

# The Box of Surprises

Gil&Moti

We first met Hava Gal-On, an artist and gallery owner, in April 2008 when we encountered the gallery "Gal-On: Art Space" in Yehuda Halevy Street, Tel Aviv. It is an exhibition space that Gal-On opened beside her studio in 2006.

And thus began our "romance" with Hava: one day the curator Daniella Talmor called us suggesting that we hold an exhibition in Gal-On's gallery. We immediately set a date to meet her there with Hava. After the official discussion we asked, out of idle curiosity, to visit the nearby studio across the sidewalk. The minute we crossed the threshold we realized we'd stepped into a box of surprises. The studio was jam-packed with a motley of works, a vast collection of images, some hanging from above and others dispersed around the space, an infinite range of two- and three-dimensional objects each differing from the others in size, in shape, and in color-saturated texture. We were struck by the abundance. Skipping around most energetically, Hava showered us with a stream of images, bathing each one of them in a torrent of words. Like children in a candy shop we stood fascinated but at the same time deterred by the totality. Later, after having left the place, we exchanged

our impressions of the meeting, and concluded that what had attracted us the most was a not insignificant group of works piled up in a heap. They were delicate creations of modest dimensions, felt-tip pen drawings on cardboard boxes encased within flamboyant frames. We resolved there and then in our hearts that we would one day incorporate these very works in an exhibition of ours.

The artist Hava Gal-On was born in Samarkand 64 years ago, and immigrated to Israel after the state was declared. From 1985 to 1986 she studied drawing under Rachel Shavit at the Academy of Art, and then continued her studies up to 1990 in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art workshops. From 1992 to 1995 she studied privately at the studio of the artist Yaacov Mishori, and on completing her studies became a member of the Tel Aviv Artists Association. During all the years of her career as a successful businesswoman she never gave up her artistic creativity, and after seven years of work in a studio in Old Jaffa and an additional seven years of creativity in another work space in Neve Zedek she decided to buy a studio comprising two separate but neighboring spaces in Yehuda Halevy Street. Hava initially designated one of the spaces as her workshop and the other as a place to exhibit her works. However, after moving to the new studio she decided to deviate from her original plan and instead of exhibiting her own works exclusively she established, within the exhibition space, the gallery "Gal-On: Art Space", which presents exhibitions of well-known artists as well as of artists newly starting out. This gallery is characterized by artistic pluralism, by openness, and by offering a stage to as many voices as possible.

Hava's decision to open a gallery is out of the ordinary, but it concurrently accords with the spirit of the time in Israel, as in the world over the past few years, in the domain of contemporary art; we are witness to a process where the functional definitions of artist, gallery owner, and curator have become fluid. The driving forces in this domain are variegated and varying, and comprise a complete mixture of functions and authorities. Among those who simultaneously hold different positions we can, for instance, count: Michal Shamir – artist and head of the "School of Art, Society and Culture" in the Sapir College; Dana Gillerman – artist, art critic, and curator; Doron Rabina – artist,

curator, and Director of the Academy of Art; Amnon Yariv and Sarah Erlich, who began their careers as artists and then became gallery owners; as well as numerous others. As for the international arena, one can very briefly mention Yinka Shonibare, a successful artist who recently established in London the "Guest Projects", an exhibition space for contemporary guest artists, and who is also presently curating one of the three exhibitions opening the renovated Israel Museum. The writers of this text, too, are artists who have been engaged over the past decade in curating, for example in the "Gil & Moti Homegallery" ongoing project in Rotterdam.

Curating signifies going deeply into another creator's endeavor, and mediating his creation to the public. For us artists the curating function is an enrichment, a learning process stemming from the attraction and interest that an artist and his works engender in us. The exhibition "Addicted to Hand Movement", which encompasses the entirety of Hava Gal-On's box works, evolved from the basis of this viewpoint and is presented, not surprisingly, in the Tel Aviv gallery of the artist Dudu Gerstein.

