

Hava's Colorfully Adorned Notebook

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«...happiness must be, for most men and women, an achievement rather than a gift of the gods, and in this achievement effort, both inward and outward, must play a great part.» [Bertrand Russel]¹

¹ Bertrand Russel, *The Conquest of Happiness*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1930, p163 (On p.200 of the Hebrew translation by Avinoam Sayag).

² **Addicted to Hand Movement**, Curators – Gil & Moti, October 2010, Gerstein Gallery, Tel Aviv.

On entering the precincts of the yard in 79 Yehuda Halevy Street I find myself, as usual, agonizing over where to turn first – to the gallery on the right, in order to visit the rotating exhibition that is presently on show, or perhaps to the transparent studio on the left, to Hava Gal-On's temple of creation where, through the wide windows of this work space, I can see an enchantingly colorful though somewhat sugary world, a kind of "Box of Surprises"² or box of candies, secretly heralding the promise of a riveting aesthetic experience.

On this occasion I choose to turn left, to the box of surprises. Right at the entrance I am confronted by a multicolored suitcase covered in an abundance of spots and shapes in green, red, azure and pink. It would appear that this work offers an exhaustive summation of Gal-On's personal style and artistic language. Colorfulness engulfs the work, with the addition of a propensity for embellishment and a kind of childishness, innocence, sweetness, freshness, surfeit, humor, and a tremendous deal of gaiety and happiness. I continue to contemplate the work while Gal-On explains: "The interior of the suitcase is filled with things, and on its exterior I express the thoughts, the memories, and the feelings that I take with me, and all this with colorfulness, like my colorful life in all the senses." My gaze wanders over the entire studio, to the paints arranged in order of warm and cold colors, to the works hung in exemplary, almost dandified order. There is a somewhat feminine aura in this studio. What is the source of this exuberance, I ask myself, what is the meaning of this hearty cheerfulness, and in honor of what is the celebration? Is Gal-On unaware that art has to express suffering? Has she no criticism of society's injustices, of the political situation, of existential suffering, of prevailing rampant injustice? I seek to find the answer to these questions through an examination of the whole gamut of Gal-On's work. I will now unfold the answers I arrived at after examining the components, the characteristics, the influences, and the implications of her work on the course of the artist's life, which were revealed to me during conversations I had with her.

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Wild Exaggeration,

July 2009 – January 2010,
curator Tami Katz-Priman, Haifa
Museum; **Flesh and Blood,**
a group of curators under the
guidance of Tami Katz-Priman,
December 2009 – January 2010,
Exhibition in the Kalisher Gallery,
Tel Aviv.

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Gila Balass, **Color in Modern
Painting – Theory and
Practice,** Reshafim, Tel Aviv,
1996, p. 129 in the Hebrew
text. Also: **Matisse,** Lawrence
Gowing, Thames and Hudson,
London, 1979, p.50

5

Balass, **Color in Modern
Painting,** pp.131-132 in the
Hebrew text.

As part of my attempt to delve into Gal-On's oeuvre and to understand her motives and messages I am classifying her works according to the following categories: images of innocence and serenity; subjects from the Bible and the Kabbala; spirituality and the heavens; earthy and social connections; and found objects that have been turned into works of art.

Contemplating the totality of Gal-On's artistic efforts gives rise to the feeling that her works are replete with gaiety and happiness, impulsive at times. From this aspect a clear gap emerges between her artistic point of departure and that of contemporary art, which as a generalization aspires to express pain, suffering, sickness, and even ugliness.³

In the modernistic tradition of the first half of the twentieth century, the artist Matisse posited that the purpose of art was to uplift the soul: "I dream of an art of balance, of purity, and of serenity with no bothersome or oppressive subjects. Art that will be able to make everyone feel calm and spiritually relaxed, like a comfortable armchair on which one can rest when tired."⁴ Matisse painted various works such as **Luxury Serenity and Plenty** or **Joie de Vivre** while striving to create the tranquil aura of an enchanted Garden of Eden containing nothing but splendor, serenity, and abundance. Painting served him as a kind of window to another, better world inducing an exaltation and purification of the mind, a catharsis. Matisse even compared the emotional effect of painting with that of music, and attributed the qualities of musical rhythm and harmony to various artistic means such as the winding arabesque line or colorful exuberance: "All my colors sing in unison; it is like a musical chord. They have the requisite power for a chorus."⁵

