Israel. I have touched upon the ways it functions within the local art-historical discourse and within a selection of images of art. The scale and the form of the critique of civilian militarism has varied from work to work, from unacknowledged acceptance in Adi Nes' *Soldiers* series, to wary self-reflection in Dudu Bareket's *Self Portrait at the IDF Induction Centre*, to critical documentation in Roi Kuper and Gilad Ophir's *Necropolis*, and to contemplative aesthetics in Larry Abramson's *tso'ob'ü*. In all these cases the critical detail that solicited my reflection resided in some sort of friction, be it the discord between Bareket's installation and its reproduction on the cover of the *Uniform Ltd.* exhibition (chapter one), or the tension that arises from the subtle changes between the images in *Necropolis*' semi-identical repetitive photographs (chapter three).

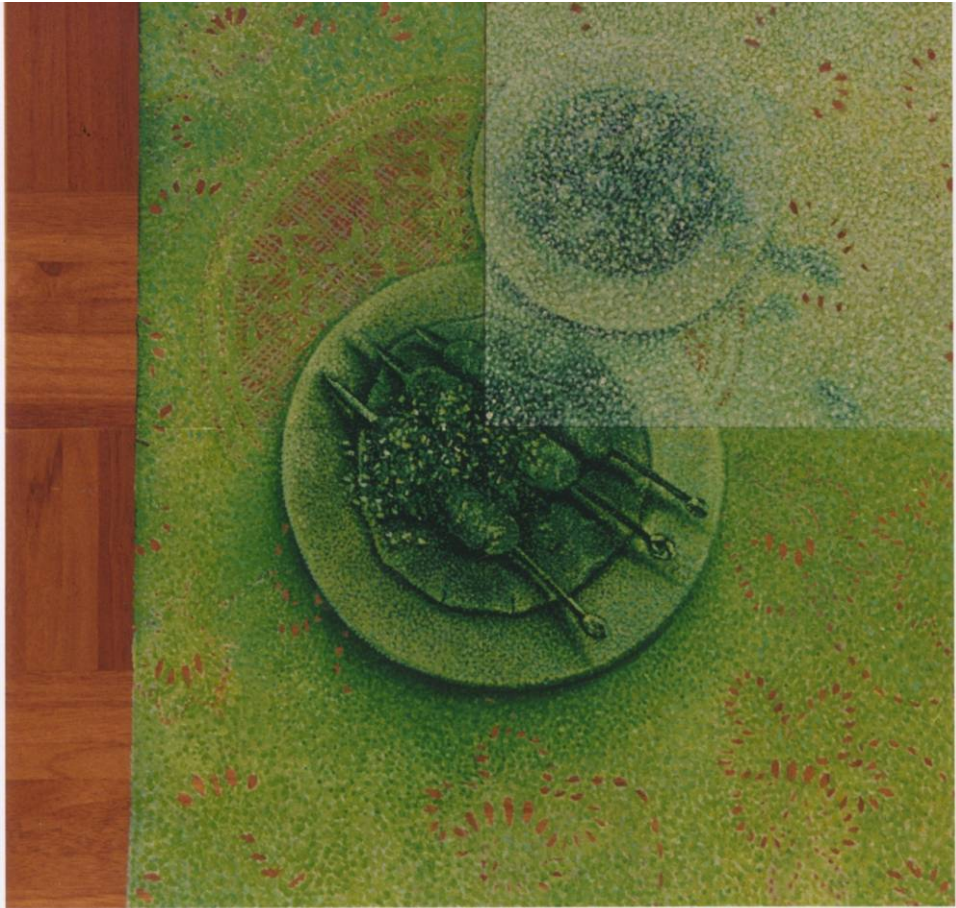


Figure 4.1. David Goss, *Lebanese Kebab*, 1998.

In this chapter I wish to develop the issue further by considering how *Lebanese Kebab* employs such discords or tensions to articulate the social imaginary of the Israeli subject and to map out its unconscious geographical and aesthetic fantasies. That mapping is carried out by an elaboration on the map as concept on the one hand, and on the still life as an art-historical genre on the other. The simultaneous reference to these two distinct categorizations, I argue, is central to the painting's meaning and message. It compels a comparative interpretation from its viewers, an interpretation that lingers on the contours of discourse. Following Van Alphen's conception of the thinking image as an active agent in the social field, and Bal's formulation of the critical image as that which points both inwards at its own existence as an artwork and outwards towards the social and political circumstances of its production and display, I argue that *Lebanese Kebab's* thinking resides in its staging of frictions, in its juxtaposition of conflicting traditions of visual recognition patterns.

In this chapter, then, I make a case for the critical image as that which enacts its critique through regressive – yet productive – contemplations. In the first section, I offer a close reading of the painting and focus on the ways it challenges and resists interpretation. Next, I explore the painting's allusion to the still life genre and to cartography as tools for critical thinking. In the final section, I conclude by locating the analysis in contemporary Israel, and theorize the critique that *Lebanese Kebab* offers with regard to its (Israeli) viewers' construction of their identity and their social, cultural, and political actualities.

