

# **Reuven Israel**

## ***As Above, So Below***

**ShulamitNazarian**  
**LosAngeles**

**Reuven Israel**  
***As Above, So Below***

September 14 - October 28, 2016

## Tales of Love and Deception

by Lilly Wei

Reuven Israel, while regarding his new work, paused for a moment, then said: “What is important—and what I want my sculptures to create—is a space for fantasy, for imagination.” Too much of today’s art is literal, he continued. Art and life may be proximate, but they are not the same.

In *As Above, So Below*, Israel continues to explore abstract form with unabated avidity and sophistication. He is deeply interested in codes of representation without the figure; the elegance of geometry is his preferred language. Each body of work is generated by the one that preceded it, with the addition of something new to the mix. While these changes might seem minor at times (he prefers evolution to upheavals), there is ultimately a notable, even immense difference, sometimes surprisingly so in relationship to the matter-of-fact nature of the shifts. For instance, the antecedents to this show consist of stacked pieces, often larger, horizontal in orientation, resting on the floor, or angled against a wall and braced by it. In the present project, the palette and some of the components are similar, still threaded on a thin copper rod, but the sculpture has been pared down to three essential designations: base, shaft, and finial, or feet, body, head, reminding us that sculpture, for most of its history, has



*At First Blush*, 2016, Copper coated steel rod and painted MDF, 96 x 13 x 13 inches  
*Green*, 2016, Copper coated steel rod and painted MDF, 96 x 21.25 x 21.25 inches  
*Black Out*, 2016, Copper coated steel rod and painted MDF, 96 x 14.5 x 14.5 inches



*At First Blush*, 2016, Copper coated steel rod and painted MDF, 96 x 13 x 13 inches

been figurative. Furthermore, these nine recent sculptures, emphasizing the top and bottom, are freestanding, underscoring their association with the body, as does his increasing engagement with the base as he progressed. Israel constantly adjusts the ratio between elements, tinkering with placement, always fine-tuning their visual and psychological impact, the top “launched” by the bottom. The tension between top and bottom has been ratcheted up in this series as they contend with one another, attracted and repelled, energized by the confrontation, pushed apart and pulled together.

Israel is greatly drawn to extravagant interpretations of geometric shapes that are capacious enough for fantasy to flourish. Minimalism and Pop, Modernist design and architecture (with its belief in ideal environments that are socially and spiritually affective), Islamic mosques, Buddhist stupas,

and Russian Orthodox cathedrals all provide him with visual stimulation. Playing on this tension, Israel infuses the work with the language of science fiction and its vision of future worlds ironically derived, in his eyes, from an aesthetic vocabulary rooted in the past. His references are intentionally open-ended and difficult to pin down—spaceships, javelins, ski poles, ceramic vessels, and more come to mind as viewers contemplate the work.

Israel’s forms are impeccably crafted. What you might notice first is the extraordinary refinement of his production, the surfaces approaching some platonic ideal of what surface and form should be. All are made of painted MDF (medium density fibreboard) replicating wood, metal, and plastic, demonstrating the artist’s delight in his virtuosity and in trompe l’oeil; his credo is that deception is central to art. In this contemporary version of trompe



*At First Blush*, 2016 (detail)