Viewing colorfulness as a kind of orchestration or harmonic chord and employing a rhythm of shapes and colors characterize the works of Gal-On, too. A similar spirit of innocence and simplicity hovers over her work titled **Marathon** (see p.16). It displays a couple of runners depicted in squiggly lines of color of a primary childlike nature. The runners appear to be gamboling gaily, and in the background can be seen layers of color signifying clods of earth, vegetation, and a light blue sky with white clouds floating aloft. The work is characterized by a maximal flattening effect, which also typifies other works of hers, an artistic means of intensifying its childlike dimension as well as its simplicity and innocence. When the work is turned sideways, the figures appear to be dancing and not running, and the golden line of color that delineates their contours appears even more squiggly and sensuous. The use of gold intensifies the embellishment dimension of the work, and imbues the images of the runners with a jewel-like appearance, a recurring motif in Gal-On's work. In this, as in her other works, she totally renounces the figurative ethical artistic language and turns toward abstraction. The pure means of winding line and bold colorfulness accumulates a rhythmic musical quality that imparts a message of cheerfulness and joie de vivre.

In many of her additional works Gal-On employs abstraction, flattening, and exuberant colorfulness. One such work is **Roly-Poly Toy**, 1995, comprising a flowery fabric of colors – pinks, reds, oranges, yellows, purples and light blues. The colors mingle in an abundance of interwoven shapes and patterns in which can be discerned, integrating with the background patterns, a feminine figure that appears to be floating in a dreamlike space. What is the source of this dreaminess?

Hava Gal-On was born in Samarkand. To escape the terrors of the Holocaust her father, Zvi Meister, fled from Poland to the Ukraine, where he met her mother, Raya Suskin. They married and moved to Uzbekistan. Gal-On immigrated, with her parents, to Israel at the age of three and grew up in Tel Aviv. Her mother engaged in creating decorative artificial flowers for adorning garments, and her father was, for a short time, the owner of a textile factory. During the austerity period he lost control of the plant, and from then on made a living as an accountancy clerk. Perhaps these origins hold the explanation for Gal-On's propensity toward aesthetics and embellishment, her yearning to gladden the eye, which exists in her together with another dominant aspiration, namely to transmit messages and intuitive impressions.

Gal-On's early childhood was steeped in feelings of a great sadness because of the sickness of her younger brother, Menahem, who was born with a heart defect. Though the parents devotedly stayed by his bedside throughout his hospitalization he died at the age of five when Gal-On was only eight years old. After the tragedy, the parents decided to turn over a new leaf for the better in their married lives. A certain event from those days remained very clearly engraved in Gal-On's memory: "My parents and I went out dressed in the best of festive garments, my mother wearing a taffeta dress in an integrated purple pattern... and the two of them dancing to the music... this fantastic sight was like a joyous fairy tale. It gave me the feeling of hope for a new start in life, this time a life of happiness." A year later her parents divorced, in a world where divorce was almost unheard of. The pain, the sorrow, and the feelings of loneliness and melancholia became at that time part of the daughter's internal and external life. She was a sociable girl who used to dance and be merry, but at the same time the only-girl-in-the-class-with-divorced-parents. In all likelihood this anomaly stirred in her a process of withdrawal and severance, causing her to create for herself a world of her own.

In Gal-On's work as an artist the subject of couplehood is central. The core of the work **Growing Couplehood** (see p.16), is a portrayal of a tree from which a couplehood is growing upwards. Drawn in a scribbled line the roots of the tree appear like feet embracing one another, whereas the branches are crosshatched into a motley weave of shapes and colors wrapped around the legs and uniting them. Gold, blue, and purple are the colors that are mostly dominant here. These colors, Gal-On explains, conceal a symbolism within themselves: purple carries a "slightly poisonous" mystic quality; blue

is regarded as a spiritual color both in the Christian tradition and in the perception of the colorist and father of abstract painting, Kandinsky; whereas gold signifies holiness in numerous traditions and also holds a very dominant place in the oeuvre of the early twentieth century Austrian painter, Gustav Klimt. In general, a comparison between the work of Gal-On and that of Klimt is called for. Characteristics such as flattening, stylization, ornamentation, the use of gold paint, and the integration of images with the background that are characteristic of Gal-On's work also stand out greatly in Klimt's famous work **The Kiss**. The two artists very often celebrate the intimacy and bonding of lovers, as well as the jewel-like image of the painting that turns love into a kind of valuable appeasement of desire. In this context Gal-On's uniqueness surges beyond her creativity, and it is of interest to note that also she herself does not fail to adorn herself both in her dress and in her jewelry, and to design her surroundings in the same spirit.

