

Talking to Nomi Tannhauser

Irena "Crimson Peels" is a project in which your position is twofold – that of a curator and a participating artist. How would you describe the nature of the project from this position?

Nomi : Up till today I didn't participate as an artist in exhibitions I curated. This time the project was very personal for me. First of all the workshop is a place in which I worked when I was younger, so I feel comfortable working there again. Secondly the "Crimson Peels" project was born largely out of my own work, which has dealt for a long time with the female body. Even when I painted covered women, they were always very physical. Nowadays I paint myself, and the clothes I wear. Every encounter between the body and the cloth interests me. I came to this project both as an artist and as a part of a group of artists whom I feel are all dealing in some way with this subject. My curating here continues my investigation of the topic as an artist, it allows me to continue my research through the works of other artists. The "Hair" exhibit which I curated in 1997 at the Jerusalem artists' House, also spurred from my own work concerning women's hair coverings. Through this work I realized to what extent hair is a central and deep topic in culture, and I initiated an exhibition in which 16 artists participated who presented various aspects of hair – issues of masculinity and femininity rejection and abjection. In the Crimson Peels exhibition I try to bring to the surface the repressed aspects that even women are at times unaware of.

Irena: How do you explain your decision to choose only female and artists, it can be seen as an act of exclusion and perpetuating the dichotomy between men and women.

Nomi: I really feel that for a man it's hard to enter the experience of the female body – it is very interesting in itself, but it's a different experience. I'm trying to examine the experience of the female body from the perspective of the woman

and I wanted not to disperse but to focus: I didn't invite women artists as such, but only those to whom I connect conceptually and emotional since I feel they deal with the same difficulty with the body. Each artist in the project reflects a different approach to the topic. Through them I try to clarify complex issues. From this perspective curating is a deep and ongoing process that includes dialogues, debates, and discussions between the artists and myself.

Irena: In transition to you as an artist, can you tell me how the compositions and images in your prints came about? They are actually are all self-portraits, and mostly consist of the tension between body and garment, between body and texture, some are headless and the chest area becomes a mirror of the soul.

Nomi: For twenty years I painted women from Jewish Ultra-Orthodox and Palestinian sectors who were always dressed and covered, not knowing why. Only questions I was asked by Yaniv Shapira in the exhibition "Shibboleth", exhibited in 2006 at the Ein Harod Museum of Art, led me to think I actually painted myself, the same frightened girl closed in dress and in oppressive systems. I decided then that it was time to paint myself – sometimes dressed and at sometimes partially dressed. Age also played a role: the fact that I was already not young solved the problem of exposing my body to myself and to the world as a sex object, and the mature body has more painterly points of interest, more to grasp.

The prints are the outcome of this process. The choice of faceless chest communicates all sorts of ideas concerning what the female portrait actually is and our everlasting struggle with this part of our body, that in one way or another the forms our feminine identity consciously or subconsciously.

Irena: Even when there is nudity in your prints it looks like a garment, like an outer layer, a peel. When you look at the works there is a sense that you can't enter inside the nudity itself, that it is impossible to break the barrier between

inside and outside, in this sense that the works create a kind of protest, a defiance.

Nomi: There is no doubt that the issue of the barrier between the inside and outside occupies me. In the last work that I made at the work shop – "Feminine Metabolizm" – It seems that this barrier is completely broken and the body actually merges with the environment. Yet it's hard for me to see the work from the outside. It is clear to me that there is protest here, but my paintings come from a place that is quite unaware – the topics, the compositions and the character of the work. Basically I work until I reached a point where I feel a sort of peace. There is no virtuosity in me nor a clear point to which I aspire, but a kind of search through trial and error. I believe that the accumulation of things creates a whole and this will create meaning and reflect who I am.

Irena: As an artist in the project you worked at the Print Workshop for a long time, you arrived here on a daily basis and to a large extent became part of the place.

Nomi: The intensiveness of my work in the workshop resulted from a kind of perfectionism that is the other side of my obsessiveness – a restrained side I relate both to my cultural background and to concept of the withdrawn and restrained femininity. In Israeli society that worships the unrestrained free line I am a bit of an outsider. I give respect to this reserved side, even if it doesn't reward me directly. I don't believe in shortcuts, I don't believe we can skip over things inside us. Ran Segal, the printer, suggested that I work freely on the final print, it did indeed come out very free, but I felt that had to earn this freedom, and it came only after a long process and a sisyphic efforts. In fact, working with Ran was very unique; I felt that he was a full partner in my work.

Translation: Nomi Tannhauser