Contesting Mis/interpretations

In his book *Art In Mind: How Political Art Shapes Thought* (2005), Van Alphen proposes that we consider the act of painting as an intellectual practice, and paintings as visual modes of thought. Instead of being cultural products, paintings can be seen as cultural agents, framing culture just as much as they are being framed by it. Artworks, Van Alphen explains, do not simply thematize social or cultural issues. They participate and intervene in the cultural matrix in which they are created and displayed. Their potential lies in their ability to offer an alternative to positivistic understanding. Following Theodor Adorno, Christoph Menke, and Hubert Damisch in

this respect, Van Alphen argues that the crucial function of aesthetic thought is to make viewers confront their conventional assumptions (*Art* xvi). The thinking image, accordingly, is that which stages thought not as a means to an end but as a valuable process in itself.

According to Bal, a similar process of staging thought can also take place when a work is exhibited. The open-ended modes of looking encouraged by the thinking image are in this case translated to the “philosophical exhibition” that “expos[es] thoughts without ending, problems without solutions, questions viscerally absorbed and not answered on the spot” (“Pain” 96). Goss’s *Lebanese Kebab* is an exemplary case of a thinking image that encourages aesthetic and political reflection of this sort. It calls for regressive and circular contemplations that repeatedly question the basic premises of vision, perception, and knowledge. Instead of reflecting a certain visual tradition, the painting reflects upon traditions of visual and categorical recognition patterns, and so theorizes the essence of perception as an indirect process and its dependency on pre-existing knowledge.

The painting’s confounding of interpretative visual cues drawn from different styles of painting is a case in point. Its title, *Lebanese Kebab*, along with the painting’s naturalistic features, solicits an iconographic interpretation. Such an interpretation identifies the decorative green background of *Lebanese Kebab* as a flattened representation of a tablecloth, and the bare wooden base to its left as a segment of a wooden floor. The smaller circle at the top right quarter of the painting can be interpreted as another plate of food, a side dish of sorts, partly covered by an embroidered serviette. However, the painting’s formal elements – color, perspective, and composition – complicate this simple iconographical description. They refuse a consistent identification of objects and events, and result in a dynamic process of negotiation between various and contradictory possible interpretations.

For starters, the flatness of *Lebanese Kebab* conjures an abstract reading of the image as a geometrical game balancing shapes and tones. The shapes do not correspond to the figurative ones and create colored layers that have an autonomous visual existence: for example, the top-right square of white film (the “serviette”) effaces the faint depth cues as well as a clear outline of the “food plates.” The painting thus hints at abstraction, in its encouragement of a non-figurative reading that negates any reference to a material origin.

The intense green monochromatic coloring of *Lebanese Kebab* further distances the represented objects from their material appearance, by grounding the image in a fantastic world of artifice. The meticulously rendered kebab plate is clearly based on a real-life model; yet due to its fantastic coloring, its reality exists inside the painting alone. This green, grainy food plate, and the table on which it appears to stand, originate in paint. In fact, I could say, with Michel Foucault, c'est n'est pas un kebab.¹⁰⁷

It has not been uncommon for still lifes to challenge the representational suppositions of artworks. Norman Bryson interprets Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit* (1602, figure 4.2), and later Paul Cézanne's *Still Life with Apples* (1895), in this vein when he writes:

The *Basket of Fruit* does not recede: it projects. And as it does so, it announces that the only space where the objects reside is in this projection that is sent out from the canvas towards the spectators. The painting shows objects that exist there, and only there – not in some prior, receding space that is neutrally copied or transcribed. The basket of fruit and the fruit are presented; they come into being on the canvas for the first time, not as transcription but as originary inscription. (*Looking* 80)

Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit* is, according to Bryson, a visual testimony of the artist's ability to create an image that is superior to the denoted, dispensable object (*Looking* 81). As such, it focuses on the *art* of painting, rather than on the painting's *subject*. In a similar fashion, Goss's elaborate processing of color and texture in *Lebanese Kebab* directs attention to the artist's toil, and to the materiality of canvas and paint. The image's representational potential recedes before the labor involved in its production.

Caravaggio abstracts the fruit basket from any worldly context. The case of *Lebanese Kebab* is different, because the painting's title assigns the kebab to a specific culture and geography. I will come back to this point later, but for now, I wish to emphasize that the painting still follows Bryson's interpretation of the still life genre as one of presentation (not representation), inasmuch as it stresses the artificial,

¹⁰⁷ I allude here to Foucault's essay *This is Not a Pipe*, where he analyses René Magritte's famous painting *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (1926) as an argument against a system of seeing that links reality with visual representation.

fantastic, and aesthetic qualities of the image over its representational aspects. In *Black Olives*, another painting from the *Table Maps* series, the point is made in a more overt way. *Black Olives*, a clear quotation of Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit*, emphatically associates itself, and by extension the entire series, with an internal art-historical discourse (figure 4.3).

