

## INTERPRETATION-ELIMINATING PAINTERLY RITUAL ANAT DANON SIVAN

Iva Kafri's painting takes place in the space. It begins by entering an empty space, into which the artist "pours" colorful wallpaper, acrylic and spray paints, printed transparencies, Perspex boards, and other industrial materials. It continues with a performative act which demands concentration, dedication, and prolonged seclusion in the space, at times month-long, and even longer when possible. Usually there are no preliminary studies, sometimes a mere sketch of the general lines, which is also erased or changed when the process begins. In the studio the artist merely practices "études," "warming up before the grand performance"; she paints on random boards and transparencies, photographs, cuts and pastes, contemplating whether something will be introduced into the work or not. This work process generates a tension and disquiet in the artist (as well as the curator). There is no telling what will happen at the decisive moment: will a miracle of creation occur, or perhaps total collapse? Kafri's painting takes its place in a narrow, fluid interstice, which expands with every act or breath of the painterly gesture.

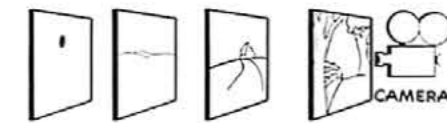
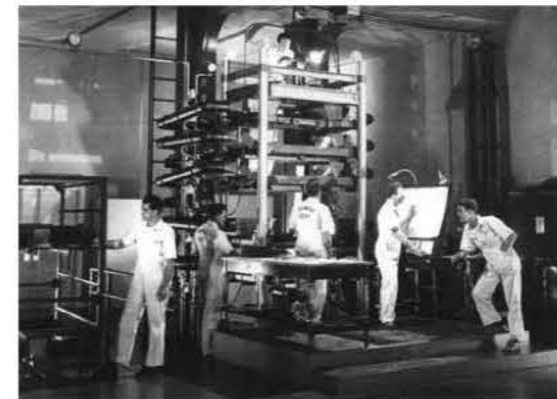
Kafri's painting "speaks" to us in a language without words. The painterly act emphasizes its physicality and materiality. Despite the industrial appearance of the materials comprising the work—plastic, adhesive tape, and fluorescent wallpaper—Kafri's praxis remains largely stormy and romantic. Painting's predicament at the onset of the new millennium leads her to cross the known boundaries and expand the traditional language: to replace the blank canvas with a space, including all of its elements: walls, floor, ceiling, and the void between them. The space functions as a point of departure, setting the entire work in motion;

the dimensions of the painting are drawn from it and in relation to it.

The painting leaves traces in the space. A scribble, a strong downward brushstroke, an attached yellow rectangle whose edges are concealed by a black circle, a transparency cut with intentional curvature, a confident line, a broken line—all the painterly and collagist gestures are channeled into the painterly arena. The movement of the artist's body dictates the dance of the painting. The body's participation is also vital to the process of observation. The viewer must pave his way in the painting, which offers pleasure and detachment, by following the material and form, and identifying possible compositions. This process demands prolonged observation and dissociation from the verbal-exegetic dimension. In Kafri's case, hermeneutics is replaced by an erotics of art.<sup>1</sup> Her painting does not propose a change of narrative (whether political or social), but rather entry into a nonverbal field, which is externalized by its colorfulness, yet remains withdrawn. Its essence and reality lie in the materials and forms.

In the current exhibition, Kafri incorporates transparent Perspex boards on which she constructs her paintings. These surfaces function as both independent paintings and as transparent walls in the space. Painterly and architectural elements, they divide the space anew, offering a range of fresh perspectives and compositions. The boards' transparency enables the viewer to perceive the material applied to the surface as if it were freehand drawing in a space ostensibly detached from the hard surface. The viewer's gaze shifts from the two-dimensional Perspex paintings to additional painterly gestures scattered in the space, bringing them together and trying to close the gap to generate the whole. Unlike the installations she created in recent years, which comprised a single painterly-sculptural array consisting of multiple fragments scattered in the space, in the current show Kafri explores painting's ability to function as an autonomous object. She proposes entry into a five-part composition which may be taken apart and reassembled.

The title of the exhibition—"Multiplane(s)"—hints at a tectonics of a stratified, multi-layered work whose parts are all fixed, yet it remains open to renewed readings and views. At the same time, the title is also an allusion to the multiplane camera developed by Walt Disney Studios animator Ub Iwerks in 1933, which was intended to create appearance of depth and motion in a flat, still picture in early cartoons by moving overlapping layers of artwork painted on glass plates.<sup>2</sup>



Multiplane camera used in animated films, Walt Disney Studios, 1937  
עבודה עם מצלמת multiplane, אולפני וולט דיסני, 1937

Kafri takes the title of this early cinematic technique as the title of her show, perusing painting's ability to generate movement and depth via an array of transparent screens painted on either side. The paintings float-hover, their flexibility attesting to their liquid state. Unlike the animation technology, which generates an illusion of movement and depth by moving painted screens, in Kafri's work the act is reversed. Rather than a passive figure that absorbs moving images, the viewer is an active wanderer, chancing into a tangle of painterly situations.

