

## Yonatan Amir Talks with Nomi Tannhauser

Yonatan Amir

**"I'm a woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and that's considered a feminist act."**

**On culture and art, blindness and femininity – artist Nomi Tannhauser's interim conclusions**



Nomi Tannhauser-Kedar, Oil on Canvas

"It's interesting that a journey that begins after the first station and ends before the last station, still manages to create something whole", says artist Nomi Tannhauser-Kedar, describing *Shibolet*, an exhibition of her recent body of work, shown at the Ein Harod Museum of Art and at the Artspace Gallery in Jerusalem. The exhibit includes a series in oil, depicting wheat fields with Arab and ultra-orthodox Jewish girls, and is accompanied by a catalog that provides a sort of mid-life retrospective, summing up twenty years of artistic work.

"The idea of stalks of wheat started out as an image that made a strong impression," explains Tannhauser-Kedar, "it seemed iconic, although I didn't really know why. There was some connection in my mind between the yellow fields and the blue sky, and it was only later that the images stood out clearly and I began to have some insights on the reasons that I choose certain subjects, the issues involved and what they're made up of. The imagery in my work is like live ammunition; for instance, my insistence on painting a Palestinian girl together with every portrait of an ultra-orthodox girl, retaining the symmetry between the nations. The symmetrical balance originated in my feeling that that's the way things ought to be, but in retrospect, I've realized that there's an autobiographical element. In the final analysis, it's clear that these are in some way self-portraits, because I'm actually the result of two distinct nations."

**The Jews seem to be specifically ultra-orthodox.**

"Yes, but they're also an expression of femininity. I think that I choose peripheral, borderline, "outsider" characters. There's also something about the way the girls are withdrawn and covered up that turns them into symbols, rather than images of themselves. Their clothing symbolizes an emotional and spiritual state, and that has to do with the fact that feminine destiny is often much more powerful than belonging to one nation or another. A lot of people who've seen the exhibition comment on how similar the girls are, how they don't seem to belong to any one ethnic group. There's an additional aspect; I didn't grow up in an agricultural milieu, and neither did any of the girls that I photograph. They celebrate the agriculturally-based holidays, like *Shavuot* and Passover, but they haven't a clue when it comes to farming, so we're actually talking about the post-modernist and post-Zionist experience in general.

**Looking at the exhibition as a whole, one senses a type of convergence.**



At first, the fields were so overpowering that I couldn't really see the individual stalks of wheat; it took a while before I started to notice them and then I could focus on individuals rather than anonymous fields. It's the same convergence that takes place when I'm filming the girls. When they're in large groups they all look the same, anonymous, and they're also all wearing the same uniform. But when you observe closely, you discover that each one has a distinct personality. The same applies to the stalks of wheat – each one is curved in a different direction, and that creates a narrative that touches on the question of what makes each one unique in terms of form and color – what makes a stalk a stalk.

**The *Counting of the Omer* series was done outside, in nature, after years of painting from photographs. Why did you decide to paint the fields on-site?**

What was interesting was experiencing change. Painting a field is not the same as painting a building. You don't know beforehand if the field has been reaped or not, or if the stalks have withered because of a heat wave. There's a certain tension when you're painting in nature, because you don't know what you're going to be doing or what the outcome will be. It's very unlike the way I usually work. One of the things that people say about my studio work is that I never leave anything incomplete in my paintings. And it's true; I can't show anything that I'm not totally satisfied with. But when I'm in the field, there are things that have to be resolved on the spot, and sometimes that's not easy for me. It's a new and exhilarating experience – pulling out all the stops both professionally and emotionally, that also has a lot to do with things I'm going through in my life. When all is said and done, my almost incidental choices show up in the graphic language of my work. There's something intuitive in the studio paintings as well.

**A painting of the way a field changes over time is actually a painting of a process. Is it tracking the way things transform that interests you?**

That definitely does interest me. Actually, my next project is self-portraits, and at my age that involves processes, and once again, it's connected to femininity. In the meantime I've started drawing my class pictures from grade school, which has to do with the same topic.

### **Living in a world of images**

In 1983, when she was a young woman of twenty-six, Tannhauser-Kedar stood in front of a store in the center of Jerusalem with a placard that read: "This display is demeaning and promotes violence against women. Do not buy at this store until the display is removed." Her actions, protesting the humiliating representation of a woman's body in the storefront windows, got her arrested. A photographer from a local paper snapped a picture of the event, and Tannhauser-Kedar has kept the faded cuttings to this day. The ideas behind that protest are the same ones that appear in her work today, which she often describes as feminist works of art.