Color, texture, and volume all operate in *Lebanese Kebab* as triggers for the viewer to go beyond iconographical interpretation. They call attention to the artist's toil, and hence, to the act of presentation. What is more, the combination of flatness and closeness with a bird's-eye view positions the viewer directly above the table, as if floating in air. This combination of a bird's-eye view, usually distant and disembodied, with an intimate closeness to the depicted object, unsettles our sense of location and balance. As a three-dimensional variation on the *trompe l'oeil*, the painting "provokes our eyes to the point of insult, and of doubt: the deceit undermines our reliance on our perception" (Grootenboer 5). *Lebanese Kebab* is clearly not a *trompe l'oeil* in the traditional sense of deceiving the eye. However, it follows Grootenboer's definition as it manages, for a split second, to undermine the reliance on visual perception as a tool to locate oneself in the world. In so doing it underscores, and undermines, the intimate relation between perspective and point of view. What we see remains unstable; and the place from where we see it does not stabilize at any given point.¹⁰⁸

Thus, the painting conjures several simultaneous modes of looking: realism, naturalism, abstraction, and *trompe l'oeil*. The represented object is both lifelike in shape and fantastically colored; the position of the viewer shifts between pragmatic and imaginary points of view; and the task of perception and interpretation alternates between descriptive, representational, and geometrical analysis. Yet, an iconographical interpretation is not cancelled out, since the kebab plate still inhabits the processed image. No one single reading is satisfactory, and the image allows neither the eye nor the mind to rest. The planes of painting and viewer reflect their fragmented realities back and forth, and the attempt at an interpretation *à la* Panofsky turns instead into a "tireless process that does not lead to interpretation, but to a

¹⁰⁸ A comparable analysis of the destabilizing effect of a bird's-eye view can be found in Van Alphen, *Art*, 81-83.



Figure 4.2. Caravaggio, *Basket of Fruit*, 1601.



Figure 4.3. David Goss, *Black Olives*, 1998.

process of thinking,” provoking thought in its refusal to reveal a clear meaning or truth about its being (Grootenboer 158). Multiple readings are thus encouraged in a way that does not allow a subsequent deterministic analysis. The painting’s textural allusion to the test for color blindness is a final, sarcastic pun on this matter.

The Still Life as Intertext

Lebanese Kebab refers simultaneously to two visual discourses: those of the still life genre and of cartography. The painting, and all the works of the *Table Maps* series, feature inanimate objects as their subject matter, and thus can be easily categorized as modern still lifes. The titles of the paintings in the series, such as *Black Olives* (1998), *Turkish Coffee* (1999) or, for that matter, *Lebanese Kebab*, conform to the tradition of the still life genre as well. At the same time, the bird’s-eye view and the flattened, geometrical composition allude to aerial photography and topographical maps, and situate the artworks in relation to the category of cartography.

When I identify *Lebanese Kebab* as a still life, I am bound to interpret the image within the framework of the genre and its history. Naturally the interpretative approaches to still lifes vary, but their connecting thread is the presence of contradiction and ambiguity.¹⁰⁹ When the still life is interpreted as an image of *vanitas*, portraying the humble mortality of man, it does so through the capacity of art to outlive its makers (Grootenboer 145, Bryson, *Looking* 116). If the still life image can be understood as a scientific experiment in optics – a description of the world seen – it nevertheless exhibits a fractured, multiple world that exposes the deceptive aspects of vision (Alpers 22). When the still life image is comprehended as a means to glorify artistic virtuosity, it does so by depicting un-glorified, dull, and mundane objects (Stoichita 18, 33; Bryson, *Looking* 81). Thus, the notion of conflict, or paradox, seems to be constitutive of the genre.

In his study *Looking at the Overlooked* (1990), Norman Bryson engages with the genre and its conflicts from a socio-political perspective. For Bryson, a central

¹⁰⁹ The most prevalent approach to the genre understands still life paintings as images of transience. Texts by Ingvar Bergström and more recently by John Ravenal are exemplary cases. Svetlana Alpers interprets still lifes, rather, as optical scientific experiences, and Ernst Gombrich (“Renaissance”) approaches still life paintings as demonstrations of artistic virtuosity. Overviews and appraisals of these and other accounts can be found in Stoichita; Grootenboer; Jay; and Bryson, *Looking*.