The attempt to lay a "hermeneutic" net which would locate Kafri's work within the genealogy of modern and contemporary painting soon leads to a dead end. Her work echoes myriad inclinations and styles

from the beginning of the 20th century to its end: from European abstract (e.g., Wassily Kandinsky and painting's affinity with music and the spiritual), through amorphous Surrealism (e.g. Paul Klee), Russian Constructivism (Kazimir Malevich), Tachism, and American Abstract Expressionism (Robert Rauschenberg, Willem de Kooning, and Cy Twombly), to Post-Minimalism (Ellsworth Kelly and Blinky Palermo) and the spectacular installations of the 1990s, which addressed the elusive boundaries between painting and sculpture (Katharina Grosse and Jessica Stockholder). These influences locate Kafri's work in-between two antithetical poles which demand constant regulation: one is spontaneous, wild, and immediate; the other—planned, reasoned, and measured. The work is not performed in one shot or in a spurt of creativity; instead, it consists of various painterly situations, made of many parts, which are constructed and deconstructed until the last minute before their presentation.

Kafri's discussion of painting's autonomy and its ability to stand on its own right without an explanatory narrative echoes Clement Greenberg's assertions about purist modernist painting. According to Greenberg, the avant-garde poet or artist creates something valid solely on its own terms, something given, independent of meanings, similars, or originals.<sup>3</sup> Kafri's work, whose thrill is associated with the invention and organization of the spaces, surfaces, colors, and forms in the painting, echoes the avant-garde artists mentioned by Greenberg in this context, among them: Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Georges Braque, Kandinsky, and Klee. In Greenberg's terms, one may describe Kafri's painting as "metamorphosed" painting, which deviates from the "transparent picture plane" and functions as a three-dimensional event, yet continues to issue from the discipline of painting.<sup>4</sup> Has Kafri taken Greenberg's vision of purist painting too far, to the extent that she has eliminated the sharp distinction between kitsch and avant-garde? Are her paintings indeed "purist" or "silent" and hostile?<sup>5</sup>

Kafri's choice of an abstract, autonomous language that does not rely on descriptive or conceptual traditions differentiates it from the local, the political, and the social. This choice is also reflected in the personal biography of the artist, who left Israel for Paris at a young age, and began studies at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts with such artists as Dominique Gauthier and Jean-Marc Bustamante. Paris gave her the freedom to engage in painting, but her big break came in New York. The decisive moment of her work will be recounted here as the tale of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings (it all began with a chance leak from the brush...), when the brushes "breached" the borders of the canvas onto the wall and the floor, in an "accident" of sorts, which was followed by the realization that the space itself may play a key part in the painting.

Alongside the abstract language of the painting, Kafri incorporates a few figurative images. Some are photographs of nature and the environment, others—"random" artworks captured by her camera. There are also many close-ups of work processes in the studio, in which she exposes various new compositions which do not reveal themselves at first sight. These photographs may attest to the nature of Kafri's work and the intricate process leading up to the abstract piece. Kafri has photographed since an early age, and by now possesses an infinite archive of photographs. The camera serves her as an extension of the eye, rendering memory a visual-material baggage, before it is transformed, resumes being a form, and is inserted into the work of art. Furthermore, Kafri is reluctant to extract a hermeneutic narrative from the images, and they refuse to take a "conscious" part in the work, preferring to float, hover, or drift in keeping with the work's changing nature.

Despite the stubborn interpretation-eliminating painterly ritual, one cannot keep "silent" upon encountering Kafri's paintings in view of their photographic images. The landscape images—the sea, a field of sabra hedges, thistles, a Eucalyptus grove, and cypress trees—were taken in Israel rather than in Paris, Berlin, or New York, the cities in

which she has lived in recent years. These images are not depicted in a personal or biographical manner. They undergo a process of reduction and abstraction by means of duplication and printing on transparencies. The images thus become a texture, or possibly—a fragment of memory, and are combined in the work via a collagist act. One may also regard the representations of wild virgin nature as a key to understanding the “libido” of the work itself, which stems from an erotic, instinctive, and unconscious place. The incorporation of Egyptian or African sculpture and patterns from Orientalist fabrics all indicate the curiosity and the fascination with the mystical, ritualistic facet of the work of art.

Another inspiration for Kafri’s work is a reproduction of *Modo de volar* (A Way of Flying) from Francisco de Goya’s series of etchings “Los Disparates” (The Follies, aka “Proverbios,” Proverbs, 1815-1823) hanging on her studio wall for many years.



Francisco de Goya, *Modo de volar* (A Way of Flying), 1816, etching and aquatint, 24.5x35, collection of the British Museum, London

פרנצ'סקו גויה, דרך לעוף, 1816, 24.5x35 עם אקוטינטה, אוסף המוזיאון הבריטי, לונדון

When she came to work in the gallery at Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the photographs of the sabra hedges, the sea, the grove, and Goya’s human creature with bat wings all traveled from the studio and were hung on the museum’s wall according to a random syntax, as motivation and as inspiration for the evolving work. Goya’s etching reveals a fantastic-

nocturnal, beastly and monstrous aspect of man through representations of bat-like human figures which hover in the darkness. The contrasting black arising and bursting forth from Kafri’s phosphorescent-floral world accentuates to what extent her work remains tangled, enigmatic, and unresolved.

Notes

1. Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 14.
2. The link between the Perspex paintings and the technology of the multiplane camera was addressed in Kafri’s conversation with Raphael Nadjari held in preparation for the exhibition.
3. Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* VI, no. 5 (Fall 1939), pp. 34-49.
4. Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 36 (originally printed in *Partisan Review*, July-August 1940); see Greenberg’s elaboration on the expansion of the notion of painting and deviation from the transparent picture plane.
5. See: Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).