



On Knots, Connections, and Games of Chance

"Gambling, risk-taking, and games of chance are inherent in the way a structure, for instance, a body, can swing between activity and passivity, between control and submission to fate or to another entity." Hagai Ulrich on the sculptures of Daniel Oksenberg in the exhibition "Sweaty Grips."

Critique / Hagai Ulrich May 21, 2021

Daniel Oksenberg's exhibition "Sweaty Grips," at Maya Gallery in Tel Aviv (curator: Sagie Azoulay) featured four sculptures made out of basic materials cut into simple shapes: painted plywood disks, hand-shaped unpainted plywood, jute ropes, cut sheet metal, and paint. The four sculptures, as well as the materials they are made of and their content, bring to mind the Four Elements – fire, earth, air, and water – pre-scientific theories developed by the ancient Greeks to explain all materials' structural elements.

The four elements also appeared as a conceptual and semantic foundation for explaining real events. In Hellenic astrology, fire, earth, air, and water are the elements that define the signs of the zodiac, the planets, and the houses of the horoscope. Throughout history, the elements have been integrated into Western culture and appeared in Western astrology and tarot cards. In Hebrew, the word *mazal* (luck and chance) means a planet but also fate. In the Hellenic context, the fate of a substance or an event is mostly a question of its elements' composition. In "Sweaty Grips," marking the four elements with painting and sculpture connects the works to games of chance and to fate.

At the entrance to the gallery was the work *Double or Nothing (the Gambler)*, consisting of a mound of small, colorful plywood disks that spilled to the floor from a corner. Two bare plywood hands were set on top of the mound, suggesting the gathering of loot, or perhaps its dispersion, as if trying to grab or hold a huge amount of chips won in a game of roulette. On each disk there was a different painting: numbers, stars, card signs, yin-and-yang symbols, hearts, spider webs, and other colorful signs and ornaments. In tarot cards, images of chips and coins are associated with the element of earth, which is recalled by the proximity of the sculpture to the floor.

Daniel_Oksenberg_Maya_4 small.jpg



[1]

Daniel Oksenberg, *Double or Nothing (the Gambler)*, 2020, oil paint, jute rope, wood, various dimensions

From: *Sweaty Grips* (curator: Sagie Azolay), Maya Gallery, Tel Aviv

Photography: Daniel Hanoach. Courtesy of the artist.

The fire element was evident in *Cherry Bomb*, named after the kind of fireworks made of colorful balls containing ignitable material connected to a taut fuse. In the work, the volatile balls are represented by two large disks with jute ropes woven into their edges. The ropes are knotted together at the top, connecting a long, thin, curved metal strip to an unpainted plywood hand touching the floor. It is a tension-evoking structure, like a spring or a lighter or an insect about to sting. The two disks are unpainted on the side hidden from the viewer's gaze. On the visible side, a headless dragon is depicted. Just as the paintings on the disks in *The Gambler* stand for the earth element in the coins, the element of fire is represented here by a green dragon against a red background. Its hands curl sideways; it reminds us of a flame. Perhaps the missing head underlines the notion of "losing one's head," getting carried away with rising emotions.

[Daniel_Oksenberg_Maya_3_small.jpg](#) [2]



[3]

Daniel Oksenberg, Cherry Bomb, 2020, oil paint, jute rope, metal, wood, 175X250X70

From: *Sweaty Grips* (curator: Sagie Azolay), Maya Gallery, Tel Aviv

Photography: Daniel Hanoch. Courtesy of the artist.

In *The Juggler*, the bare plywood hands are positioned like supports on both sides of a wooden stand holding disks with holes in their centers: they are like nuts used in building and construction to hold the bolt while it is inserted into a piece of wood, to avoid trauma to the wood and to keep the parts of the structure well tightened. The plywood nuts are large, painted in oil and industrial paints, and tied together with rope, like juggler's balls frozen in mid-air. The ropes are prominent, same as in *Cherry Bomb*, drawing attention as the dominant, weighty materials of the structure in two ways: as limbs holding the nuts in place – the nuts' meaning and function are not clear – and also in their visual role as the organizers of the composition. Here Oksenberg used painting to point to the element of air: runs and stains spread over the painted surfaces and blended as if a blast of air had flattened and scrambled them. Or perhaps the fluid paints have run together after the disks were hung facing different ways in the open air – the very same air that captured the flying balls.

[Daniel_Oksenberg_Maya_1_small.jpg](#) [4]



[5]

Daniel Oksenberg, *The Juggler*, 2020, oil paint, jute rope, metal, wood, 200X240X85

From: *Sweaty Grips* (curator: Sagie Azolay), Maya Gallery, Tel Aviv

Photography: Daniel Hanoch. Courtesy of the artist.