feature of still life paintings is the challenge they pose to humanistic values. A still life does not depict great dramas and does not follow the naturalized visual conventions of perspectival truth. Rather, argues Bryson, still life images attend to the world ignored, and indeed, overlooked, by humanism, with its customary attraction to heroic plots or spectacular events. In other words, still life attends to “rhopography”: the world of small things, of the repetitious, the mundane. The genre offers an alternative to established aesthetic hierarchies in both content and form, intermingling megalographic “high-art” style with rhopographic “low-art” subject matter (81). Its plea to look at the overlooked by means of this “transfiguration of the mundane” leads the way to social struggles as well (70). As a case in point, Bryson associates the marginalization of the art-historical still life genre with gender marginalization, and argues that the segregation of still life into feminine space in seventeenth-century Dutch art contributed, in fact, to women’s liberation out of the home and into the artist studio.¹¹⁰

Yet, here, too, lies a paradox. Once rendered in paint, the mundane or disregarded object becomes megalographic – distant, defamiliarized, and elevated – and so, the everyday remains to some extent overlooked:

What is shown is art itself, as something which in the presence of an everyday world always grows *impatient*; it is not content to be subservient to that prior world, and seeks autonomy and escape. And though what is painted remains humble and commonplace, in its state of restlessness and self-assertion, there is only one place rhopography can go – *megalography*. (86; emphasis in text)

Lebanese Kebab contains similar paradoxes, and in this sense closely follows the genre’s tradition. It confuses elements traditionally associated with “high art,” such as oil paint and meticulous performance, with the “low art” depiction of banal objects of consumption from everyday life. It is rendered on a base of wood, which recalls not only sacred iconic paintings from the past but also ordinary wooden floors, since the wood used is meant for parquet. In addition, and not unlike other contemporary still life paintings, *Lebanese Kebab* adheres to Norman Bryson’s social analysis of the

¹¹⁰ This argument is elaborated in the third and final chapter of Bryson’s *Looking at the Overlooked* (136-77).

genre through its incorporation of politically tainted subject matter. And yet the image itself remains contemplative, even lyrical, distant from the heat of the cultural struggles it refers to.

So far, it would seem that the painting's staging of paradoxes remains within the genre's conventional boundaries. Yet *Lebanese Kebab* takes a further step by introducing an untraditional cartographical perspective. In so doing, it alludes to an older conflict or paradox already inherent in works that were the precursors of still life.

Victor I. Stoichita traces the origin of still life images and shows how their subject matter, from food products spread on a table to flower bouquets in a niche, originally served as a form of a subordinated illustration, understood to be in opposition to the central topic of the painting, which depicted biblical scenes and human figures. These “pre-still lifes” were painted on the reverse sides of diptychs or triptychs, or in the margins of history paintings. They were supplementary, designed to connect the world of the image with that of the beholder. In other words, precursors of still life images functioned as *parergon* or frame and constituted the domain of the “non-image,” the “anti-image.” They confronted the central scene, the space devoted to the “image,” with a reverse side that was devoted to the “truth” (20). As a result such depictions “brought into the work's field of vision a fragment of the spectator's space, that is to say what was (according to the norm) *this side of the painting*” (Stoichita 8, emphasis in text).

If the “pre-still life” once employed characteristics of “distortion” or “cut” (Stoichita 23), hovering between the distant, imaginary space of the painting and the contemporary, actual space of the beholder, today still life imagery belongs wholly to the former realm. It is an established genre, where critical reflections are integral to its conventions. It is the mapping view, in Goss's case, that brings the precarious edge of the “anti-image” back to the picture. Maps and pictures belong today to different visual regimes – art and science – and, as pictures, to different academic schools – art history and geography. They are read with different expectations in mind, as they portray different kinds of knowledge. Simply put, paintings are aesthetic objects that belong to the artistic sphere and, as such, they are expected to solicit a subjective view (hence, “image”); whereas maps, belonging to the realm of science, are supposed to supply an objective (though iconic) description of the world (hence, “truth”). Their incorporation in a single image employs the characteristics of a “distortion” and a

“cut,” mixing distinct modes of description and interpretation. And so, in *Lebanese Kebab*, the art-historical genre of still life, with its inherent theoretical reflections on vision, representations, and social hierarchies, departs from the distant plane of the painting and locates its paradoxes back in the material, politicized space of the viewer’s actuality.

The Map as Still Life

The still life and the map, as respective instances of artistic and scientific representations, did not always belong to distinct visual regimes of knowledge. In fact, early mapmaking practices were quite decorative and coincided with landscape paintings to such an extent that there was no distinct terminology to set the two apart (Rees 60). According to Ronald Rees, until objective scientific schemes ousted pictorialism from cartography, maps and paintings had a reciprocal relationship and occupied a similar place in visual culture. Landscape paintings in particular were based on the same geometric principles as those of map-making, architecture, and even artillery science (K. Clark 17-19; Cosgrove, “Prospect” 46-52). In addition to their overlapping aesthetics, landscape paintings and maps shared a politics: Dennis Cosgrove explains how

[i]n painting and garden design landscape achieved visually and ideologically what survey, map making and ordnance charting achieved practically: the control and domination over space as an absolute, objective entity, its transformation into the property of individual or state. (“Prospect” 46)