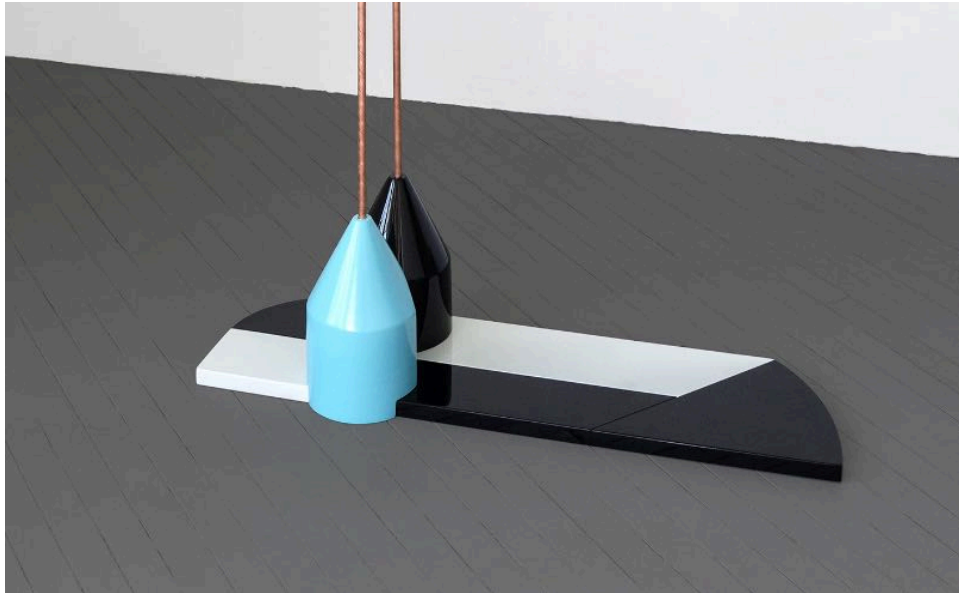


*Black Out*, 2016, Copper coated steel rod and painted MDF, 96 x 14.5 x 14.5 inches



*Green*, 2016, Copper coated steel rod and painted MDF, 96 x 21.25 x 21.25 inches





*Black and Blue*, 2016 (detail)

l'oeil, what seem to be precise, mass-produced objects are illusions. In reality, everything (except the copper rods) is painstakingly, delicately wrought by hand—cut, laminated, sanded, colored with industrial paint and lacquer, then polished to an immaculate finish, aglow with a potent visual allure.

His titles, prompting discourse, are idiomatic expressions based on color, giving them a new context, their meanings recharged, rebooted. They stress the role of color in works that are as much about painting as they are about sculpture (similar in certain ways to the Californian minimalist John McCracken). *Black and Blue* (2016) usually refers to the bruising of the skin but Israel, typically, sees it another way, as something more descriptive and visual, at the same time

appreciating its denotation. The work is more accurately described as black and white (a phrase that itself denotes clarity and the unequivocal—the latter a notion the artist might debate as an impossibility) rather than black and blue, if considered quantitatively. The title is inexact, he points out approvingly. It is also about the “mirroring” of forms, although that mirroring, too, is inexact, and linked to his sense of rupture and play. Additionally, its upright poles, like double antennae, seem to signal the cosmos. *Yellow Belly* (2016), meaning coward, a kind of snake, and more, is named for its lemony cup-like form presented on a two-tiered base fitted to its diameter, the piece culminating in a small, glossy black cone that suggests a hat or perhaps another attempt at cosmic outreach. *At First Blush* (2016) features a plump, beguiling shape that toggles between



*Black and Blue*, 2016, Copper coated steel rods and painted MDF, 96 x 39.5 x 13.15 inches

identities;, perhaps it's a stupa or, further afield, something deliciously edible. In *Red Neck* (2016) and *White Collar* (2016), two of the newest works, the base has become more expansive. *Red Neck*'s tilted support—its copper rod at a diagonal—consists of mostly red-toned stripes. It appears to be constructed from separate bands but is not. Israel goes to great lengths to persuade the viewer that it is, especially in his detailing of the edges, which seem slightly misaligned. *White Collar*'s fan-shaped base also suggests multiple parts like a pieced-together puzzle. However, it is made from just two joined sections and is the most assertive in the series; it might be read as an abstract painting or as a black tie on the grey ground of a shirtfront.

Israel is a formalist, but his brand of formalism hovers over specific things in the world without coming to a standstill. Fluidity of meaning is inherent to his practice, full of associative riffs and speculations that are serious, strange, humorous, the range of possible readings crucial to its richness, urging viewers to let their responses wander. Labors of lavish, stubborn love, these utopian objects are steeped in contingency and a kind of magical thinking, mischievous talismans for an uneasy era.



*White Collar*, 2016, Copper coated steel rod and painted MDF, 97.5 x 61 x 61 inches



*Red Neck*, 2016, Copper coated steel rod and painted MDF, 80.5 x 65.75 x 47.25 inches



*Red Neck*, 2016 (detail)





*As Above, So Below*, 2016, Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles (installation view)

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*As Above, So Below*, 2016, Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles (installation view)





*Red Head*, 2016, Copper coated steel rod and painted MDF, 96 x 9.5 x 9.5 inches



*Red Head*, 2016 (detail)



*Out of the Blue*, 2016, Copper coated steel rod and painted MDF, 97 x 14.5 x 14.5 inches



*Out of the Blue*, 2016 (detail)

