

A conversation

Maya Bamberger sits down to talk to Iva Kafri, a moment before the opening of her new exhibition.

Maya: You begin your artist's statement by stating, "I'm a painter." Even when, at times, your painting breaks the boundaries of its frame, you still approach it as a painting: a painting within a space, or a 'painting-installation.' What does being a painter mean to you?

Iva: It's my mode of expression. I use color, line, and form. In the simplest of terms, I create a composition that articulates something, whether it is two-dimensional or happens throughout a space. Painting enables actions that come from a physical and intuitive place, and only then comes the part of trying to understand what I have done and how to define it. The painting is smarter than me in many ways; it evolves from within, not necessarily from a process of external or intellectual decision making. I've been painting for so many years that the action has life and wisdom of its own. I'm learning so much about myself and where I'm at, despite what I might think.

M: Where did you think you were compared to what you had discovered?

I: Toward the exhibition that was due to open a year ago, I discovered aluminum, which, like Plexiglass, is a sturdy and bright material. It causes the colors to bounce outward. The mirror-like element has a playful aspect to it - I can paste something transparent onto it, or gaze at it and see my reflection within. I wanted to create more and more paintings on aluminum, and build a sort of installation with reflections. That was the plan, and then...

Maya: You were somewhere else.

I: I returned to the studio and suddenly I wanted the canvas. Afterward, I was able to analyze it and understand where that need had come from, the place I had been at, and why - something in the absorbent quality of the canvas attracted me. But precisely because I have a tendency to over-articulate, I'm trying to trust myself during the work process, and I try very hard to just exist.

M: There's no conscious effort or action that you do to enter this state?

I: No. On the contrary. I've been painting since forever, it's a part of me, like a mother tongue. There's a sort of release that comes as a result of the dialogue I have with a painting.

M: You use the word 'dialogue' but the painting doesn't actually respond. Maybe in a certain world it does. But there's a place where those two sides exist inside of you - the side of s the painting as well.

I: You know... it doesn't speak... it's not a puppet show. The painting exists.

M: It's already outside of you.

I: Exactly. I start a painting and the first choice is its surface, which already outlines a certain statement. And then it's in front of me, and I respond with some sort of gesture that seems necessary to me, say a line, a form, a certain color, or an image I paste on, and then **that's** in front of me, and the dialogue develops. There's a certain dialectic of resolution and release, act and observation. I speak the language of the painting.

M: There's also the writing stage, which reoccurs constantly. Is the writing meant to be an outlet for you to refine the initial stream-of-consciousness, to make room for a more intuitive space, or is it a stage of thinking that helps you understand in retrospect actions you had carried out?

I: If it's ahead of an exhibition, it can be reflections that help me understand where I'm at and what I want to say and how I want to communicate it. At other times, it's my impression of what's happening at that moment.

M: That purple line feels like this to me?

I: Actually, lately I've been trying to occupy that space less and trust myself more, and I don't record every step. Basically... it's evident in the paintings. Everything is so... so transparent, actually. I'm so transparent. I didn't make that connection.

M: Between the writing and the shift in the paintings? What has changed in the paintings that requires less of the writing?

I: I put more emphasis on being inside the painting and less on looking at it. In the painting that was presented in my last exhibition, I was more analytical in terms of the forms of action: to place, to look, to think, to remove.

M: Bursting out less.

I: Now I need to be completely as one with the painting.

M: Which to you has always felt like what you've been doing, but suddenly there's a spectrum.

I: The idea that had always guided me was that ultimately there would be minimal distance between myself and the painting. That's how I measure it. So as far as I'm concerned, I didn't see myself as analytical even then.

M: If we act on instinct, there's less distance, and if we act logically there's more of it? Can't the closeness to the work come from somewhere else?

I: I don't feel that there's more distance between me and the earlier works. Only in terms of their appearance - the space between the gestures has been more visible then, and is less so in the paintings now.

M: And when an outside perspective forms the moment you finish working, the paintings begin to take on the shape of an exhibition. Even now, as we look at the paintings, they're at a larger physical distance from us. What is the stage of looking at it from a certain distance like?

I: It's happening for the first time today, and it's exciting. I've been very intrigued to see how these works will function outside the studio. I was occupied by far fewer thoughts on painting as a medium in this exhibition than in previous ones. In every painting, I got something out of my system until everything that formed outside came together as an exhibition. It came entirely from a place of need and passion.

M: You've said previously that you're transparent. Do you mean that the entire process is visible in the final result?

I: That too. I've always been attracted to things that are intrinsically exposed. I try to make as few repairs as possible. There's a certain quality in the materials, in the gestures, just as they are. Not in trying to make them into something else, or using them to show how talented I am. At a certain point, I had a more conscious understanding of the significance of time and process, and their imprints within the painting - that they're part of the quality that seeps out, and that, to me, from an experientially existential perspective on life, the process is the most meaningful part. The final painting is a testimony in material and the conclusion of a series of choices that have taken place at a certain moment, and at the same time it is complete and final.

M: A lot of the works is tracing a figurine whose photograph was hanging in your studio. A week ago you wrote to me about surprising discoveries you had made regarding the statuette.

I: I encountered it at Musée du Quai Branly, which is a museum for indigenous art in Paris, where I really love to take photographs. I can't remember how it suddenly materialized and became the central image that accompanied me over the past year or so. For the exhibition, I wanted to find out exactly where the figurine came from, and I discovered that it had come from a place called Villa Corona in Mexico, and that it had actually been used in funerary rituals. In the nine months since my mother passed away, it's something that occupies me a lot, and suddenly this discovery put me in a state of shock. The image is of a mother holding a child, but she's sitting...it's very much not a *pieta*. She sits up very straight and looks ahead. She even has a half-smile, and she sits cross-legged...she's like a female Buddha. This sphere of motherhood - I have become a mother, I have lost my mother - it really engages me. I remember that I used to be asked if my art was feminine, and I associated feminine art with softness, and with crafts, and I didn't understand what that had to do with me. Suddenly now, since I became a mother, I realized that it's this crazy power. I don't feel that it diminishes me or makes me softer, I'm connected to the core of life, to earth (*adama*), to a place that is like fire and lava.

M: Let's talk about the viewer for a moment? I'm thinking about the position the viewer might be in front of these paintings. The viewers enter your installation, and you allow them to compose their own painting, to look around, to take in the various perspectives, and in this exhibition I feel that the most interesting connection between you, me, and the viewer can be created through the transparency of the process. You did say that the works were finished, and there's something about painting that is really absolute and finished, but still...

I: They make you want to paint.

M: Yes. And it feels as though a dialogue can take place between me and the work, even if in this specific case the work on the painting isn't continuing...

I: Because it's a living thing.

M: And something can emerge from the gesture of refining something internal in relation to the painting. Or to the world in general. This is just a single case.

I: It's air that exists within the work and provides space. There's an aliveness to the work. Unlike a work that is entirely an executed idea, and I don't sense that something has happened to the person who had made it, when I see art that touches me I usually feel the person and their presence. I really like watching dance, for example. Using the body can be the most powerful thing there is, and the circle, for example, is totally in the scale of my body. There's something in the testament to the movement that expresses a certain desperation. Desperation in its most direct and powerful sense. Which is crucial for me.