While Rees, Cosgrove, and others concentrate on the particular conviviality of early mapmaking and landscape paintings, Svetlana Alpers makes a more general claim for the relationship between maps and paintings. Alpers argues that seventeenth-century Dutch paintings can be seen as the products of a “mapping impulse” that translated into what Victor Stoichita calls a “poetics of description” (Alpers 119-126, 147; Stoichita 174). Following Alpers, both paintings and maps shared a common notion of the knowledge that was to be gained through them: artworks were not strictly

separated from the products of scientific inquiry, and were understood to be empirical observation on vision (119). Alpers concludes:

... what maps have in common with other Dutch pictures at the time [is that they used to record] something that was otherwise invisible. Like lenses, maps were referred to as glasses to bring objects before the eye. (133)

Seventeenth-century still life paintings, too, brought objects before the eye, describing them with a scientific and seemingly disinterested attention to detail. It was by using a microscopic approach that the painter's eye scrutinized objects in a still life painting (Alpers 90-91), while the geographer's cartographic eye scanned the land from afar through maps and landscape paintings.¹¹¹ Both modes of description were joined in their desire to map out the world and obtain descriptive knowledge (Alpers 95-96, 119).

Alpers differentiates between *maps* as a specific type of visual image, and *mapping* as the super-structure of Dutch art and visual culture (147). Her definition of mapping, as the driving force behind, and the connecting thread between all kinds of images, allows maps to be understood as an artistic genre, parallel to still life, portraiture, and landscape, all subordinate to the scientific aspiration of the mapping impulse, to the quest to assemble knowledge through pictures (147, 165). Following Alpers, *Lebanese Kebab* can be read as a combination of these two distinct modes of description that nevertheless attempt to reach a similar goal, that of depicting scientific knowledge in representation. Yet, as argued above, the fortunes of the still life genre reveal ambiguities and ambivalence to be foregrounded as one of its main features.¹¹² Thus, the underlying "mapping impulse" of the still life genre, with its quest for – and assertion of – objective, scientific knowledge, is estranged and investigated through its very articulation.

The rhetoric of the modern map is that of objective, scientific knowledge. Maps make it possible to see phenomena unavailable to direct seeing. They are immediately both visible and readable, and function as image-indexes (Jacob 1-3,

¹¹¹ I borrow the term "cartographic eye" from Christine Buci-Glucksmann, who reads desire and fantasy in the seemingly disembodied perspective of the map by associating the bird's-eye point of view with the Greek myth of Icarus and his fatal flight.

¹¹² Alpers too refers to the inherent ambiguity of the still life genre and to its potential to problematize the "truth" of a representation in her discussion of the paintings of Constantijn Huygens (22-23).

Buci-Glucksmann). Yet the descriptive knowledge that the map provides is never disinterested, as maps help to codify, legitimate, and promote the worldviews fundamental to them.¹¹³ According to Christian Jacob, the map's power of seduction and its status as an iconic image cannot be distilled from its rational construction as an intellectual space ruled by science.¹¹⁴ Numerous critical texts on the political undercurrents of maps and of mapping point to two distinct layers of misrepresentation. The first has to do with the paradox that the map can clarify only by means of distortion. Maps on a scale of 1:1 have been useful only as a speculative literary conceit.¹¹⁵ The second, related layer has to do with the effect that this misperception has on the territory that is mapped. The juxtaposition of the still life and the map underscores both predicaments.

Clearly, *Lebanese Kebab* does not describe a specific geographical area. While its title references a specific geo-political space, the visual "map" that it forms through shapes and colors is wholly fantastic and generic. What is left from the area map is only the idea of Alpers' mapping impulse: the endeavor to represent space in a coherent way. The resulting conceptual map reflects on the kind of knowledge that the mapping impulse effaces, and on the kind of desire that maps are meant to serve.

In fact, the painting offers the map itself as the object under scientific scrutiny: it includes an actual depiction of a map – a "table map," which is the Hebrew expression for tablecloth. Visually, the tablecloth/map is indicated in *Lebanese Kebab* by the ornamented decorations on the green background. Conceptually, this relationship is underscored by the series' title. While the painting's title announces a plate of food as its subject matter, the series' title effaces that plate and presents the tablecloth/map as its thematic focus. The map-as-object and the mapping view mirror each other in *Lebanese Kebab* and draw attention away from the contents of the table, from the professed subject matter of the painting. In an attempt to map out the table, the map envelops its object, and thus underscores the predicaments inherent to the mapping impulse, where one is prompted only to identify, but never to identify with,

¹¹³ Elaborations of this argument can be found in Frieling; Crampton; and Harley.

¹¹⁴ In his classic study *the Sovereign Map* Jacob offers a historical overview and a comprehensive analysis of "the nature of the cartographic object in the diversity of its materializations and its possible uses" (8) by exploring the components that make up the map, including borders, grids, legends, and decorations, but also aspects of memory and imagination.