### **Addicted to Hand Movement**

A year after the first meeting with Hava we set a date to meet her once again in her studio in order to discuss the exhibition we would be curating. On the way to this meeting we thought, among other things, about the great architectonic resemblance existing between Hava's studio and our "Homegallery". Half of the walls in Hava's studio are transparent, so that passersby also become witnesses to her creative process. Our "Homegallery", too, is transparent and enables the viewers to, partially, observe our lives. Awareness of this resemblance made us stop and ask ourselves: what does this situation of working in a context of transparency create? How does it affect the process of creation and its results? We toyed with the possibility of writing an article to accompany the exhibition that would, among other things, point out the revelation of the very striking resemblance between the drawings on the glass framed boxes and the structure of Hava's studio – a colorful textural entirety that is also framed in glass.

On entering the studio we immediately spoke to Hava about our idea, but she informed us that while she does create all her oil paintings and installations in the studio, she actually creates the boxes in question on her bed in the bedroom while watching TV, and takes them to the studio only after the framing process. In view of her answer we arranged to meet her again in her home. She began to create the "Box Project", as Hava terms it, as soon as she stopped smoking, in April 2004. The project comprises dozens of untitled works, some of which are at present in private homes, without any orderly registration. These small-sized works are personal, intimate, of a compact nature, and appear to be the result of obsessively intense daily labor. The boxes are recognizably the result of a lengthy collection process comprising tension, decorativeness, and naïvety. They encompass opposites such as control versus happenstance and spontaneity versus planning, and the assiduousness governing their design details is the syntax of their painterly language.

The first box in the series was created by chance. Hava was sitting one day in front of the TV holding a cigarette, as usual, when all of a sudden she decided to stop smoking. But she then discovered she was left with nothing to keep her hands occupied and suddenly realized that she had not been addicted to nicotine but to hand movement. Beside her on the table lay an empty chocolate box, and alongside it a packet of felt-tip pens that had served to keep her grandchildren busy. Also standing before her was a vase of dried flowers, and without taking her eyes off the TV she started drawing them.

From that day on Hava began collecting empty boxes and storing them in a cupboard in her bedroom for use as required. She buys the felt-tip pens on diverse occasions in professional art stores or in children's toy stores. She works sitting up on her bed facing the TV with the colors on her right in three separate containers – one for cold colors, the second for warm colors, and the third for all the rest: golden colors, pencils, fingernail varnish, Tippex, and so forth. To her left lie various boxes; Hava chooses one, switches on the TV, and lets her hand and mind run fancy free. With her glasses balanced on the tip of her nose, her eyes shift between looking down to follow her precise work movements and looking up fleetingly to catch glimpses of the changing

picture on the TV screen. Even while concentrating visually on her work she remains attentive to the TV sound. She does not usually finish a work in a day and does not mind completing it on the second and even on the third day. When she decides the work is finished she sprays it with a fixative, which sometimes dissolves some of the colors, endowing the work with spontaneous textural qualities.

Certain similar features connect Hava's works to the drawings and paintings of the Israeli artists Gary Goldstein and Tal Mazliach. In the painterly domain, the works of these three artists are characterized by a profusion of detail, by a surfeit of textures, and by the use of pure colors. Furthermore, it is of interest to examine how the three artists make use of the written word: as an image, but also as a key to or hint for understanding the narrative of their work. With Mazliach, the eye is sometimes obliged to feel its way among and delve into the layers of paint before finding the word hidden therein, but from that moment onwards the path to follow becomes clear. With Goldstein, however, the word is made present by its absence, by the empty comics word balloons that require to be filled in by the viewer's imagination. As opposed to these two artists, with Hava the word appears in all its glory – clear, sharp, and legible. She makes abundant use of quotes from diverse identified sources such as the Bible and the Kabbala, but the word-image combinations she creates complicate the ability to decipher them unequivocally, and their interpretation is left for the eye of the observer to decide.