*Yellow Belly*, 2016, Copper coated steel rod and painted MDF, 96.5 x 12 x 12 inches



Excerpts from  
**Joshua Neustein Reuven Israel**  
**In Conversation**

Paperweight Art Press, Tel Aviv 2014

**Joshua Neustein:** Maybe we should start with, what George Kubler called “the point of entry” both personal and artistic. Personally when did we meet? Was it at the exhibition “Flat” curated by Gilad Meltzer on Salame Street in Tel Aviv? I remember encountering the floor piece, big alternating black and white stripes, very bold. I liked it immediately, it resonated with images of the street and the sports field and to art historical issues. I asked Meltzer “Who is this artist? I want to meet him?”

**Reuven Israel:** Yes that was the first time we met. A few months later I was in New York and you invited me to visit you in your studio. About the work you mentioned, it was a piece that I did as a student in my second year at Bezalel Academy that resurfaced in that exhibition. I think that in a way I was trying to take abstract painting and put it on the floor.

**JN:** I can’t recall if the stripes were painted directly on the floor or if they were applied to a material like linoleum, which you laid on the floor. There are so many tensions and dependencies between the marking and the material

you marked. How did the stripes meet the floor? As for painting vers sculpture - this is still a lingering issue for you, and for me as well. Perhaps that is one the overlaps in our practices.

**RI:** It was actually one of my first experiments with MDF and spray painting. Each stripe is a separate board, it’s a bit like shelves placed on the floor one touching the other. One of the questions I was asking myself was “what is the minimum height for something to turn into a sculpture?”

**JN:** That certainly was what drew me to your work and I felt a common sensibility. How displacing an object changed its category. Is an object on the wall a painting and on the floor a sculpture? This was a rhetorical but fertile question. You and I were like parenthesis to an era, I the opening parenthesis 40 years ago and you the closing parenthesis on that era. We both crossover from 2D to 3D and vice versa. You work on your surfaces in a pictorial fashion, more than on the weight and mass of the sculpture. I work more on movement, process and evidence of performance and I’m dismissive of my surfaces.

**RI:** It’s true I do work on my sculpture surfaces in a pictorial fashion. Many times even the shapes themselves are determined by how I wish them to “take” the coat of paint. In most cases each color is a separate piece that I later assemble with other parts to create the final sculptural work.

**JN:** I have so many questions about the process and the technique. So the process is not carving... juxtapositions, and the construction is not building a sculpture, but fitting the parts together that are prefab.

**RI:** They are fabricated as different parts that are fitted together many times during the process before individually painted. After a while I started also doing the opposite; making one piece look as if it were assembled from many different parts. So if something looks like it’s one piece with a few colors then it’s probably made of separate parts put together and if something looks like it is made of a lot of different parts it can really be one piece, or much less pieces than it seems.

**JN:** These components preclude any hurried decisions on the subject. Like the editing film rushes to create a narrative. As you spend a lot of time together with the object of your labor and get to know every angle, the experience you induce attaches a physical identification and distillation, and constructs disparate facets and a kind of cubism.

**RI:** The fact that in many cases my sculptures are assembled from different parts causes a situation, that in a way, I see the piece for the first time only when I put all the parts together after painting them. That moment is very strange to me. I have a very strong sense of detachment from the thing I was working on for so long. It is new to me, like a stranger, that I never really saw before that very moment.

**JN:** How do you make the sculpture seamless when you combine the different parts?

**RI:** Parts do often need to slide one into the other and fit perfectly, but this sounds more complicated than it actually is. In many ways it is just like building a chest of drawers, that each drawer needs to fit into a designated space. The sculptures are actually not seamless at all, they just appear to be so at first sight. They also sometimes appear to be straight or round, plastic or metal and industrially fabricated.

**JN:** I don’t have Texte zur Kunst statements to hurl your way! But I know criticality analysis locates itself in a recognizable way. Rather than braid self-congratulations. Good analysis creates terminology that is both curious, specific and contextualizes the sculpture. Your sculptures are “desiring machines” if we are to use a Deleuzian term. And the time you spend on them, or more precisely with them, generates a delirium which in time becomes automatism. The experience of making





*Superpartners*, 2011, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv (installation view)

your sculpture is what psychiatry calls “a fixation”. Along these extensions and projection there is the act of disappearance. Your obsessive working on the image, also disappears you. But we disappear like Bedouins in order to reappear again in another place.