¹¹⁵ Examples include Lewis Carroll, "Silvie and Bruno" (1893) Jorge Luis Borges, "On Rigor in Science" (1946), and Umberto Eco, "On the Impossibility of Drawing a Map of the Empire on a Scale of 1 to 1" (1992).

the matter at hand. This disjunction between the map and its object is made more explicit in two other paintings from the series, *Couscous* (figure 4.4) and *Turkish Coffee* (figure 4.5). In *Couscous*, the food stuffs falling from the silver spoon change texture and shape according to their spatial location in one color field or another. In *Turkish Coffee* the spilled coffee creates an identical composition, but instead of mutating according to the map's delineation it spoils the neatly cut symmetry.

In all these works, the map is put on the table, so to speak, as part of the "self-awareness" of the still life image (Stoichita, 1997), and therefore accommodates a reflection on the distortion inherent to the meta-structure of mapping the world, which is closely linked to its incessant desire to grasp that world. Instead of "looking at the overlooked," to use Bryson's terminology, the still life-as-map reflects on the act of overlooking as such. It emphasizes the transparent quality of the overlooked subject in the terrain of an abstract spatial comprehension of space.

What is more, the tension that is created between the distant gaze of an area map and the intimate closeness to objects on a tablecloth/map underscores the impossibility of discerning it all at once. It confounds a territorial gaze with an intimate indoor space. Each category demands a different tuning of one's sight, and whichever knowledgeable framework the viewer chooses to look from, each time, she cannot wholly familiarize herself with the subject of/on the map. This categorical impossibility is inherently related to the painting's political layer. It sketches the impossible desire of the Israeli subject to intimately belong to, and at the same time control, its geo-political neighbors.

Through its title, *Lebanese Kebab* locates the categorical tensions that it brings up in a specific cultural, geographical, and political arena. The designation "Lebanese" refers to an old culinary tradition, traces of which are found today all over the world. It also refers to a nation-state, a historically recent geographical entity. The latter affiliation turns the kebab plate into a symbolic shape of the Lebanese nation-state, which was partly occupied by Israel when the painting was made. Certainly, the reference to Lebanon in the title *Lebanese Kebab* is more readily connected with a highly praised culinary culture than with notions of national geography, occupation,



Figure 4.4. David Goss, *Couscous*, 1999.

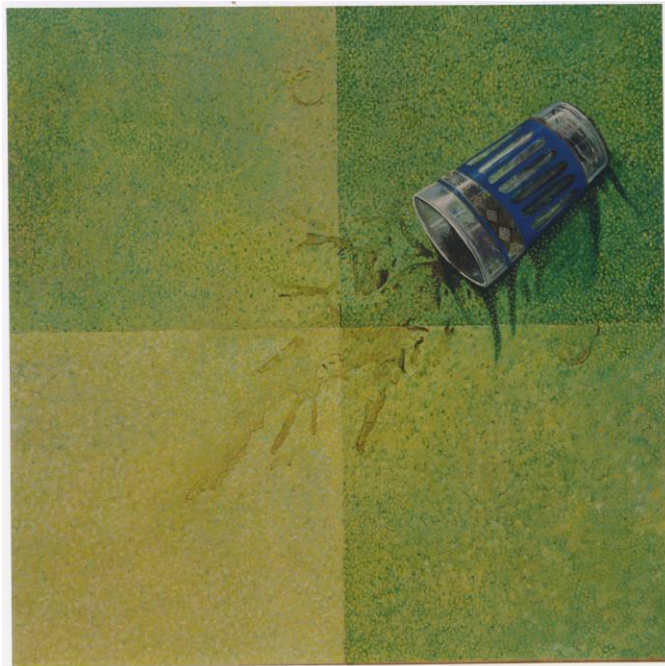


Figure 4.5. David Goss, *Turkish Coffee*, 1999.

and war. Many Israeli restaurants pride themselves for having a Lebanese cultural atmosphere, expressed in homeliness and hospitality complemented by a delicious aroma. These nostalgic and inviting notions of Lebanese culture circulate in dissonance against Lebanon's political connotations in Israel, which intimate combat, threat, violence, and territorial dispute. The framing of the kebab plate in terms of the mapping impulse straddles a desired cuisine with its feared geographical roots, as it locates the spectator's gaze simultaneously inside the interior of a household and above a demarcated terrain. The depicted subject matter – be it a food plate or a figurative shape of a nation-state – fades away in the process, and all that remains are the viewer's gaze and desires.

