



Illustration from the series "1 Minute 8 Seconds"; "Post Traumatic Installation no. 19" (2022) at Petah Tikva Museum; also from the series "1 Minute 8 Seconds"; "Fragments of a Future Past" at Tel Aviv's Litvak Contemporary.

Amir Tomashov; Elad Sarig; Yuval Chai

Naama Riba

"I'm a panic button for anyone who wants to talk about destruction," says artist and architect Amir Tomashov, speaking at his Afula studio in northern Israel. People seeing his work for the first time on social media or at exhibitions may think he is reacting to the current scenes of devastation around us, but Tomashov has been drawn to destruction for over two decades.

His works, whether three- or two-dimensional, tell of our destructive present and dystopian future: decimated cities; spaces that have crumbled and collapsed; homes and furniture that have fallen apart.

His followers on Instagram are fully aware of this and send him images of bombings, blazes or earthquakes from around the world. "People write to me after a quake and say they thought of me. Especially since the October 7 attack, they tell me they're thinking about me. I became the person you think about when everything is in ruins. I'm not sure I like this role that's been assigned to me."

'The default behavior of humans is to solve things by colossal destruction. Big cities have been destroyed dozens of times: in wars, floods, fires and plagues.'

The names of his current exhibitions reflect his work. His solo exhibit at Tel Aviv's Litvak Contemporary is called "Fragments of a Future Past," featuring 60 mostly recent works. He is also part of the group exhibition "When Things Fall Apart" at Kibbutz Hazorea's Wilfrid Israel Museum.

In a second group exhibition, "Following Photography" (at Haifa's Pyramida Center for Contemporary Art), he has three illustrations from a series called "1 Minute 8 Seconds," critiquing consumer society.

That title refers to a report on China's Singles' Day in November 2019, with the works depicting the ruins of commercial and service buildings whose illuminated billboards come crashing to the ground in some climatic incident. "On that weekend," it notes, "one of the Chinese websites made \$1 billion in just one minute and eight seconds from the moment the sale opened. We refuse to see the environmental and peripheral damage that is also created when we purchase a product."

In case his message didn't hit home, "Resounding Decay" was the name of his 2024 exhibition at Ma'alot's Apter-Barrar Art Center and Gallery. That same year, he also took part in a group exhibition at Rishon Letzion's Yaacov Agam Museum of Art.

This year will also see him participate in a group exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art – the same venue that recently purchased his 2020 work "Space: Zero no.5" (part of his "Space Zero" series). The museum stated that the work "echoes the disaster and fracture that are still unfolding." His illustration depicts part of a residential building whose walls have collapsed, with bricks and metal wires hanging from the ceiling and floor, and a pile of debris at the bottom.

The viewer may think this is Gaza, Tomashov says, but "Space Zero" is actually "a series that disconnects the events from the location." Each frame in his wonderfully precise illustrations is taken from locations past and present – from Berlin, Homs in Syria, Russia and others – but they match any place.

"The answer to those who ask if it's from Gaza is that ostensibly it's not but in reality it is – because the works also depict what's happening there. Destruction is universal."

Biblical tales

Born in 1978, Tomashov lives in Afula with his partner Michal and their two children. His attraction to ruins began at an early age. "I always loved visiting archaeological sites," he recounts. "Tel Megiddo [aka Armageddon] is in my everyday line of sight. These are places that enchanted me. I was also interested in biblical tales about the end of days. All this intensified during my military service."

What happened there? "I served for seven years. I was company commander in a communications unit that assisted the Home Front Command's rescue team that travels to disaster sites around the world. I was in Turkey after several earthquakes, and Delhi too. This unit is in less demand today because communication has changed significantly. But back then, I visited many places that had been destroyed.

"And yes, at the same time, I also witnessed destruction in Lebanon and Gaza during several opera-



Amir Tomashov. "I realized that people are mesmerized by destruction."

Gil Eliahu

tions – until I was finally discharged from reserve duty a few years ago. I'd had enough."

Between the end of his regular army service in 2003 and before he started studying architecture at the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, Tomashov decided to visit Alaska.

"I wanted to be somewhere where the relationship between land and humans is the most extreme, with almost no buildings. I understood in the army and on my travels just how much we are creatures who rely on vision but don't really see anything. We suffer from psychological blindness: We only see what passes through the emotional filter."

While there, he visited the site of the 1964 Great Alaska Earthquake, which at 9.2 on the Richter scale was the second most powerful in history. The epicenter was 120 kilometers (75 miles) east of Anchorage and 25 kilometers underground. Most of the 131 casualties died in tsunamis around Prince William Sound in southern Alaska. In Anchorage, they preserved part of the ruined city as Earthquake Park – so of course Tomashov went there.

"You go there and it's a site that has been preserved

like it was after the disaster. The vegetation has grown, of course, but you can still see the destruction and the sinking of the ground. It's a breathtaking space."

Do you remember what you were thinking?

"I realized that people are mesmerized by destruction. This phenomenon has been studied. In the 19th century, they started bringing various ruins and priceless relics to Europe and placed them in museums. They treated it as something romantic. Most people are fascinated by tragedy on live TV. It's not for nothing that the defining event [of the century] is 9/11, and that October 7 joined it. People were staring at the Twin Towers going up in flames and collapsing, and you can watch those clips again and again and wait for them to collapse again. We find some kind of attraction in this destruction."

A world without color

Tomashov is a painter and illustrator from childhood, but he never had any formal training in the plastic arts. His artistic endeavors sometimes include architectural elements: construction materials such as cement blocks that he puts in piles,

or illustrations of structures made of blocks.