Like *The Gambler*, in *Ocean Winks*, the nut-like plywood disks are spread on the floor, connecting nothing. They were set among ropes attached to a papier-mâché rock. The rock seemed to have a lighter mass and highlighted the heaviness of the ropes and the disks. The latter resemble buoys or lifeline floats because of their uniform colors: light blue, orange, dark blue, black, and white. The whole structure is reminiscent of the remains of a ruined ship caught around a rock on the beach. The nuts, which generally function as aids to connections, objects that mitigate weight-bearing tension, were strewn all around like the ropes. This alludes to a fact mentioned in the exhibition text: the ropes in the works are knotted and interwoven in a technique inspired by *Shibari* – a Japanese tying-up practice mostly used in the context of BDSM.

The gambling, the risk-taking, and the games of chance are revealed in the way a structure – a body, for instance – can swing between activity and passivity, control and submission to fate or to another entity. The bearing of weight and its dispersion acquire meanings related to the ability to withstand pain and distribute it and the psychological tension in relationships and interpersonal connections. Although the exhibition did not contain a significant sexual aspect, the sculptures embodied the tension between enslavement, surrender, passivity, and submission, and dominance, control, and subjugation. In one moment, the ropes, metal parts, or plywood disks are the dominant rulers, and in the next, they are passive and drooping. Because sexuality is absent or hidden, the sense is that these sculptures function as signs of association, connection, assessment, and assignment of value with no specific signifier. They describe the stress, risk, and chance inherent in the attempt to form a



relationship, be it physical, emotional, spiritual, or conceptual.

[Daniel_Oksenberg_Maya_5_small.jpg](#) [6]



[7]
Daniel Oksenberg, Ocean Winks , 2020, oil paint, jute rope, papier-mâché, wood, various dimensions

From: Sweaty Grips (curator: Sagie Azolay), Maya Gallery, Tel Aviv

Photography: Daniel Hanoch. Courtesy of the artist.

The four elements are coordinates that help to emphasize the instability in the functioning of the dominant features of Oksenberg's sculpture: knots and nuts. Largely insignificant in sculpture installations, they are not only exposed in these works but emphasized as their central visual aspects. The paintings, which usually are the centerpiece and the object of sight, function here as catalysts for creating meaning, assisting in making ties and connections, and signaling the viewers' understanding of the installation.

Oksenberg, a painter who received from Bezalel Academy the Haim Schiff Prize for Figurative Realistic Painting in 2016, which he was awarded during his studies in Bezalel, created in this show a kind of trans-painting - he distances himself from the basic and conventional functions of painting, neither using it as a tool for seeing nor presenting the subject of the painting to be beheld. Instead,



he awards it a role in producing the context and the signifying act. Thus, the focus swings to aspects related to the performativity characterizing the dynamics of associations and relations between bodies. Like BDSM practices, the series of contradictory actions become the main event, creating unresolved tension that raises prospects of pleasure and pain. Objects whose role is to tie and join, to hold, to mitigate tension and weight, become the central element in the installation, paraphrasing the dynamics of pain, pleasure, and danger that are present in relationships, while painting and sculpture only help to mark and connect the various elements, the ideas that construct the installation.

[Daniel_Oksenberg_Maya_6_small.jpg](#) [8]



[9]

Daniel Oksenberg, Ocean Winks , 2020, oil paint, jute rope, papier-mâché, wood, various dimensions

From: *Sweaty Grips* (curator: Sagie Azolay), Maya Gallery, Tel Aviv

Photography: Daniel Hanoach. Courtesy of the artist.

Another role reversal occurs in the exhibition's title, "Sweaty Grips," which alludes to effort. But the sweating was not evident in the airy, engineered sculptures. They looked like theatrical sets or background decorations in a circus or a fair that includes games of chance, gambling machines, and jugglers – mostly because of the emphasis on the two-dimensionality of the paintings' substrates and



the eclectic, pagan symbols painted on them. The sculptures highlighted the stage, the performance, and the trans-ness of the objects as they move away from their assigned roles, change, and reverse themselves. The gallery was turned into a stage, and the viewers into actors in a somewhat precarious event. It could be said that the fire, earth, air, and water thus bring about the fifth element in the pentagram – ether: the upper air, the spirit, and the mind.

Daniel Oksenberg's exhibition "Sweaty Grips" (curator: Sagie Azoulay) was on display between December 3 and 26, 2020, at Maya Gallery, Shvil Hameretz 2, Tel Aviv.

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