

Wild mood swings, now on display

Ahead of a new exhibition in Tel Aviv, Gabriel Klasmer explains why he won't commit to one medium.

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Gabriel Klasmer does not want anyone to know who he is. For this artist, who was born in Jerusalem in 1950, the most important thing is the experience of viewers as they wander among his works. He wants to create an experience that will stay with them even after they leave his new solo exhibition *Efes/1*, which is hosted by the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv.

Instead of seeking compliments, Klasmer seeks to surprise and trip up those who expect specific things from him. Instead of clinging to a historical-retrospective process, he insists on “the experience at the exhibition, as a group exhibition by one person.” Instead of devoting himself to a single medium or a defined field, as most members of his generation did, he takes turns using various media and strategies.

His current exhibition, which is his most significant one in Israel to date, is a representative test case for the artist's changing moods, and at the same time also an attempt to unify the complexity of his oeuvre over the years. Alongside a series of paintings from his Israeli period, which lasted until the late 1980s, Klasmer shows his didactic paintings on the top floor of the pavilion — the monochromatic, the abstract and the figurative. On the bottom floor, he exhibits a kind of sculpture garden on a platform, with sculptures made of aluminum foil beside it. Farther on in the space, a 3-D video presentation that he created with his daughter, photographer Shira Klasmer, is shown. On the ground floor are two large, fragile and empty air bubbles made of plastic wrap.

“In many ways, I am everywhere because I do not want to limit myself. It doesn’t work in my favor especially, certainly not commercially,” Klasmer says. “I still believe in the ethos that an artist should express his freedom. It’s obvious that artists work with a market segment with a commercial edge, but it’s infuriating that they turn into a brand, a product in a market that has too much power over the art world today.”

From politics to internal artistic engagement

Itamar Levi, one of the curators, believes that Klasmer’s art “is threatened with collapse, since it is constructed on a basis of total skepticism. From a certain perspective, this is art after despair.”

Naomi Givon, owner of the Givon Gallery, has worked with Klasmer since the early 1980s. She compares to a super senior in college. “Crystallization terrifies him, and canonization is the end of the road for him,” she says. “He’s always burning for experimentation and action. He reinvents his methods like a magic act that he protects with devotion. He is one of the few artists who feels the significance of the avant-garde. He respects not the self, but new work methods - being in motion all the time.”

When Klasmer started out, during his studies at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem (he graduated in 1974), his works had a strongly political, critical character that left its mark on the exhibit in particular and on Israeli art in general. Together with Sharon Keren, one of the founders of the Zik Group, and also without him, Klasmer exhibited a series of works that dealt in direct, conceptual ways with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its ramifications.

He admits that he does not have a good feeling about the total reversal that took place in his works — from the radical and daring political place that characterized him in the 1970s and 1980s to an internal artistic engagement that is almost entirely hermetic. “I did the more radical things that cancelled out or unified the connection between art and life when I was starting out,” he says. “I was in that world, which had no boundaries, and one might say I became much more conservative for a person who engages in art. All I want is to do a good painting, a clean and precise sculpture, a clear statement and experience.”

Klasmer, who left Israel for London during the first intifada, does not link his move to the dramatic transformation that took place in his approach to art. Just after he reached the peak of expressiveness in his paintings, he left to study, and at that point began producing his monochrome paintings. That was in the early 1990s. “After the fact, my work in England went into a gray and rationalistic area. When I arrived in London to paint works that were similar to the ones I painted in Israel, I wanted to have complete control over what I was doing, to understand completely. That’s why I started, a bit idiotically, with the monochrome as a last painting, which is representative and abstract at the same time. I tried to open it without creating a gap between the image and the background.”

‘Painting in Zero time’

In London, he also wrote a doctoral thesis examining the history and status of the monochrome painting. As a result of his work, he insisted on reducing all the media he had worked with up to that point: the political context, text, image, handprint, fluidity. Klasmer, who had always seen himself as a conceptual artist or “a philosopher of art or painting,” as he described it, built his painting from scratch based on concepts of inflexibility. He moved away from painting purely by hand and began to paint using simple tools that help the artist’s hand to move in horizontal and vertical lines, a kind of large, low-tech printer operated by the artist.

“The mechanization of Klasmer’s paintings, both as a painting technique and as a way to hold back meaning, arose as a major presence in his work from the 1990s on,” Tali Tamir wrote in the exhibition catalogue. Klasmer created hundreds of paintings using the mechanical technique. The

criticism leveled at him spoke of how they looked like hollow, decorative crafts, outdated geometric minimalist pieces trotted out of the 1960s that remained a mere suggestion.

Ellen Ginton, the curator of the exhibition, associates Klasmer's automatism "with the context of a fantasy of speed, of a painting in zero time," as she describes it. Ginton combines the drive toward the mechanical with the loss of awareness associated with the loss of the sense of time. "The sorcerer's apprentice loses control, and his work becomes endless repetition," she says. Since a painting cannot be verbally expressed, Klasmer built his machine to probe the medium from the angle of its creation.

Despite the great deal of thought put into the quality of the components, Klasmer claims that the mechanical desire "looks like ideology, but all I did was try to solve a painting problem. I don't believe my own expressive painting because I don't think it expresses something internal. It's a mannerism." Unlike the exhibition's curators, Klasmer believes that machine paintings are not lacking in self-awareness or that they are random, but rather an experiment that contains many uncontrollable variables.

Despair is more comfortable in English

Klasmer, a lecturer in design at the Royal College of Art in London, was and remains an Israeli artist. He links his connection with Israel to the fact that he does not have, "and will never have, a brilliant international career." Galia Bar Or, curator and director of the Museum of Art in Ein Harod, curated Klasmer's exhibition in 1996, in which he represented Israel at the Sao Paulo Biennial. She says that Klasmer is like many other Israeli artists who live abroad and never became leading artists as far as the Americans or the British were concerned "because for that, a miracle needs to happen." But she believes that Klasmer is one of the most original artists to come from Israel.

For Klasmer, the subject of identity or the expression of the Israeli experience is one of the things that troubles him here. It was in the Hebrew language that he found the origins of a series of paintings in which Hebrew words appear in Latin transcription. Still, according to Klasmer, despair is more comfortable in English. He says that London is an amazing city, certainly for a person who makes his living in visual art. "London is visual and sophisticated. It's the source of many things that are connected with the world of plastic arts, architecture, shops, objects, fashion culture. It is a creative city and calmer, too. People are more themselves. In London you're much more alone, but much more yourself."

Upon Klasmer's return to figurative painting in recent years, his works have become more personal, physical and sensual. He says that the source of his work is much more emotional than can be described. "I work out of a feeling, not out of an idea," he says. "A particular rhythm in the painting can come out of the electronic music that I try to translate into color. When I think about what I want to accomplish, it's more about atmosphere and feeling than form."

Despite everything, you're still a believer? After all, art today is seen in most cases as entertainment, illusion, a dull replacement.

"Yes. I still see good art and fall over. Since I'm not really commercial and not really on the inside the story completely, maybe I'm deluding myself that it's still real. When I'm jealous of something good, it really hurts me. At least when I'm listening to the radio and hear an amazing song, that makes me believe that it's still possible, that there are moments of grace, and hope that it will happen to me, too. Since I work without ceasing, I never feel that work is something I did, but something that came out of me. I work on 100 failures to produce one worthy piece."