**Discussing a painting's subject matter and content implies that painting is the outcome of a verbal point of view, rather than of a visual language.**

I live in a world of images, a pictorial world. It's true that the choice of a specific image, such as young girls, may be emotionally charged, but later I deal with it using color and form. So the bottom line is that I'm a painter – but a painter who's chosen to paint girls or women as seen by a woman living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and that's considered a feminist act. I have a problem with art that gives top priority to technique, and is limited in its subject matter because of technical limitations. At times I feel that that kind of art ignores the context.

**When you say "subject matter", aren't you turning the painting into a visual slogan?**

I don't think so, because I believe that there's a different equilibrium in painting. After all, the content is the same, even though it's not something that's expressed verbally, and that's surprising. Note that I'm not associated with any particular artistic school. I didn't study art and I started painting only after graduating from university, in America, in an environment of figurative art that encouraged artistic creations that tell stories. In those terms, I perceive myself as an unpretentious human being – a human being who wants to tell a story.

**Local Color – Global Content**

I work in the antithesis of low-key, and I don't like the fears that people often have of something they call "over-working". Personally, I prefer "over-worked" to the dangers of "under-worked". At times I feel that Israeli art, and perhaps the Israeli experience in general, contains a certain degree of blindness and failure to assume responsibility.



I feel that untreated art may provide a loophole – a place that could conceal immoral thoughts or actions that burst forth and it's not really clear what they're trying to express. My painting is an attempt to create transparency, clarity. I'm wary of those shady, implied areas, and I believe that correlates with an ideological feminist worldview that refuses to accept things without asking questions.

**What do you mean by "immoral"?**

A painting may be immoral if you paint something that you can't justify or stand by its contents. It's a metaphor for unhealthy things that happen – things that are not spoken of and remain untreated, and that result in blindness that prevents progress.

**And in your opinion, minimizing, which many people view as a type of condensation or purification, actually conceals, while over-treatment, "over-work", reveals?**

I think I'm talking about the process, not just the final product. My work is also becoming more condensed and abstract, so maybe there's no sense in saying that less necessarily conceals or blurs. I have a problem when fear of over-working becomes the default option. For example, I deal with the morality of form in my work – whether a certain form is moral, or whether it's a romanticized, out-of-place version that has no connection to the here and now. In the portraits, for instance, each of the forms that make up the faces is a form that I'm in total agreement with – a valid form. From that aspect, I try to create healthy paintings that are based in reality, and not to get carried away. In general, I prefer taking the risk of over-working something, rather than leaving it untreated.

**Your color palette is reminiscent of a milky screen covering the painting. How do you obtain that quality of color?**

Slowly, gradually. The art critic Tzipi Luria said that it reminds her of the way the light struck European artists when they first came to Israel. I assume there's something to that, but I feel that it's primarily the emotional reaction of a person dazed by the powerful experience of living here. There's also the issue of visibility – am I doing the observing, do people see me or the girls I portray?

**"Light-stroke" actually emphasizes contrasts – dark colors get darker, light colors get lighter and the intermediate hues disappear. In your work the opposite is true.**

I feel like I'm blinded, dazed, and it's a great challenge to have to cope with that kind of screen covering the painting. There's a feeling of powerlessness and a sort of

barrier between myself and the culture, and also between me and my self, a barrier that restricts my drawing, my spontaneity. Graphic over-working is a kind of handicap, and I have no problem admitting that there are people who are more free-flowing and lighthearted than I am.

**Blindness is thought of as black, but yours is white, like in the book by Jose Saramago, *Blindness*.**

I don't experience it as black. It's not total blindness, but more like seeing through mist. I feel that the barrier is important; it's both a screen and a sort of freeze-frame. There's something in the surfaces that create the images of the girls that is both alive, and frozen and distant at the same time.

**Would you describe your paintings as feminine art?**

I don't know what feminine art is, but my point of view is that of a woman at a certain point in time and in a certain place. I feel that there are still a lot of things that have to be opened up, stories that need to be told, essential experiences of "being on this side of the divide", and perhaps they, or the lack of them, are the reason I'm still coping with the things that happen to me. I look at my women friends, and I'm often surprised by the dark sides of their lives. We still leave so many areas of our lives untreated – creating a vacuum that gets filled up by content that may contradict our essential interests. From that point of view my art is not protest; it's a search for a way, and all kinds of things come up along the way, including content that is definitely feminine.

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