Nevertheless, Gal-On's work differs from that of Klimt in the colorfulness, the tenderness, the innocence and the mischievousness that characterize her. The painting **Growing Couplehood** (see p.16), is a song of praise for the growth of love engendered by Divine Providence, abundance, and beauty, as well as by the infinite yearning that they arouse. And the total bonding occurs in the work **Infinity 2** (see p.123), where the digit 8 signals infinity and expresses eternal bonding. The childlike innocence that characterizes the painterly language embodies a spiritual message: infinity and eternity are celestial. Her treatment of these subjects connects Gal-On to the classical artistic tradition where the principle of Platonic love is a classical tradition asserting that the connection between lovers is both physical and spiritual at one and the same time.

In the work **Adam and Hava** (see p.110), the two entities bond and become the Biblical couple, which Gal-On's brush portrays by an abundance of decorative touches of color, which are typified in the same manner recurring in her work, and is somewhat reminiscent of the works of Tal Mazliah. The eye contact between the couple signals intimacy, innocence, and a naïve pastorality reserved for both of them within a world of their own, without either of them noticing the snake gliding stealthily between them. The snake's phallic shape signifies the dark agent that penetrates the serenity and threatens the peace, the couplehood, and the pleasantness, in the same way that life itself is disturbed by diverse threatening agents. The theme of disturbing the tranquility is also present in the works of the painter Yitzhak Livneh, but whereas his work is characterized by a dimension of cynicism, which finds expression explicitly in his overly posterlike refined and almost artificial style, Gal-On's work is devoid of any cynicism. Her artistic language is personal and picturesque; she amuses herself with simplicity and innocence, and her notes and words are happy ones. Those who know Hava Gal-On are aware of the fact that she is by no means a naïve woman, but are also aware of her effort to withdraw – both in her real life and in her art – into a fantasy world of innocence and happiness.

In numerous works Gal-On makes actual use of words. These words are usually purposely aimed at the goodness, the abundance, and the beauty of life. Sometimes they are words from the Kabbala and quotations from the Bible – verses from the books of Genesis, the Psalms, the Song of Songs, as well as other sources, which endow the artist with inspiration for her work as though they were mantras or a life-and-hope-affording lodestone. Gal-On also demonstrates a strong affinity for traditional Judaism, from which she absorbs the inspiration and the good words she integrates with her works.

Gal-On's choice of happiness – in her life as in her art – is expressed in many of her works. The **Tree of Life 2** (see p.108), for example, reflects this choice. The tree that signifies life is very elegant. Its fruits curl like colorful ornamental models, and the color of gold abounds. This work too is like a jewel in quality, and is likely to put one in mind of the works of Bianca Eshel Gershuni. The flowery landscape in the background is painted in Gal-On's characteristic naïve style, and is somewhat reminiscent of Yedid Rubin's landscapes. The earth beside the tree sprouts eggs containing couples that have not yet hatched. Serenity, abundance, love, fertility and life suffuse the work like a blessing.

After her parents divorced Gal-On lived with her mother, who had meantime remarried, in the Givat Aliya neighborhood of Jaffa. Of those times she remembers the sewage running through the streets. The local residents, mostly Holocaust survivors, were constantly bringing up memories of the horrors they had undergone but were also preoccupied with the lust for life. Each successful venture led them to believe that they had achieved a victory over the Nazis. Inspired by those very days Gal-On chose the following motto: to succeed no matter what and in spite of everything. When she was in the sixth grade at school she moved with her new family from Givat Aliya to Ben Gurion Avenue in Tel Aviv. Her supportive father was always present in the background and it was he who drew her to the world of culture, enabling her to come in contact with the ambience of opera, theater, and art.

Ever since that time, Gal-On has been painting incessantly. At first she painted for her own amusement in her notebook and in those of her classmates. She copied paintings from art books her father bought her, and created for herself a life brimful of imagination and color. Color always made her happy and thanks to her inborn grim determination and aesthetic talent she taught herself to master it, to play with it, and to turn it into a fount of overflowing happiness. In the nineteen eighties she studied drawing for a year with Rahel Shavit in the College of Art in Ramat Hasharon. She also studied painting for four years with Yakov Mishouri in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and for another three years in his studio.

