

> **Iva Kafri**

Gallery / Biography / Studio Visit



STUDIO VISIT / IVA KAFRI

Talya Shalit

This space where you've painted the Lava paintings is your old/new studio, the room where

you've grown up in your parents' home, where you had started to paint as a girl. Can you talk about your return here and how it affected your work process for the exhibition?

I moved to this studio when we were evacuated from the studios at Halalit. As a girl, this was my room and my studio. I attended the Thelma Yellin high school, and this was where I started painting. Later I left home, and it became my mother's room, and so it was when I moved here. I hadn't touched it after she passed away. And, of course, my father hadn't either. It was on the level of tissue boxes next to the bed. Piles of bags filled with papers and bills... Whatever. It was the holidays, and I'd spent about a month here, and I began to sort through these things, and I thought I would never get through it... I'm an only child, and it was very difficult. And then, in November, my father's caregiver left; I've been forced to spend time here. I had to interview caregivers, cook and clean for him, and the studio was here, and it saved me. Suddenly I could escape into my corner at home and work.

A bit like being a little girl again, at home.

Yes, escaping into my room on the one hand, and on the other – there is nowhere to run; this is as close as it gets. I was very concerned about it. It could have turned out to be a terrible idea. But I couldn't find a studio, and I said to myself – OK, maybe I'll just store things here and see what would happen, even if I didn't dare think it would be productive.

And from it came this exhibition. Interestingly, the works in the exhibition are very figurative, and also the story of how it came about is very figurative, very much like a story: It has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Yes, that's right.

It's funny because I didn't think about a show when I started painting here. It was just survival. I came here and saw this painting I made at 13 – my first painting on canvas. It was very emotional. I painted it after a photograph by my uncle, who was a painter, but at the time, he was primarily a photographer. I'm unsure why I loved this photograph so much as a child.

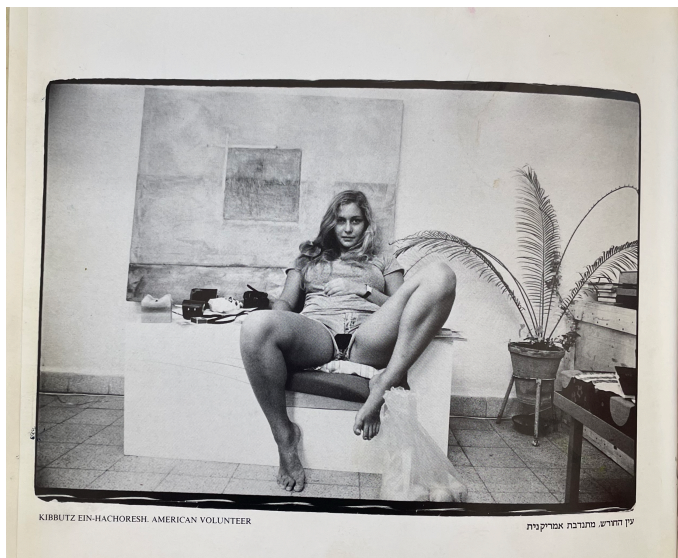


photo: Itamar Kafri

The women in the paintings all look directly at the viewers. The volunteer in the photograph is staring at the camera, and there is a camera between her legs.

Yes. I, too, took pictures. That summer, I got a job and saved money to buy a camera, like a Minolta Reflex.

I think I just identified with her. Something about how she is sitting, looking straight at the camera – in retrospect, she seems very sexual... (I have not yet been aware of sexuality at that point in my life) and the way she stared connected me to the red painting of the mother looking straight ahead (from the previous exhibition, "Earth") and this painting, after one by Gauguin, which also shows a nude woman looking directly at the viewer. Suddenly it all came together intuitively. All the female figures that have accompanied me in my youth. They projected a lot of power.

