

Recombination : Breakaway Permutations

Amir Beker

It is tempting to define the art of Giddy Landan as “scientific art”. Like the products of scientific research, his works constitute a fascinating display of rational analysis harnessed to the resolution of an intellectual challenge. Landan's works are the result of a meticulous examination of details and of their relationship to the whole, within the strict constraints of a closed and isolated system. In contrast to scientific research, however, Landan's works produce an intense emotional and visual experience, and invite the viewer to participate in a process – at once complex and unambiguous – of deciphering their structural and thematic secrets.

The study of codes, recoding, deconstruction and reconstruction has been central to both the professional and creative work of Giddy Landan. In the past, Landan was a military intelligence

analyst who specialized in codes, cryptanalysis and decipherment. His scientific research, in the field of mathematical biology, is centered upon the most wonderful and complex puzzle of our world: the genetic code – the molecules of DNA that govern the creation and operation of all life on Earth. It is instructive to learn that Landan's doctoral thesis described different ways to match and align DNA sequences; his research thus constitutes an almost literal translation of the questions raised by his art into the scientific, biological domain.

The raw materials for **Recombination** are jigsaw puzzles. Some of these commercially produced puzzles, which are offered for sale at toy stores, are brand new, while others are more than thirty years old. In Landan's work, they are transformed into a powerful medium for an original form of

artistic expression. Landan joins the pieces of each puzzle together like a studious child, but not quite. No piece has been remolded or cut, and the fit between the interlocking pieces is perfect. Perfect also is the bewilderment of the puzzled spectator, for the imagery itself is shattered, fragmented and disconcerting.

Jigsaw puzzles, which are intimately familiar to us all from infancy, capture our attention when we first face one of Giddy Landan's puzzle works. The initial perplexity about the display of a "plain" commercial puzzle is quickly replaced by the feeling that "something is wrong"; something diverges from our expectations. Yet this divergence is extremely alluring, like a mystery inviting us to approach and closely study its enigmatic nature. Gradually, we come to the realization that the unexpected variations are clever and ingenious, while nevertheless adhering to the constraints of the jigsaw puzzle and

embracing its limitations. The artist seems to have scrutinized the countless number of possible combinations for joining together the different parts of the puzzle, and to have detected a possibility for creating a new order. Within this order, certain parts have been removed and then fitted perfectly into another area of the puzzle – a reordering that sometimes involves the rotation of individual pieces. Once the initial visual enigma is solved, the viewer becomes aware of the artistic nature of the work, and of the added visual and thematic value with which it has been endowed following its surgical treatment.

Take, for instance, the familiar façade of the San Marco Basilica in Venice (fig. 9), which seems to have been magically transformed: a wizard has upturned one of its vaulted gates and transformed it into Heaven's Doors. In its place, he has planted one of the Basilica's spires – which, overturned, now rises against a sky-blue ground

inserted into the church façade. No one in the crowd milling about outside the basilica seems particularly disturbed by the theological drama taking place just above their heads. The perfect fit of the puzzle pieces seems to confirm the validity of the image, not unlike a “certificate of authenticity” attached to an archeological artifact, an affirmation that proclaims: this is, indeed, the truth. Our perception is thus torn between the structural logic of the jigsaw puzzle and the visual sanity of the image.

In this work, only two areas were skillfully interchanged and rotated at a 180-degree angle. Careful scrutiny of the borders of these interchanged areas reveals the delicacy and precision involved in their relocation. The choice of the transposed areas, which relies on the structure of the jigsaw puzzle, captivates the viewer. It is this contrast between the seemingly slight structural transformation and the substance

with which it infuses the work that constitutes the principal source of tension sustaining Landan's puzzle works.

It is difficult to think of a better title for the exhibition than **Recombination**, the name chosen by the artist. In genetics, this term is used to describe a new combination of genes that did not exist in the organism's ancestry, and which was created as the result of natural reproduction or of a random mutation. In genetic engineering, the term “recombinant DNA” describes processes in which foreign gene elements are artificially transplanted into an existing genetic sequence – sometimes that of an entirely different organism – in order to alter the organism's original traits and functions.