Gal-On's abstract paintings are in the nature of "pure painting" according to Kandinsky's definition. Outstanding among them are portrayals of Genesis, in the rounded format reminiscent of the Indian Mandalay paintings. It would appear that Gal-On is especially

fond of portraying the chaos of Genesis by playing games with color. These compositions are characterized by self-generated rules, which are unique in each portrayal, and are based on a bold colorfulness and the proportioned dispersal of spots of color creating a balance between warm and cold colors. Such balance and harmony also characterize Kandinsky's artwork, and especially the works **Composition** and **Improvisation**.

Gal-On's choice of the language of music clearly illustrates the emphases present in the painting **Purity**, which focuses on the aesthetic language of shapes and colors and in the creation of harmony governed by an internal set of rules. Thus does chaos become orderly in her work, which portrays the struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness and concludes with light having the upper hand of the struggle. This is a metaphor for the artist's own struggle to overcome sadness in her life and to fill it with happiness. Gal-On also draws a good deal of inspiration from the Kabbala, which espouses tikkun (repairing the world) and eradicating negative elements in the life of man. The two worlds are symbolized by the colors blue and yellow: blue is connected to spirituality, though also to sadness, and yellow symbolizes the light and the sublime. The work **All's a Mission** (see p.20), for example, portrays two segments of a circular body, which appear to be moving toward each other and would ultimately collide. The thick paint that adorns the bodies is also reminiscent of the work of Kandinsky, which deals with the terrifying struggle between earthly forces and celestial forces. But Kandinsky's style is characterized by a measure of sharpness and violence, and is intended to warn against the terrors of the apocalypse destined to occur, whereas Gal-On's style excels in tranquility, in accepting the realities, in serenity and conciliation, which could perhaps be characterized as a feminine trait. Among the abstract images one can also discern human figures facing each other in seemingly conciliatory gestures, as though they had been sent between the two worlds in order to encourage them to contract a peace treaty.

Aspiring to rise above petty considerations and searching for a sublime divine light are considerations that are common to many of Gal-On's works. The search for spiritually rising above petty considerations, in connection with the spirit of the Kabbala, is expressed in her work **Path to the Light**. The core of the work portrays an abstract image of a reel uncoiling across the width of the format. It is a kind of green-yellow-red flammable material burning at the edges of the blue color, and from thence gradually widening and turning yellow with sparks radiating out from it. Her works on the subject of **Heaven**, shown in a solo exhibition held in the Artists House in Tel Aviv, were also characterized by a very dynamic colorful presence. The spiritual dimension that she imparted to color there is reminiscent of the work of Mordechai Ardon, and Gal-On herself points out that he had influenced her. These motifs were expressed once again in her solo exhibition **Genesis**, which was held in the Bible Museum.

But does Gal-On's work also treat earthly and existential subjects? The answer is in the affirmative; she has already responded in the past to political events. In the work **First Gulf War** (see p.22), for instance, the images gave expression to the ambience of war: Israel divided into areas, the gas mask, the cormorant soaked in fuel oil, pictures of those killed, and a chess board twisted to provide an optical illusion of perspective, all of which served as a metaphor for the war zone. In that work a feature of the game became a means of criticism. Additional works that treated political subjects were **Road Map**, which referred to Israel's borders, **Yad le-Banim**, which touched upon the question of loss of life in wars, and the work **September 11** (see p.143), which dealt with the attack on the "Twin Towers".

Gal-On's anti-war message is explicitly expressed in the works **Optimism 1** (see p.160) and **Optimism 2**, which are very reminiscent in character of the works on the subject of Heaven. The azure color dominates in the pleasant appearance of the bright colorfulness of these works, and its borders are converted into chains of flowers as, too, are the flags that surround the map. Also the caption "And the Borders Will Dissolve and the Land Will Be Peaceful" contributes to the peaceful aura. The naïve reference to the political context also appears in the work **Rose-colored Spectacles** (see p.134), which portrays Israel with a wink and with optimism.