**RI:** Yes we both erase ourselves in different ways from our work.

**JN:** In your case the high gloss surface insinuates that it should not be touched or approached? “Noli me Tangere”. You actually titled one of your earlier sculptures “P.D.T. (Please Don’t Touch)”, so here we have the institutional attitude toward painting, drawing. But sculpture flirts with tactile senses.

**RI:** I used regular household enamel paints in the beginning; these paints seemed dry, but weren’t really for a long time. So often, if people touched them they left fingerprints embedded into the surface of the paint. This used to freak me out. “P.D.T. (Please Don’t Touch)” is from that period. After a while I started working with more industrial and sophisticated paints to solve that problem. About the name, traditionally a name should give some kind of explanation to the work of art, in this case I liked the fact that the sculpture itself is very self-absorbed and non-revealing, and the name instead of explaining just holds you back. You are also not sure if it’s a name or an instruction.

**JN:** Your sculptural surfaces give themselves as a power of semblance. It passes

to a region of objectivity. But I suspect that the motive force is a labor intensive repetitive action that is self-hypnotic. For a dyslexic person this must be addictive and magical to work the surfaces hours on end. The surfaces are more an artificial image than a natural image.

**RI:** You mentioned magic, as I see it the word magic can refer to two very different things. The first is shamanistic, believing that certain people animals or objects possess supernatural powers. The second is acts of magic which are actually elaborated acts of deception like a magician’s performance. You know that you are being fooled, you just don’t see how. While one hand of the magician is drawing your attention the other hand is busy doing the trick, concealed behind his back.

**JN:** You did the “Superpartners” show at the Tel Aviv Museum alongside the painter Shai Azoulay. One of the pieces you showed was “Babi”. A box-like shape that has a movable section. A thick frame or doorway-like part and an internal rectangular “door” that can swivel inside the frame if pushed. Would you say it is rotating? Revolving? Turning?

**RI:** Sculptural works, especially seductive tactile ones, invite, whether I want it or not, physical inquiry from the viewer, that often leads to abuse. At one point I had enough of this abused and I wanted the pieces to respond if



*Babi*, 2011, painted MDF, 32 x 23.5 x 14.5 inches

touched or poked. This led to sculptures that can be turned or have rotating elements in them, parts that can be opened and closed and buttons that can be pushed. In the case of “Babi” there is an inside revolving panel.

**JN:** So the sculpture responds to the touch. It takes on a role of submission. Does “Babi” have a toy-like quality? The title or name of the piece seems child-like. If so is there a perversion when an old man plays with toys? I myself have been accused of that as well.

**RI:** I think that when a grownup person encounters an object that can’t be categorized immediately, s/he goes back in a way to a juvenile or even infantile state, of physically inquiring what that thing can do and from that s/he tries to understand what it is. I think that at

times, I encourage or provoke that behavior with my sculptural works.

**JN:** So you welcome the invasion? To submit to the abuse? Is touch equal to abuse? Is this a reversion to some kind of sexual economy? In this case is touch an harassment?

**RI:** Maybe...actually you can never predict the way people behave in a gallery or a museum. Some respond to the work with gentle almost sexual caressing, other people tap on them with their fingers to try and make out by the sound of the tap the material it’s made of, I even saw people use their legs and kick them to check if they move. So you can really never know how and with how much force people touch and that’s why I think the word abuse is appropriate.





*The Museum Presents Itself 2*, 2015, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv (installation view)

**JN:** You missed my meaning. Or perhaps I was too vague, or you were guessing what I meant without reading the whole sentence. By “sexual economy” I was not wondering about the viewers/public mindset but your own state of mind. Abuse followed by repetitive actions of buffing the surface.

**RI:** Wait, now you just jumped from the viewer to me. We were discussing the viewer regarding abuse. When I sand, polish, buff, or whatever I do while creating the piece, it is completely different than someone touching it once it's finished. I can't abuse the piece while working on it, there isn't something autonomous enough to abuse. It's more like playing with yourself. Don't you separate between your relationship to your work and that of a person that encounters it for the first time?

**JN:** No, I don't separate between the other observer and myself. As you said yourself while you are working on the piece it has not achieved autonomy. But when it is finished it becomes autonomous and then you yourself see it for the first time as an autonomous sculpture, with no more privilege than any other viewer. So your distinction is the relationship to the sculpture before it is finished and after it is finished. I might even go as far as to say that I am an observer while the piece is coming into its own.