His extensive library at home has books about wars and architecture, including the architecture of destruction. There are countless references to this in art, he says. He is influenced in part by American architect-artist Lebbeus Woods, German Romantic landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich and the Romantic Period in general, when artists painted broken landscapes and architectural remains.

The art world welcomed him with open arms. For his finals project, he and partner Sagi Rechter were allowed to plan not a building but a dystopian space. The only condition was that it be related to Tel Aviv. The year was 2009, the White City's centenary, and the entire class dedicated itself to it. They designed an amazing space inspired by the iconic Orly Castel-Bloom novel "Dolly City," built models and made illustrations inspired by the city that grows taller and bigger, and then comes apart. "For us, this was some sort of preproduction for a film project," he says. "It remains with us to this day, and images of it are printed in various books."

The project was covered

extensively in the media and became the talk of the town in every architectural institution. Tomashov won the Azrieli Prize for outstanding finals project. Castel-Bloom, who attended the presentation, said the project was the second best thing that had ever happened to her. "She added that she couldn't remember what the best one was," he smiles.

He says he doesn't see any advantage or disadvantage in his training as an architect, but notes there are some differences to art. "I'm quite the outsider in my involvement with art, because I've had no real academic training in it. However, this is a prism I tried to expand as best I could with the means given to me in the academic incubator.

"The mappings to reality that I learned gave me this ability to neutralize syndromes such as psychological blindness, and to ask more about where I am rather than just what time it is – as Georges Perec would say. And anyway," he adds somewhat sarcastically, "as an architect I've already plunged deep into the world of suffering, so people tend to believe that I'm a tortured artist despite my position at the bottom of the food chain."

Another architectural aspect about his work is that it lacks color: His works are black, white or the color of the material, such as wood.

"One reason why I leave the objects white and strip them of grotesque elements – apart from the fact that I'm color-blind – is that there's something clinical about whiteness that allows you to see the morphology of destruction. After all, 99 percent of structures in the world have a limited lifespan. I want people to look destruction in the eye," he says.

And remain unfazed by it? "They should understand it. They should understand why they enjoy looking at it. I

strip away the emotional aspect – a little bit like the aerial photographs from Gaza."

That's a bit morbid. "Yes, but that's human nature. Wars and destruction have never stopped."

In his current Tel Aviv exhibition, Tomashov is presenting about 20 works from the last couple of years. They are based on tapestries and landscape paintings that were on sale in tourist markets around the world. This is also the first time he left the colored layer in the work untouched.

"These were images that were about to get thrown in the trash, and I collected them," he recounts. "They are works that reflect a utopia, so I took these romantic, kitschy landscapes and added contemporary pollution to them: garbage, construction materials, cellular antennae. My intervention is a humorous mirror bringing together utopia and dystopia. At first glance, the wall looks like it is from some bordello. But as you get closer to each image, reality is revealed."

Failing to understand settlers

To a degree, the abnormal sense of destruction since October 7 is just part of the everyday for Tomashov. To those who ironically tell him he must be thriving right now, he replies that he really didn't need this. "At any given moment, you can throw a stone on a map of the world and find a place that's been destroyed. At any given moment, there are civil wars in the East and Africa, or natural disasters. If you zoom in on the Middle East and the Levant, we're living in a territory of destruction. Think about how many civilizations have been here and were destroyed."

You can't say October 7 didn't affect you more than, say, a conflict in Thailand.



Amir Tomashov's "Reforgotten no. 6" (2024).

That sounds callous.

"Like everyone else, I was swept into the vortex after October 7, but my work has hardly any direct response to that event. We're still in it. We don't understand it yet and we keep falling into new lows, new rock bottoms. But suddenly I feel like I'm being dragged into the political, and I'm so not political."

And you can't say you're apolitical. Destruction IS political.

"I'm not afraid of death or disaster. October 7 reminded us that catastrophe is always just around the corner. I always knew it was there, because I've been watching it and moving within it for two decades now."

Around the world and in Israel too, they say what's going on in Gaza is the worst destruction event of the 21st century.

"In terms of terrorism in the 21st century, we've definitely entered a new phase. I'm talking about both sides and about the destruction of Gaza. But there are other places that have also been significantly destroyed – such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq. And we don't know yet what's going on in China or North Korea. In almost every African country, hundreds of thousands are being killed in conflicts. This goes unphotographed to the same extent, and even when it is filmed – it's different.

"I don't think that in terms of catastrophe, we're at any kind of peak compared with the 20th century. But in terms of marketing it and broadcasting it through various mediums – we're at a peak. No one's taking any interest in the world's backyard. But what's going on in the world's political centrum is intriguing, and we've been at the center since the dawn of history."

There are some settlers who believe a miracle happened on October 7.

"I wasn't trained to understand their minds. This is not an argument you can debate, just as I don't argue with those who believe in our father in the heavens.

As for Gaza, for sure there's an element of Schadenfreude that exists on the far right – they're excited about this. As I said earlier, they're mesmerized by the destruction. But I would say that, regardless of political leanings, there is something in people staring at these sights. I just hope that, for most of us, this does not imply some kind of disorder."

Basically, what you're saying is that we've joined everyone else.

"The default behavior of humans is to solve things by colossal destruction. Big cities have been destroyed dozens of times: in wars, floods, fires, plagues or just by grandiose architectural plans like in Paris. This is not a unique characteristic of dyed-in-the-wool Israelis. We've seen it in Yugoslavia, at the World Trade Center, and now here."