The mutations created by Giddy Landan's art are based on the relocation of different elements within a given image or from one image to

another. At times, these mutations are chimera-like, as in the Alpine oasis or the Eiffel tower carried by a sailing ship (Chimera, the mythological monster with a lion's head, goat's body and serpent's tail, finds its problematic modern expression in genetic experiments that produce animals with the cells and even organs of another species). In other cases, however, the mutations are almost imperceptible – as in the picture-perfect Swiss landscape of snowy mountains reflected in a lake. In this work (fig. 11), the offspring of a banal pastoral image, it is difficult at first to locate the illusory elements. Were it not for the cry for help – a cry that literally rises from the valleys and mountain tops – it is doubtful we would have noticed the fine line winding through the lake, with its familiar jigsaw contour, which marks the boundary between the mountains' reflection in the lake and the real mountains that were transposed from their proper place, inverted and drowned in the

water. The double illusion, in which a "real" reflection of mountains was replaced by an "imaginary" reflection that is in fact a picture of real mountains – may be interpreted as a clever parable on fidelity and pretense in the images of reality we compose from our fragmented perceptions. When we turn away from the work, we take with us the echoing cry and the feeling that the call for help did not arise from the undoing of reality, but rather preceded it; that in fact the undermining of the existing order served to calm the hidden turmoil within this idyllic landscape, which had wearied of its uneventful existence.

An intimate affinity binds us to the pieces of each puzzle – the playthings of our childhood. This bond, and the way the pieces are used in each work in a manner so closely related to their original purpose – tempts us to return to play with jigsaw puzzles; to rediscover the early

pleasure inherent in joining together the pieces and the satisfaction related to the completion of the picture. Yet after having seen Landan's works, one will never again be able to reproduce the innocent childhood experience of putting together a puzzle, nor the contentment related to its "perfect" completion. From that moment on, the viewer will inevitably be confronted with visions of the alternative images released by Giddy Landan when he opened Pandora's puzzle box – visions accompanied by the anticipation of an exciting constellation of combinations that open our eyes to the perception of new worlds.

Landan's treatment of the puzzles as an artistic medium is far from being merely scientific or intellectual. His works clearly reflect his love of the characteristic, familiar outline of each individual puzzle piece, and of the winding contours of a group of joined pieces. In some of the works, the absence of several pieces lost over

time is silhouetted by the surrounding image (for example, in the image of the San Marco Basilica). In other works, the original straight margins have been removed, and the new outline is the undulating contours of the jigsaw itself. The work "Lobotomy" (fig. 17) represents an almost complete disintegration of the original image, which is hardly discernable in the visually chaotic mixture of perfectly joined fragments. The only visual elements in which the viewer may anchor his gaze are the regular contours of the individual puzzle pieces scattered throughout the work.

A most refined expression of Landan's art can be found in the delicate work based on a jigsaw puzzle of a typical English scene, depicting two children gazing attentively into a stream or canal (fig. 10). The puzzle is clearly very old: the cardboard pieces are worn out, and their edges are peeling. The artist did not add or change

anything, apart from removing the upper part of the puzzle and separating the lower part into four rectangles. This slight manipulation gives the image an air of melancholic yearning. The transposition and recombination of elements in other works seems now to have prepared us for this simple dissection of a jigsaw puzzle into four fragments – a minimal intervention that fills the old photograph with a renewed interest and meaning. It would appear that the circle will be finally completed by the display of an entire puzzle put together "by the book" – that is, one that without any further manipulation will stimulate the experienced viewer to probe the numerous possibilities inherent within it.

The subversive strategy put forth by Landan is both daring and ingenious. It is daring in its revolt against a basic axiom in our perception of the world – the continuous nature of visual reality. Its ingenuity lies in the anchoring of

its subversive nature in the accepted rules of the jigsaw puzzle: whatever fits is acceptable; whatever matches is right. At times, as Landan shows us, that which is compatible may be shocking and provocative; it may challenge the certainty that two pieces of a puzzle shall not match unless so ordained, and demonstrate that our efforts to "complete the puzzle" may produce unexpected insights representing a shattered, disjointed and even contradictory reality.

Edited by Talya Halkin



My deep thanks go to all those who contributed to the exhibition and the catalogue:

Efrat Livni

Amir Beker

Juda Amrany

Dory Manor

Talya Halkin

Arie Berkovitch

<http://giddylandan.hopto.org>



The Artists' House, Tel Aviv, September 2006