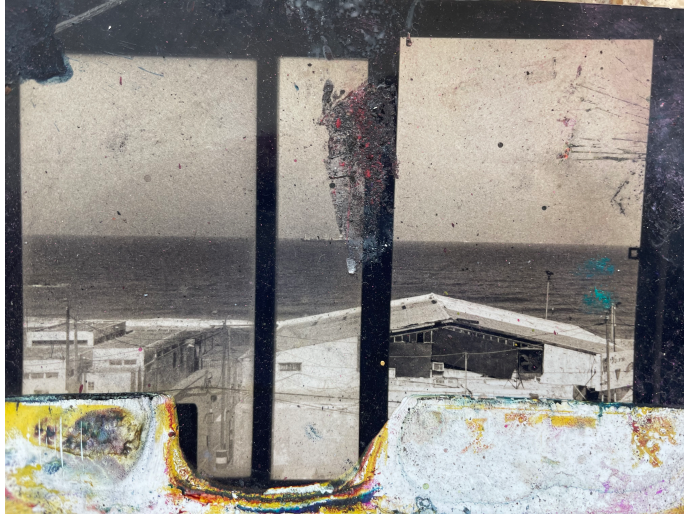
Femininity never used to be something I was preoccupied with. It even annoyed me to be asked questions associating femininity with my work. It always seemed to me that making feminine art was only about needlepoint and dolls... I did not relate to that. After becoming a mother, the experience of giving birth and motherhood itself, and it being such a powerful experience, the complete opposite of the minute and needlepoint. It's as if you are linked to the core of life – that's when I saw the connection. There was a kind of power in the red painting that I liked a lot, and I tried this time to see another iteration of it – how do I translate this feminine power not into motherhood but instead into – perhaps – a more sexual femininity, into another aspect of myself as a woman. Something I did not deal with until now, and that had been my starting point.



Femininity is present in your more abstract works, too.

That's right, I see it now. For a long time, I wanted to understand life and whether it mattered if I were a man or a woman. It's life that interests me. To say something from where I am in life right now. My thoughts were very abstract. I felt that figurative painting was limiting, that I wanted to say something more fundamental and essential, and a figure would restrict me to the concrete and immediate. And then it started to seep in slowly as elements – first an eye, then a wing...

So, when I got here, I already knew that I wanted to repaint this painting from my uncle's photograph and see what would come out of it now. I began to paint this volunteer, on paper, just because that's what was available here. The first three paintings on paper quickly followed without stopping. Then came the painting of the house. That house over there, that triangle.



Burning House, 2023, acrylic, charcoal, oil pastel and pencil on paper, 189x200 cm, photo: Daniel Hanoch

I used to photograph this house; there's a photo of it here on the floor, from my graduation project. I have several paintings of this house. Most of the works I made at the time were self-portraits. After I had cleaned out my mother's stuff, I discovered the under-layer, which was the vista of my childhood.

I was experiencing a burst of creative activity. I barely finished a painting before starting on the next one.

Following the painting of the house, I began working on this one, which takes its inspiration from a Gauguin painting (*Annah la Javanaise*). I loved Gauguin's art as a young girl and his life story. I've made many reproductions of his works. I was into fantasies. I may still be.



Paul Gauguin, *Annah la Javanaise*, 1893, oil on canvas



The Javanese (on fire) , 2023, Acrylic, charcoal and pencil on paper, 200x160 cm

Again, this is another nude woman staring at the viewer.

At first, I drew the chair and everything, and slowly it came together as a self-portrait. In the

volunteer painting, I realized that it looked like me, but only in two lines. In the last two paintings, I really tried to achieve a similarity to myself.

A print by Goya inspired this painting.

There's a beautiful library at the Beaux-arts, where I used to spend a lot of time when I studied there. I fell in love with this print. It is very famous: *A Way of Flying*

This is a photocopy I made while studying in Paris. It's been hanging in every studio since then – at the Beaux-arts, in Berlin, at the Halalit, and now here. I was interested in the wings - I used this element of the wings in many works. After erasing the male figure from the previous paintings, I suddenly felt like working on the male figure. So, for the first time since I've had this copy, I painted the figure, not just the wings.

I love how you combine this sense of awe – you have been carrying this photocopy around for 20 years now – and at the same time, it is totally worn out, and you step on it. It's filthy. These images that you collect function almost like props. It is not just an image, but this very specific object.

It's both, I guess. I like it. Generally, I love a mess. It's much more personal. Things happen to an object when it is carrying history. The actual works – those I have to work harder to preserve... Or at least distinguish between how I treat them while making them and what happens after I'm done. Say in shipping, etc. The taking care of them. Everything with me is a little bit of a 'life or death' situation.