**RI:** There is a difference between drawing/painting and my method of building objects. In drawing and painting, the relationship between the physical

act of making a mark and its perception in the eyes of the marker is immediate. There is a constant relationship between the hand that marks, the markings, the eye that perceives the marking and the brain that directs the hand to do the following mark. I can't observe every action while I'm working on a piece, many of the stages are in the micro without the shape changing. Other stages in the work demand a fast and rapid execution with no room for introducing changes in the middle, so if the eye is not pleased with the result I need to go a few steps back and do it all over again. So no, I don't see myself equal to an innocent person that stumbles upon the sculptures in a gallery or museum.

**JN:** You seem very committed to your practice. Do you feel a kinship to any other sculptor or painter? From modernism or from the Easter Island totems?

**RI:** I feel that in art there are shifts back and forth between emphasizing objects to emphasizing images. Into this “power struggle” a third player was introduced - emphasizing experience. After a long period dominated by images there is a shift towards objects and experience. I feel kinship to other artists that deal first of all with objects, if it's you dealing with paper as an object or if it's a “Long Ear” erecting a Moai on a remote island hundreds of years ago.

**JN:** What is a “Long Ear”?



*Minimal Standard Model, 2010-11, Painted MDF, 6 x 47.5 x 47.5 inches*  
Collection of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art

**RI:** The “Long Ears” were the tribe of sculptors on Easter Island that were responsible for the giant heads (Moai). At some point the second tribe on the island, the “Short Ears”, wiped them all out (except for one survivor). They also vandalized and pulled down all of the statues. There is an amazing book called “Ako-Ako” by Thor Heyerdahl that led the first archaeological expedition to Easter Island, I think it's a must read book for sculptors.

**JN:** What about artists from less remote places and that are more invested in the now?

**RI:** To name a few sculptors: Al Taylor, Richard Artschwager, Martin Puryear, Franz West, Nahum Tevet, Eitan Ben-Moshe and the “Ellipsoids and Hyperbolos” of Isa Genzken.

**JN:** Franz West was a great artist that recently died, rather young. I can appreciate your liking him. He made colorful painterly sculptures.

**RI:** I love many things about Franz West's work, the “dumbness” of his objects, the “usable” sculptures that he made, and his relationship through objects to performance.

**JN:** your aesthetic is physical and visual. You don't seem to me very Israeli. How do you connect to Israeliness?

**RI:** I grew up in Jerusalem (and stayed put there for 26 years). My mother immigrated to Israel from South Africa in 1960 for Zionist and religious reasons. My father was a beatnik writer that grew up in Rhodesia (nowadays Zimbabwe). He spent most of the sixties traveling around Europe and the U.S.

writing (as he put it) “notes toward novels”. He got stuck in Israel while visiting his aunt in the early seventies with no money to continue traveling. I grew up speaking English at home and Hebrew outside. Most of my cultural references were Anglo-Saxon, I always felt a certain distance from Israeli culture although I am very much Israeli.

**JN:** In what way are you “very much Israeli”? What does it mean to be Israeli? I genuinely ask that, not as a trap or as provocation.

**RI:** You asked Nicola Trezzi, your friend, what does an Israeli mean to him? I liked his answer. He said that Israelis are extremely diverse in the physical look but you can recognize them immediately, without knowing what is it that makes them look Israeli. He said that the state of Israel, unlike any other state, was born out of a concept and that makes Israelis Israeli by concept, and that concept is transmitted outward.

**JN:** I just came across the Tel Aviv Museum of Art blurb to your show: “Reuven Israel’s sculptures seem at first cold, closed and enigmatic, reminiscent of minimalist sculpture, but their seductive radiant color refers to Pop art. His works derive basic forms from holy sites, combined with pseudo-scientific elements, thus transferring the sculptures from our charged, conflict-ridden region into a fantastic, magical dream world”. Do you stand behind these associations: Pop, Minimal, Sacerdotal?

**RI:** In a way, I guess I do see myself coming from a Minimal background, that has a strong local Israeli tradition. In part because of artists like you that studied or spent some time in New York and London, then operated in Israel. There are also Pop art influences, mainly in the colors of my work and their humor. In a way I am more influenced by Artschwager than Judd. A dominant teacher at my time in Bezalel was Jacob Mishori who is a strong advocate of Pop art and the L.A. scene.

