

## Exhibition of vulgarity offers an alternative to the smug Israeli art scene

**The flagrantly unrefined style in Alma Itzhaky's exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum is poles apart from the refined self-satisfaction of most Israeli art today.**

Galia Yahav | Nov. 19, 2015 | 12:18 PM

The current crop of exhibitions at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art is a peculiar mix. At their center is refinement rife with coded quotations for the cognoscenti in works by Ido Bar-El, a local prince of high modernism; and alongside him, Naama Arad's digital-look, aridly rational visual exercises. Betwixt and between are, among other exhibitions and events, the semi-fascist processions of Public Movement in "National Collection," drill commands integrated with compulsive rhythm, which seem to have been hatched in the mind of Col. Scheisskopf from "Catch-22." Against this background, Alma Itzhaky's erupting figurative painting seems to be a particularly raucous exception.

Raucousness is her work's intriguing horizon. Contrary to the coded, suggestive, lean languages fraught with meanings that reference the history of art or the history of Israeliness; contrary to diverse attempts at semantic sophistication, distancing and mediation within mediation, Itzhaky's style is foreign, a fleshy form of painting that is uncommon here. It exudes a childish, close-up, unadorned caricature-like character. Her work responds over-intensively to the familiar features of Expressionism, transforming the very concept of "style" into a be-all and end-all.

Itzhaky's take on city life is composed of people, their actions and their relationships. Like another Israeli artist, Zoya Cherkassky, Itzhaky too is a "social painter," drawing her themes from the everyday life of lower-class laborers, their work and their leisure time, from neighborhood culture, the periphery, mundane moments of interaction between the subjects of the paintings or between them and their surroundings. Most of the figures are from the margins of society, the invisible workers, the down-and-out and the beggars, although there are also young people who are occupied with themselves and their milieu, partiers. All of them are powerless, part of a neglected constituency, their vitality not accumulating symbolic capital adding up to a "contribution to culture."

Her paintings depict, for example, two young men standing at a curve in the road, one munching on an apple, the other resting a leg on an iron railing ("Morning," 2015); a beggar woman holding out a plastic cup, walking next to a municipal flower bed alongside cars ("In Traffic," 2014); three young people

smearing black paint on the marble sidewalk at the foot of Menashe Kadishman's sculpture "Uprise" adjacent to the Habima Theater in Tel Aviv ("Painting Habima Black," 2013); a municipal employee from the sanitation department in a yellow reflector vest leaning on a tree and having a smoke, a superfluous mattress standing on its side, closed stores in the background ("Judaea Navalis," 2013 – the Latin for Yehuda Yamit, the name of a major artery in Jaffa, and the exhibition's title); and six men in underwear sitting on sand, hands clasped behind their heads ("Gaza War Prisoners," 2014).

Some of the paintings give the impression of a scene viewed through a fisheye lens or a distorting mirror: the centers are large, close and dominant, almost leaping out, while the margins recede into the background, the surface taking on a spherical effect. According to the museum's website (in English), "Alma Itzhaky, who resides and works in south Tel Aviv, collects scenes from the immediate geopolitical space she encounters daily and carries them back to her studio as subjects for her paintings. Bars, shared flats, a meeting at a bench, typically urban streets all are restaged and depicted from a direct, intimate perspective." Itzhaky, the text adds, "has a unique voice that reflects her generation's social and political mood." The exhibition's curator, Noa Rosenberg, describes the artist's style as "frozen Expressionism," though by the same token one could call it emotionless Expressionism.

### **Lurching into mannerism**

The style does indeed correspond to the familiar historical features of Expressionism: distorted proportions, unfettered colorism, acute sensuality, a withdrawal from an observation point toward a world of imagination, dramatic brushstrokes, excessively bony figures with skull-like heads and limbs with accentuated joints. However, it does not evoke a fear-eroded subjective inner world that projects anxiety-ridden fantasies onto reality. Nor is there an extrication from conventions, as the Expressionist style is a convention in itself, a known code for an emotional attitude toward the subjects and objects of a painting. This, rather, is "Expressionism" under the yoke of quotation marks, the result of a decision so deliberately conscious that the outcome lurches into mannerism.

The paintings are lush and bright as festering wounds, everything about them intensive to the same degree – figures, background, composition, frenetic brush motion, awareness of theme, the energy invested in them and their narrative quality – rendering them very similar to one another, variations on each other.

Is Itzhaky, in common with many Expressionist painters, coping with the question of evil in its modern context? Perhaps, but without the underlying cruelty and violence. The scenes she depicts almost abut on violence, allude to it slightly, possibly indicate its potential proximity. But violence is not the

inner driving force of the paintings nor the necessary conclusion that arises from them.

The vulgar style, simultaneously attractive and repellent, produces powerful, surprising paintings, not amenable to easy, quick deciphering – but also extroverted kitschy works whose viewing time is the time needed to understand them.

One powerful painting is “Tel Aviv District” (2013), showing a man and a woman seated on municipal benches, which are situated, as the curator notes, opposite one another at a certain distance, calculatedly not close enough to enable an intimate conversation but also not far enough apart for two strangers to be able to create a space of anonymity between them. The palms of the man’s hands are close to each other like a kind of swimming-while-sitting posture, a Christian prayer gone awry or an arrow aimed straight between the woman’s legs. The body language lends the situation a comic erotic-gynecological dimension, an absurd aspect of imploring, desire and begging in the face of a recalcitrant, turned-off woman.

Another striking work is “Noon Prayer at the Repair Shop” (2015), in which two men are kneeling on rugs next to some boxes at their place of work. The painting could be taken as a paraphrase on the use of tires as a decorative element, as Zevi Geva used them in the Israeli pavilion of the last Venice Biennale, when he covered the outside of the structure in a manner resembling Muslim art. In Itzhaky’s case, tires are not an ornamental wall covering held in place with plastic handcuffs, nor a comment on architectural style, but a code signifying the workers’ class identity.

The exaggeration of a style that is innately characterized by flagrant ugliness, vulgarity, crassness, sentimentality and high communicativeness turns some of the paintings into off-putting technicolor posters. Still, the style of excess and raucousness has a potential that will be heightened if Itzhaky finds a way to ground it in a contrarian manner, as a popular, street-smart element in contradistinction to the good taste of the refined, sated, smug Israeli art that is occupied with itself.

*The exhibition by Alma Itzhaky, winner of the 2014 Rappaport Prize for a Young Israeli Artist, will be on view at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art until Jan. 31, 2016*