Seeing Green: Shaping Emplacement

Two fields of expectations collide in *Lebanese Kebab*: one emphasizes symbolic paradoxes and ambiguities, while the other underscores a desire for positive, descriptive knowledge. This collision, together with the political specificity of the painting's subject matter, affects the way the image lends itself to interpretation. *Lebanese Kebab* was painted before Israel's retreat from southern Lebanon in 2000, and long before the more recent war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanese territory in 2006. Its relevance, despite the dramatic political changes in the area, is due to the fact that it does not contemplate a specific state of affairs, but rather, considers the contingency of national borders and the precarity of nationally framed vision. The vision that it frames is, however, not Lebanese. In fact, and quite emphatically, the questions that *Lebanese Kebab* raises with regard to national border delineations are framed from – and for – the viewpoint of an Israeli beholder. That viewpoint is marked most effectively by the monochromatic green color that covers almost the entire field of vision.

When I take the painting's allusion to Lebanon into account, then the pervasiveness of its green monochrome cannot but allude to the Green Line – the 1949 Armistice lines established between Israel and neighboring countries (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt) at the end of the 1948 war. The Green Line separates Israel from the occupied Palestinian territories, as well as from the land of South Lebanon that was until recently under Israeli military control. Its validity as a determining

factor for border delineation remains a crucial issue in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (Brawer 41). Thus the line constitutes a “boundary in flux,” whose formal and functional definitions are undergoing constant change (Newman 1). As a result of its oxymoronic nature, public references to the Green Line within Israel are not devoid of emotion or passion, while its actual contours are barely known.¹¹⁶ A noteworthy incident dubbed “The Green Line Affair” took place in December 2006. The then-minister of education, Yuli Tamir, decided to include the Green Line in maps to appear in future high school textbooks so as to enhance class discussion regarding the debate around it. Her recommendation caused a general uproar in the media, received heated responses from politicians on the right, and was ultimately rejected by the Knesset Education Committee. This goes to show that the Green Line is much more than a mark on a map, and that its physical contours are infused with fears and desires.

Benedict Anderson’s writing on mapping within colonial and nationalist contexts may shed light on the emotional intensity that the visualization of the Green Line causes in Israel. In his analysis of the relationship between cartography and scientific knowledge, Anderson proposes a more political interpretation of the map than Alpers’ analysis would allow. For Alpers the visibility provided by the map was related to science and optics. For Anderson, mapping was part of an endeavor to create a coherent concept of the colonial (and later, the national) subject.¹¹⁷ Anderson approaches mapping as a paradigm for military and administrative operations, where cartography is a discourse, rather than a science.¹¹⁸ He analyses nineteenth-century maps of Southeast Asia and sees them as assertions of power which “shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion – the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry” (163-164). Following Anderson, the geographical shape of the nation-state is a key form of national identification, regardless of its spatial context: the clear, unambiguous, and unchanging boundaries delineated on a map turn into a logo of the nation (175). In Israel’s case, there are no clear, unchanging boundaries. As a result, following

¹¹⁶ On this note see Fleishman and Solomon; Newman; and Warschawski.

¹¹⁷ However, Anderson does not deny that “this style of imagining” was a product of optical technologies – astronomy, horology, surveying, and so forth (1983:184-185). The mapping impulse and the desire for visible knowledge are, in his view, the precursors of naturalized (mapped) national identification.

¹¹⁸ An expanded argument of the mapping discourse can be found in the writings of B. J. Harley.

Anderson's account would suggest that Israeli identity – and Israel itself, for that matter – is still in the process of being established. From this perspective the emotional intensity invested in the Green Line becomes clear, as the line is shown to be the emblem around which identity struggles are taking place.

It is not surprising, then, that Israel's unstable national borders are frequently referenced within Israeli and Palestinian art.¹¹⁹ One of the more exemplary cases is to be found in the oeuvre of David Reeb, in particular in his oil paintings from the 1980s, where the contour of the Green Line is stamped over (military) figures, cityscapes, studio interiors, and abstract backgrounds (e.g., figure 4.6). Gannit Ankori describes how in Reeb's work, line and color turn from artistic tools to political signifiers:

The line turns out to be a border. The green color turns out to a pronounced political indicator. The territory that is defined by the "Green Line" imposes itself on the artist' studio ... Following Reeb, it is impossible to make or see art without having the territorial dispute forced upon the fields of vision, production, and cognition. ("Mapping" 34-35, my translation)¹²⁰

The Green Line and the related territorial and ideational struggles also impose themselves on *Lebanese Kebab*. But here, unlike Reeb's *Green Line* variations, the line stretches and swells: it is completely pervasive, invading the entire field of vision. More than an imprint on identity, it becomes a key device in constituting the subject, a filter through which the nationally identified subject mis/perceives the world.

¹¹⁹ Noteworthy examples include the works of Joshua Glotman, Asim Abu Shakra, Michael Druks, Gal Weinstein, Sliman Mansour, Mona Hatoum, and Joshua Neustein. The exhibition "Borders," on display at the Israel Museum more than thirty years ago, was the first to present a comprehensive overview of Israeli artists working on the theme (Rachum). More recent overviews and analyses of the use of borders and maps in Israeli and Palestinian art can be found in Ankori, "Mapping;" Ankori, *Palestinian* (especially ch. 6); Boullata, "Facing"; Rogoff (especially ch. 3); and Gilat.