**JN:** Your work is located between fluid abstraction, potential design, and Pop colors, but it interrogates Relational Aesthetics - even if by opposition. How do the sacred and the Pop work together? Do you flatten out the religious content? Do you make cynical statements on religious objects? Yes there is a Pop element but not the classic Pop.

**RI:** You need to understand that my sculptures aren’t meant to reflect religion in a direct manner or to mock faith, I am also neither a Minimal or Pop (or Post/Neo Minimal/Pop) artist and I use elements from these and other different sources without seeing myself obliged to be faithful to their entire approach. Me, I am a bit like a scavenger, the work - more like mongrels.

**JN:** “As painting is to sculpture” in the book called “Changing” by Lucy Lippard written about 40 years ago, she says: “A Changing Ratio: In this time sculpture and making images on flat surfaces seem to be cut loose from

the conventional boundaries or definitions.”

**RI:** Yes, I can definitely relate to that, who was she really referring too?

**JN:** She was referring to Alberto Giacometti, Eva Hesse, Yayoi Kusama, Lucas Samaras, Sonnier. She writes: “By creating fusion works or working several genres we have been confronted by domineering pressures and presences of pure practices that weigh down, impinge, lean heavily on the hybrids...”

**RI:** Hybrids, there’s that word again... I prefer mongrels. Hybrids are less independent, they have parts that look like one thing attached to parts that look like another. With mongrels it’s all mixed up together to create a new, unique thing.

**JN:** So, where do you locate yourself: Altermodern? a portmanteau de ned by Nicolas Bourriaud, is an attempt at contextualizing art made in today’s global context as a reaction against standardization and commercialism.

**RI:** Jacques Rancière doesn’t see modernism and postmodernism as two different movements but rather as two sides of the same coin, if so then altermodernism is still the same currency as its predecessors. In a way we are still playing in the playground our fathers played in, maybe not enough has really changed, it’s just the same things extremely accelerated.





*Formula*, 2016, Braverman Gallery, Tel Aviv (installation view)



*Bigger SBMs, 2016, Seter Square, Tel Aviv (installation view)*



# Reuven Israel

## *As Above, So Below*

September 14 - October 28, 2016

### Reuven Israel

Reuven Israel (b. Jerusalem, Israel) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He received his MFA and BFA from Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem. He has had solo exhibitions at Tel Aviv Museum of Art; Braverman Gallery, Tel-Aviv; Fridman Gallery, New York; and Museo Civico Floriano Bodini, Gemonio, Italy, among others. His work has also been included in group exhibitions at Danese Corey, New York; Tel Aviv Museum of Art; Lesley Heller Workspace, New York; Haifa Museum of Art; Rockefeller Archaeological Museum, Jerusalem; and Hangar Bicocca, Milan. Reuven has received several awards, including the Israeli Ministry of Culture's Young Artist Award, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art's Legacy Heritage Fund Prize, and the America-Israel Cultural Foundation Scholarship. In April 2016 the artist completed a permanent public installation at Setter Square, Tel Aviv.

### Joshua Neustein

Joshua Neustein (b. Danzig, Poland) lives and works in New York and Tel Aviv. He received his BA from Pratt Institute, New York and has taught at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem. He is known for conceptual and post-minimal work, and for his explorations in the medium of paper. Neustein's work has been exhibited extensively, including recent solo shows at The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Haus der Kunst, Munich; and the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Neustein represented Israel at the 1995 Venice Biennale, and the artist's work has garnered serious critical consideration in the writings of Arthur Danto, Robert Pincus-Witten, Gideon Ofrat, Nicola Trezzi, Louis Kaplan, Barry Schwabsky, Irit Rogoff, Raphael Rubinstein, and Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe.

### Lilly Wei

Lilly Wei is an independent curator, writer, and critic who lives and works in New York. Her area of interest is global contemporary art and, in particular, emerging art and artists. She writes frequently about international exhibitions and biennials. Her work has appeared in dozens of publications worldwide, and she is a longtime contributor to *Art in America* and a contributing editor at *ARTnews*. Wei is the author of numerous catalogues and monographs, and has curated exhibitions in the United States, Europe, and Asia. She lectures frequently on critical and curatorial practices, and holds an MA in art history from Columbia University, New York.

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R.I.

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