

There is Method in the Madness

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Hava Gal-On is an autodidactic multi-media artist; she allows her imagination to run fancy free beyond the wildest dreams. In her works she chooses to express profound happiness and distances herself from the suffering that characterizes, to her mind, most of contemporary art. The landscape that germinates from her fascinating work is anchored in an expressive existential world of fantasy, a dreamlike world. Her work is characterized by a figurative language based on an inward contemplation of the recesses of the soul connected to the occult regions. While she is in her studio her ideas take on shape, color, inspiration and aura. As they come to life they become infused with the elements of her own life and of her past, together with fantasies and associations springing from her imagination and memory. Thus do spectacular sights burst forth from the depths of her soul in a splendid array of colors and shapes. The new reality that emerges in these works heralds the cry for freedom of form and color, whereas its creator has over the years maintained an idiosyncratic handwriting that makes her work unique and serves her directly as a means of self-expression.

Gal-On deals to a great extent with numerous variegated mixed media, which she treats two- and three-dimensionally. The source of Gal-On's objects is always ready-made found objects that have been converted into objets d'art devoid of any functional purpose. As an obsessive collector, Gal-On uses diverse objets trouvés from her immediate surroundings and from within her studio. These all serve her as the basis for multi-faceted works anchored in figurative images imbued with spots of color from free-flowing brush drips and brush strokes. For her, the dialogue between the painting and the object is important. Most of her works stem from the story that serves as an inspiration and starting point, a tale that she conjunctively breaks up and conserves in the work process. From among the shapes and the colors of the materials present in each work the abstract and figurative parts gradually begin to emerge distinctly.

The **Voice of Happy Words**, the title of the exhibition to be held in the spacious upper hall of the Artists House in Tel Aviv, refers to the words that Gal-On integrates with her complex and extensive oeuvre. Her texts are wide ranging: from quotes from the Bible, Jewish tradition, the Kabbala and the Hebrew dictionary that have always appeared in her works, to personal sayings and reflections that have lately been introduced into them. The exhibition **The Creation**, which she presented in 2000 in the Tel Aviv Bible Museum, for example, treated the power of the Hebrew letters and the Creation mantra.

Diverse locations, times, and connections are ensconced in the works appearing in the exhibition, but they interlace covertly through a connective narrative. In the series on suitcases, which Gal-on covered with paintings and glued-on objects in a collage, she wishes to recreate her own and her family's lives, and to reconstruct a way of life during the previous century as well as to make an attempt at interpreting it. She documents the vanished past by means of a painting on her father's suitcase that had been kept in the attic. She glued onto the suitcase his office stamps, his knitted yarmulke, his photograph, and a piece of paper bearing a list in his handwriting. On one side of another suitcase she drew the seventy-two combinations of the name of God, which are credited with possessing positive virtues such as those of healing, success, protection, and perfection from all the aspects of human existence. On its other side she drew the same words, in the negative, as a shortcoming. The side of another suitcase bears, in various colors painstakingly drawn with brush strokes, the text of Rabbi Nahman of Breslav's "grand repair".

The ass at the core of the work **Waiting for the Messiah** (see p.59, 170), was a lifelike donkey purchased in the flea market. All the names of the Messiah have been drawn on it, while the lips have been painted blue, which the Kabbala perceives as a mystic color. The donkey lies in Gal-On's studio on a cart flaunting the caption: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, shout for joy, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, thy king cometh unto thee; he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, even upon a colt the foal of an ass" (Zechariah, 9,9). Another work titled **Trampoline** (see p.10), is based on a trampoline to which the artist has connected the covers of phylacteries, and alongside them she drew verses that refer to a zizith (tassel) and to verses placed inside mezuzoth. She glued onto two flour sieves, titled **Bre()asts 1** (see p.66-69), leaves from a Book of Psalms that used to belong to her father. Hava called this her method of storing sacred objects in the genizah.

An additional work, **Fantastic Garden** (see p.55), grew out of broken bits and pieces. It comprises a triangular corner table, discarded from the artist's home, with white-colored bits of pottery from an accidentally shattered vase glued onto its legs. The tabletop resembles a complete garden; it is made up of collections of various available articles, hi-tech components, and colorful glass flowers peeping out from the stoppers of

"Bulgari" perfume bottles, which serve as flower pots. At the center of the shining glass garden stands a figure made out of a ring stand – the black widow.

Another work touches on topical subjects that are unfortunately life-and-death matters these days. The work comprises painted jerrycans that look like fuel containers by means of which the artist protests against the phenomenon of drunken drivers who fuel themselves to death. Gal-On conjugated on the jerrycans all the inflections of the root F U E L.

Displayed on the walls of the exhibition are additional objects conjured out of ready-made materials. Among them can be seen an ironing board bearing a line drawing of flat people, as well as the work **Spring-board** (see p.175), made from a fiberglass swimming pool diving-board, and displaying the words that refer to the Creation by virtue of the power of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, one of the cosmic theses. Glued on at the back is a leaf from a booklet on the subject of the Kabbala, containing a text explaining the essence of the power inherent in each letter. The artist has chosen on purpose to set the last letter of each word in boldface, thereby creating an illegible painted text with its impenetrability imparting a mystic hue to it.