After having collected all the box works we could find we sorted them into three principal groups: portraits of women, portraits of men, and portraits of hands. The box project is above all a personal and colorful travel journal dealing delicately and optimistically with day-to-day topics that affect everyone such as: love, couplehood and loneliness, as well as giving and taking.

### **Adam and – Hava**

At our last meeting with Hava before writing this article we said we would like to talk with her about several works in the box project. The conversation proceeded as follows:

**Gil&Moti: Why hands?** (the works on pages 13-31)

**Hava:** For me, hands are an expression of giving. Hands also denote character; they say something about their owner. I also added a sunny-side-up egg to the hands because it runs, dissolves, is evasive, and slips around in the hand.

**Gil&Moti: Tell us something about the glasses of wine. We thought that when one hand is holding a glass of wine, it is waiting for another hand to come and grasp the glass floating nearby.** (pp. 18-19)

**Hava:** As opposed to my oil on canvas paintings as well as sculptures and installations, which I plan beforehand, the box works are mostly executed without any definite planning ahead. There are certain instances where I take a box and begin working on the background, on a certain texture, and afterwards add an identified specific image, while on other occasions the process is reversed. There is no set pattern but the content, the images and the textures are created during the work process. In the work in question, in the first stage I drew a texture with a light red felt-tip pen without any plan, and in the second stage the hand and glasses were added; I then chose to go back and darken certain places in the background. The turquoise blue is connected by its symbolism to the Kabbala and Islam as a defense against the evil eye. The blue glass is the glass of fate, and the hand holding the reddish-yellow glass is waiting for someone, for the hand to grasp the blue glass.

**Gil&Moti: And again on the subject of glasses of wine, what are the two gentlemen – who are also holding glasses of wine while words that repeat themselves appear in the background – actually doing?** (p. 36).

**Hava:** I saw the figures of these men in a TV program, or some newspaper, and decided to add glasses of wine in order to create a context of a social meeting, an almost daily experience. Portrayed here is a conversation full of pathos based on a constant repetition of commonplace phrases: "What's new, What's happening, How are things ...", forced conversation accompanied by indefinite body language. The figures are eyeless because in this connection the eyes are unimportant, it is the situation that is important. The text in the

background is written in various colors that characterize differences in tone of speaking and loudness of voice.

**Gil&Moti: Hava, why are Adam and Eve inside?** (p. 34)

**Hava:** I am interested in mysticism. Do the cosmic laws exist? I arrive at religion and the Kabbala through mysticism, according to which the world was created through the power of the "Aleph-Bet", namely through the power of the Hebrew letters of the alphabet. There are no proofs of this belief and I do not examine truths, but the entire subject attracts me. The drawn eye signifies the scouting eye, the seeing eye, the good eye as opposed to the evil eye. Giving is denoted here with a favorable sign. The ear of grain, too, is symbolic and signifies "the tree of all that is good" (referring to the Tree of Knowledge) before the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The eye – is the cosmic eye. It is looking at us, examining us, though not specifically in a threatening manner. People have lost their privacy because nowadays cameras are placed everywhere. That is why Adam and Eve, after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, have come inside, into the protected world of the box. I'm returning them inside. As to the contents and intentions, I'm just hinting, without interpreting. I'm enabling the viewer to sail forth unaided.

**Gil&Moti: The work with the portrait of the Medusa includes a good deal of text. The word art flutters over it like a title that floats above everything else.** (p. 53)

**Hava:** This work deals with the doubts of the artist, with the words that every artist tells himself at various times. It was a chocolate box that had been opened and spread out and has become a Pandora's box. At its center stands the figure of the artist, and around it flutter those selfsame doubts that are symbolized by the following words:

Art, Loyalty, Obsession, Agreeing, Conceding, Cancelling, Creating, Seeing, Saying, Wavering, Importance, Commitment, Worthy, Desirable, Speak up, Remain silent, Incentive.