

Beyond recognition

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In 1998, when painter Efrat Galnoor (b. Jerusalem, 1970) was studying at Hamidrasha School of Art, she was the only one doing representational art. It was considered "traditional," a no-no that was not interesting. As she remembers, legendary artist and teacher Raffi Lavie told her to stop painting and take up photography.



Efrat Galnoor: Atzulat Hakfar, oil on canvas, 2008

"The position was against the world of figurative art," explains Galnoor, who teaches at Hamidrasha and was recently appointed head of the Drawing and Painting Department. "It was considered unnecessary. [Representation] wasn't the role of art, there was nothing to be said."

At art school, if she needed to figure out something technical, she had to do it on her own. "The medium of the work was almost a by-product [of the idea]." The work was done at home or in the studio, and there were almost no in-class workshops. Instead, the focus was on getting familiar with artists, learning about the art world and finding a conceptual niche. The only teacher who coached and encouraged her technically was Mitch Becker, who had started out in abstract expressionism in the 1950s but slowly shifted into figurative work. Galleries like Alon Segev weren't around yet and the figurative scene was underground.

"I was very interested in the theoretical part," Galnoor insists. "I was very dedicated, read every article and told my students to do this." But she also continued to create figurative works, and every painting in her graduation show in 1998 was either sold or picked up for exhibition. "It's always easier to sell figurative art - this is partly what it's blamed for."

Still, she felt that, to take her artistic stance, she needed more tools. "I felt I had no foundation, not enough tools to decide what kind of painting I wanted to do - like my painting was stuttering or stumbling." And so, upon completing her studies at Hamidrasha, she enrolled in the Jerusalem School Studio, which had been recently opened by realist painter Israel Hershberg.

Though at first the Jerusalem Studio School and Hamidrasha seemed like very different schools of thought that tried to abolish each other, she eventually realized the dichotomy just wasn't there. "A spot of color is what builds a painting, and also what destroys it. It allows for the illusion, but also emphasizes the flatness of the medium."



Efrat Galnoor: Monkeys, oil on canvas, 2008

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After completing the course with Hershberg, she began to exhibit again, and by the end of 2000 was teaching at Hamidrasha. She also enrolled at the University of Haifa Art Department for her master's degree. Her mentor there was Larry Abramson, an artist she says has a lot of respect for the craft of painting, and whose writing she especially appreciates. Abramson introduced her to the writing of American artist Robert Smithson, who discussed the conflation of site and non-site. "[Smithson] would bring rocks and soil into a gallery and make it into a 'site.' But on the other hand, it was also a non-site" - because the elements were not natural to the environment and were imported.

As Galnoor explains, the space in between the site and non-site is the space of the viewer - the space where art exists. This idea was particularly important for her as a landscape painter. "I always name my paintings with the name of the place, but the piece itself shifts the specificity of the place." On the one hand, people recognize it, and on the other, it's portrayed in a different way. This puts her work "between recognition and estrangement, an avoidance of pointing to a certain place." This shift is what she strives for - it points to the possibility of painting and to creating an illusion.

"It brings the conversation to the craft of painting, to putting a spot of color on a canvas." Again, it's an issue of both creating and destroying at the same time. "It keeps asking: Is this possible? Is this a landscape?"

At the Haifa Museum of Art, she was offered a 10-meter wall on which to exhibit, and decided to create a single painting to cover the whole expanse. "At first it feels like you can make sense of it - there's a horizon - but the more you look, the more it confuses you and starts to deconstruct itself." Perhaps because large paintings become a kind of site, Abramson dubbed her approach "site-specific painting," an idea which refers to both painting and installation.

"All my site-specific paintings are designed for a specific spot in the gallery," she explains. "The architecture is almost a blueprint for the painting."

So far Galnoor has created five site-specific paintings. One of the recent ones was shown early this year at the Bezalel Art Gallery on Rehov Salame in Tel Aviv. She explains that because the piece is almost completely white, it could be about blindness - being blinded by the Tel Aviv light. But because there's a pink layer underneath that's been mostly covered over, it can also be about destroying her own work. In May, she presented several site-specific paintings at the Rosenfeld Gallery when it relocated from Rehov Dizengoff to Kiryat Hamelacha in South Tel Aviv.

With each commissioned project, she goes to a site and strolls around, taking hundreds of photos. Then she spreads out the photos and looks for a motif that sticks out in the environment. Because she is often an outsider in these areas, she sometimes has to return and repeat the process until she finds this motif, which becomes the motif of the painting. "When I take the photos, I don't know which what motif will emerge," she says. "At Givat Haviva, a campus of kibbutzim and a place that I know, it took a month of going back to find the motif."

Then she decides on a certain spot in the gallery where the painting will hang. Only then does she go into the studio and paint a kind of collage-image which she fashions from the photos. "It's connecting the site, the act of painting and the place of hanging," she says. What she takes with her to the studio is "something personal, completely mine, which means something to me."

Alongside Galnoor's personal development as an artist, the local art world has also changed since her early days of exhibiting. "It's more sure of itself; it has absorbed outside influences; it has contradictions within it. It's a completely different art world today." She adds: "Think about Judaism and the way that Israeli culture sprang out of nowhere. It had to take a stand quickly, and so it threw away a lot of tradition and Diaspora culture. The *Dalut Hahomer* [Israel's Arte Povera movement] made a secular Israeli stand."

She says that, looking at the art scene today, students have a much wider range of possibilities, more places to exhibit, from alternative spaces to commercial galleries. More curators are interested in many styles, and the connection between art and money is more transparent.



Efrat Galnoor: Atzulat Hakfar, oil on canvas, 2008

But she points out that the change is not just in Israel: "The world has also changed. Think about the 'Triumph of Painting' [exhibition in 2005] and the financial force behind the Saatchi Gallery [that presented it]. No one talks anymore about the 'death of painting' as they did in the '90s. This discussion is over for now."

Standing apart from abstract or conceptual work, people relate to figurative art for different reasons. "Sometimes the wrong reasons," she admits. "It's beautiful, communicative; it has technical aspects to be appreciated - all things of which the Israeli art world was suspicious. And rightly so. Belief in a single image is a problem when you have mass media and endless sequences of images."

And yet, after her studies at Hamidrasha and while studying with Hershberg, she learned something important: that the two languages were the same. As she puts it, "In order to be a real figurative and realistic artist, you have to think completely abstract. And the more you can think abstract, the more you can be realistic."