The work **Portion of Land** (see p.60-61), comprises a strip from a tire that Gal-On found during a journey in Turkey, the shape of which reminded her of the map of Israel, whereas the work **White Angel** portrays in relief on plywood the figure of a white cat which, from her point of view, is guarding Israel. Around the cat appears a freehand drawing reminiscent in shape of the map of Israel, and to emphasize the resemblance the artist drew on the map the names of the Biblical four winds of heaven.

Mirrored doors that had been removed served Gal-On to paint her self-portrait for the first time. The work with the four mirrors led her toward a process of inner contemplation and encouraged her to explore the emotional drives that the artist undergoes during the work process. In the first mirror titled **Stuck** (see p.14), the image of the artist appears in full size as though she had stood right inside the mirror. In the second work titled **Flying** (see p.14), the artist appears with her legs in the air in a state of hovering and uplifting. In the third mirror titled **Upturned** (see p.14), the artist is painted from a photograph, standing on her head. From the fourth mirrored door, which as opposed to the others lies on its side, sprout several portraits of the artist painted from diverse angles.

The works on shoes, which form a central part of the exhibition, portray pairs of shoes that have all been worn by Gal-On in the past. The variegated out of the ordinary shoes serve as the basis of a colorful and highly imaginative kind of painting, enscrolling expressions on the subject of shoes from the dictionary side by side with additional citations. A fashion show exhibited in Shenkar College of Engineering and Design, which displayed among other things a Perspex purse manufactured by the Chanel Fashion House in the nineteen fifties, gave Gal-On the idea that the shoes could be packaged inside Perspex containers shaped like purses. All the pairs of shoes in the exhibition can

consequently be seen sprouting in the fascinating transparent Perspex purses designed in diverse shapes.

In the same spirit the artist built, around each of the two principal works in the exhibition, a Perspex box – the one encompassing a chair and the other enfolding a tree. In this manner she also imparted to these works displayed inside their enclosing boxes the status of a vitrine. On a chair she found by chance and has titled **Studio** (see p.51), Gal-On has over the last decade glued redundant work materials, including empty tubes, worn out brushes, dried out felt-tip pens, and empty packages that she had used in her work at the studio. She also placed the work **Big Apple** (see p.53) suspended inside a big Perspex jar on wheels, simulating an oil jar with a handle. The work comprises an apple tree, which she had taken from her garden after it had withered, painted it over in oil, and planted it in a wine box with the Stars and Stripes painted on its four sides. At the foot of the tree she scattered empty paint tubes from her studio to serve the tree as fertilizer. In the spirit of the saying "In America money grows on trees," 50 green one-dollar bills droop down from the tree placed in the jar of "plenty".

Gal-On's handling of tools that serve her in her work process causes the studio to become one of the subjects of her creativity. By means of the artist's tools and colors she raises significant questions regarding the subject of artistic doing itself. Moreover, the means of painting and the artist's utensils serve her as a kind of substitute for the self-portrait. She signifies the creative artists by means of the utensils they use for their artistic work, utensils that could also be termed still life. The standing of the still life that appears in these works, however, is not a routine one since the objects that are integrated into the work, such as the empty tubes of paint, the brushes, and the felt-tip pens, appear in this case as a metaphor for the artist and her work, for her world, and for her self-image as a creator. The appearance of the artist's tools-of-the-trade is in line with the age-long tradition of the studio and the artist's utensils in the history of Western art, a tradition that began with the Dutch artists in the seventeenth century, an outstanding example of which can be found in Chardin, who worked at the end of the eighteenth century. This subject also became prominent at the end of the nineteenth century in American art in the work of John F. Peto. The artists who treated these subjects wished to exhibit the attributes of the plastic arts in their actual surroundings. In the twentieth century these subjects became even weightier as part of the concern regarding the intellectual aspects of artistic creativity, along with significant questions on the subject of art in general and artists in particular. Portrayals of this subject can be found in the works of artists such as Matisse and Ensor, Braque and Picasso, and even in the New York School with Johns and the Pop Art artists, such as Dine, Arman, and numerous others.

The objects in the present exhibition fill the whole of the display space, creating designer surroundings and turning the exhibition space itself into an installation of objects and paintings that the viewer is invited to enter. The displayed works express an ambience that



Waiting for the Messiah, 2008, oil on a fiberglass ass from the flea market, 120x150x60
בציפייה למשיח, 2008, שמן על חמור מפיברגלס (משוק הפשפשים), 60x150x120

suffuses the studio space and the artifacts within it, thereby creating a balance between the concrete and the abstract as well as between actual objects and images-cum-shapes. On the one hand the works document visual reality, while on the other hand they express the sensations that these familiar shapes give rise to. A metaphorical element emerges in them when images and shapes deviate from their naturalistic context toward an idealistic reality. The mystic element presents itself as a buffer between the work and the viewer who insists on a literal understanding of Gal-On's work; but it is precisely that element which, taken out of its context, enables her to create the images that defy the possibility of finding naturalistic parallel versions for them.

In her wide-ranging oeuvre over the years Gal-On has brought about various meeting points between the immediately available-within-reach, and the sublime; between extinction and eternity; between reality and illusion. Her works serve her as an expressive utensil for illustrating her personal stories, exhibiting an eternal periodicity of formation and disintegration while remaining unconnected to any specific time or place; they express the realization that the riddles of existence will never be deciphered. The artist ventures on a journey in a sea of questions, during which she examines a string of indecipherable codes, and invites the viewer to choose whether to abandon the stance of an outside observer or to join her and become a partner in the riveting journey that is an ever present accompaniment of her works.