In 1997 Ilan, Hava's husband, died after an illness. The separation from him was heartbreaking after a marriage that had lasted 35 years. Gal-On cared for her husband with the utmost devotion and shared in his suffering. After his death she wrote the following poem:

Ilan, pain travels
Gnawing squirming pain
Clasping choking pain.
It probes the middle
Spreads sideways
Creeps up then halts
On the left side.
Never leaves
Never ceases
Stopping only to return
Before it stops again.
A maze of pain

Traveling pain.

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Gideon Ofrat, **Within a Local Context**, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2004. p. 233 in the Hebrew text.

Ever since the Romantic painters of the nineteenth century, numerous colorists have used color as a poetic lyrical means of expressing existential and personal pain. In effect, they became so used to the "artist" image that we find it difficult to accept the artist who plays, with no apology, with color. Michal Perry, a colorist, recently exhibited an expressionist work titled **Field of Roses**, and beside it wrote: "And the image of a wall with pieces of flesh bursting on it gripped me." Gal-On's work is devoid of this fatalistic spirit. It is true that there was no lack of difficulties and crises in her life, but she chose to view them through rose-colored spectacles and this stubbornness alienated her from the contemporary artistic milieu. Having said that, it is also possible in contemporary Israeli art, as in the international arena, to point at a trend of movement toward "The Playful and Aesthetic Direction", as Gideon Ofrat has already recognized.⁶ Ofrat's words referred specifically to images of soldiers in the staged, erotic, and aesthetic photographs by artists like Adi Ness and others, but as a generalization one could say that this tendency reflects a desire to return to the original aim that guided artists throughout numerous periods in art – the aspiration to confer on the viewer aesthetic pleasure while undergoing an uplifting spiritual experience.

Hava Gal-On plays and amuses herself with aesthetics, and thereby also feels refreshingly uplifted. She believes in the kabbalistic principle that it is incumbent on man to be good vis-à-vis his surroundings. According to her, life is like swimming in the sea. When a wave draws near, it would be better to rise with it and not to oppose it. The wave will then pass on and the water will descend and calm down. It is interesting to see that this metaphor is also reflected in Gal-On's name (gal = wave). She reckons that it would be best to treat the adversities of life like a game, where art is one of its pieces. One of the boxes in the studio bears the caption **Game of Happiness** (see p.74). Images of flowering, happiness, a bird and music are portrayed on one of its sides while on the other side letters and numbers are drawn. The game is based on moving along the path of life, choosing the pieces, and assembling them. If we understand that the choice is ours, happiness becomes child's play.

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Addicted to Hand Movement, Curators – Gil & Moti, October 2010, Gerstein Gallery, Tel Aviv.

Gal-On's studio is cram-full of numerous objects suffused with humor. Ilan's trousers have metamorphosed into a "Blessed Installation"; multicolored ironing boards symbolize "Flattened"; an ass standing still, as if **Waiting for the Messiah** (see p.59, 170), is covered in captions bearing the name Ben David; several mirrors portray Gal-On's colorful self-portraits; memories and thoughts are painted on multicolored suitcases; fashionable shoes are redecorated in vibrant colorfulness; a work titled **Studio** (see p.25, 51) comprises a chair loaded with glued down empty tubes of paint and worn out brushes that had been in use over a period of more than a decade (Gal-On's own life-support pieces) and which have been enclosed in perspex; and, naturally, the boxes are to be found there. The paintings on the boxes shown in Gal-On's solo exhibition



Optimism 1, 1996, oil on canvas, 32x43

אופטימיזם 1, 1996, שמן על בד, 43x32

Addicted to Hand Movement⁷ are especially naïve: they comprise hands, glasses, trees and flowers, and beautiful women with flowing tresses. These works have been created spontaneously and innocently, and are reminiscent of a young girl's scribbling in her notebook, as Gal-On was wont to do in her youth.

Gal-On takes everyday objects and turns them into aesthetic art objects. She utilizes feminine articles such as nail varnish and rouge in order to create art. To a certain extent one could regard this as a new version of *Wanted Matter*. However, as previously stated, the use that Gal-On makes of Ready Made objects is void of cynicism, and they are loaded with messages that are at times mystic and always optimistic, almost ideological. And just because of that, because of the grand celebration she has created all for herself, her art better expresses the surfeit and the pluralism that are characteristic of the culture and art of postmodernism.

Hava Galon is unique. She is an original artist whose work overflows with a variegated abundance of mischief and color, while humor and fun emanate from her without provocation or constraint. Thus does she adorn the notebook of her life.