¹²⁰ Reeb's political art is both exceptional and revolutionary within Israeli art historiography. For more on his work see, for example, Faulkner; and Azoulay and Reeb.

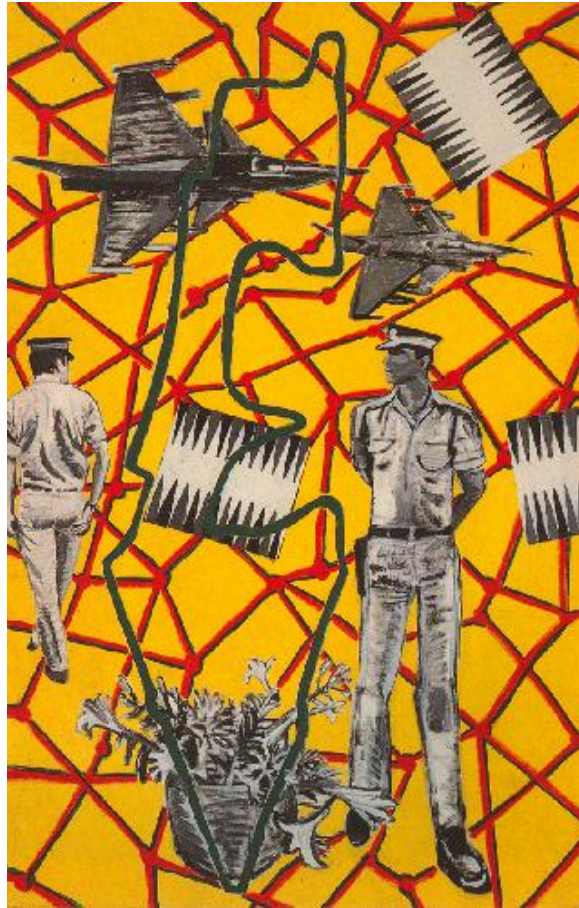


Figure 4.6 David Reeb, *Green Line with Backgammon*, 1985.

It is important to note that the maps that Anderson refers to are neither the same as those analyzed by Alpers, nor those created by Goss in the *Table Maps* series. Anderson refers specifically to so-called mercatorian maps from the middle of the nineteenth century, which assisted the colonizing enterprise.¹²¹ As an inevitable outcome of translating a curved surface onto a flat sheet, the shape of the mercatorian map distorts the layout of the land it purports to represent. While the distortion remains on the level of representation, it nevertheless has consequences on the comprehension of the represented space. Anderson's discussion of the mercatorian map intersects with Goss's *Table Maps* in its critical assessment of perceptual and political distortions engendered by the map.

The painting's green monochrome, especially given the target-like composition, is unavoidably associated with military power. During the first Gulf

¹²¹ The mercatorian map is a cylindrical map projection of the globe, initially made for navigational uses, that has come to serve as the conventional mapped representation of the world.

War, footage of night combat was regularly seen on TV. Such footage covered the entire screen in fluorescent green. The painting's composition – circle in the middle of a square cross – and color – pervasive, forceful green monochrome – allude to such images, and thus conjure associations of night-vision goggles used in military action. The kebab plate, positioned at the center of a square cross, turns into the target and future victim of this military weapon-like vision. The mapped land of *Lebanese Kebab* is thus covered with the color and shape of combat. More importantly perhaps, the composition, read in such terms, positions its viewers behind a gun sight. There is no other way to approach the image than to accept, *a priori*, this complicitous position, to join the painting's mapping impulse and distorting effects, as well as its subtle yet resolute fracturing and effacement of its own subject matter.

In conclusion, *Lebanese Kebab* intermingles reflection on the inconsistency and ephemeral quality of the shape of Israel, its status as an emblem of national identity, and the effects that such national identification has on one's perception. The allusion to the Green Line and to military night vision through a singular aesthetic element irreducibly combines national identification and a militaristic point of view. When political geography is constructed for military use, the subjects that it makes as well as the subjects that make it are forcefully and arbitrarily differentiated from others. To name the kebab *Lebanese*, or, for that matter, to know oneself as *Israeli*: both are acts that engender national subjects and subjectivities, as much as they describe them. *Lebanese Kebab* brings the absurdity of spatial delineation to the fore, and examines the essence of the map as a dictator of borders, boundaries, and definitions that are not bound to be.

Yet *Lebanese Kebab* does not compel a critical reading; it does not aspire to reveal the overlooked to a reluctant audience. Instead, fitting into Van Alphen's delineation of the thinking image, the painting allows the willing viewer to reflect on the blindness and distortion inherent in perception. In the course of this reflective process, the painting is "able to make present that which withdraws from our cognitive power" (*Art 9*), as it rethinks the naturalized and politically inflected truths, rooted at the base of perception and understanding.