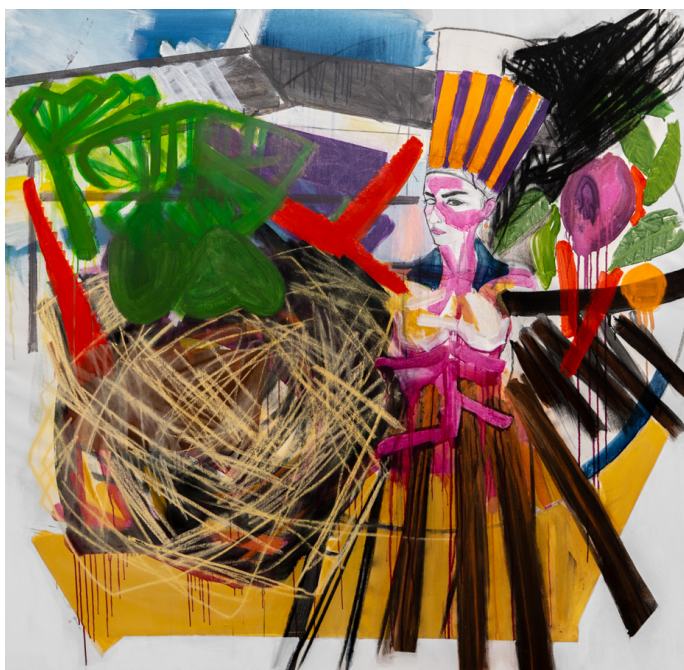
A Way of Flying, 2023, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 148X141 cm

The Nefertiti work is the last one in the series. I feel it has a slightly different energy' something with more separation. Less at the eye of the storm, perhaps even a sense of victory. All I knew was that I wanted to make a self-portrait. It took me a week – or somewhere over the top like that – to paint the face.

When I finished the face, I found a postcard of Nefertiti right here, on the floor. I noticed that the angle of my head in the photograph I worked from precisely matched the turn of her head in the postcard, and suddenly she became connected, very naturally, to the self-portrait. Some kind of fusion has occurred.

What does a self-portrait bring along? How does the gaze upon yourself affect the way you paint? What happened when you started looking at yourself, painting yourself?

At age 18, I left for Paris and stayed there for nine years, and that was when the abstract flowed into me. I suppose this return into the room of my youth and the fact that I've made many self-portraits here while in high school, a period when the preoccupation with who you are was very central, and now, 25 years later, it was almost obligatory to do a check, a recalibration, where was I now. Beginning at the basic level of how I look now, at age 41, what I project, what comes out of me, where I am, and who I am today. In retrospect, I could also say that I needed a representation of power, in these uncertain times.



Tumbleweed, 2023, Acrylic, charcoal, pastel and pencil on canvas, 161X158 cm

My painting has always given me power. I always search it for force. However, perhaps now the connection with my image has placed something in sharper focus.

When the goal, at least at the beginning of a painting, is to paint a similarity, it creates interest. It has been a passage into the zone of being a craftswoman. I am used to going to the studio, where there is something very mystic and abstract, like meditation, truly feeling things, being very connected; it's very intense. And here, suddenly, there was this stage, coming in and knowing that today I am about to do something very specific, that this figure will look like me. You don't attempt to express the meaning; rather, you have a mission and will succeed in the end. There was magic in it.

However, then come the questions: what is happening with this? Where am I taking it? How do I associate it with myself again, and what would bring the painting close to me? One of my teachers in Paris has said a sentence that guides me to this day, like a compass – "keep as little space as possible between myself and the work." So I'm constantly checking that it is me, and in the end, it remains a painting that is a line, a spot, a color. And it should work; the magic has to happen. In this sense, there is no difference, for me, between the abstract and the figurative.

You have described this process as "backward and inward." Is this where the title 'Lava' comes from?

Yes. At first, I thought about a whirlpool in the context of the studio's location by the sea and the sense I've had here, when I started to work seriously, of being carried away, the way the sea pulls you in and spits you out. When you let go, there is an exit. In the end.

But a whirlpool sounded too much like an 'emotional whirlpool,' which seemed inaccurate.

Lava – it's not fire; it's the power of fire under the surface, inside, until it bursts out.

It is something primordial, the origin of things.

And by the way, when lava congeals, it creates rocks.