

Merav Shinn Ben-Alon and Ram Samocha have in recent years initiated projects that have undermined the usual distinctions between artist and curator, between a home and an exhibition gallery, and between an art audience and a random audience. Even at the Museum of Art, Ein Harod, their action went beyond the particular context of an exhibition at a museum. It is customary that art curators in museums determine the contents of the exhibition, the manner of display, and also situate its contexts. Quite often the artists have no part at all in the process of exposing their work and its ramifications. Merav Shinn Ben-Alon and Ram Samocha chose to exhibit together and in many senses acted as artist-curators who are involved in all the stages of the work on the exhibition and who seek their audience in a place where it is still possible to "collaborate", to create a reciprocal attentiveness, to bring about conditions for dialogue.

To the exhibition space – a classical, broad, white and high-vaulted museum gallery – the artists brought an intimacy of daily collaboration and traces of the Tel Aviv studio where they recently showed their works jointly (July 2002). Their work in the exhibition space, like painting the vault of the dominant ceiling a murky pink, gave the gallery a new face, a flexibility and a capacity to contain. For their work at the museum, in the exhibition and in the catalogue, the artists had interiorized conclusions drawn from their experience in the various domains of art: study, teaching, work in the studio, exhibitions, personal and journalistic writing, curatorial work, and work in alternative spaces.

The "collaboration" between them, which began in the early '90s, has grown deeper over the years and has influenced their thinking, the way they act, and the character of their work. The two artists, together and separately, have developed channels of presentation and communication that are different from the institutionalized ones practiced in commercial galleries and in museums.

Although the starting-point of the collaboration is the work of the individual, it appears that the prolonged and intimate dialogue between the artists has created a kind of attentiveness that is unique in the local context. This attentiveness to layered processes of slow and incessant, masculine and feminine, mental and physical change, and a struggle with an identity that becomes blurred and is built anew. For both artists, the engagement with the body, with anxiety and pain, is conducted from a standpoint of intimacy that facilitates a direct and sober contemplation of what is interiorized in the features of the body that remembers – in scars, in bald pates, in absence. The traumas of the body are mundane, banal, lacking in pathos, and the constant wondering about the body's transformations with its layered aspects is an inseparable part of the dynamics of life.

In the intricate connection that has been built between the artists' works over the years, a subtle yet essential distinction between the different (and at times polar) character of their individual bodies of work has not become dimmed. Since the outset of her path in the early '90s, Merav Shinn Ben-Alon has developed the landscape context in monochrome painting. The affinity to the landscape aspect is also discernible in those of her works that deal with still life and with women's body organs, and is meaningful for the way she constructs space and for the essence of the dialectical tension between nearness and distance, appearance and absence – important components in her work.

In this context, the act of painting and drawing is perceived as reflexive because it intrinsically entails a discussion about the elusive relations between artistic practice and the "original", and it leaves traces of a tireless endeavor to grasp an essence that cannot be captured. The act of painting accumulates meaning in an endeavor to reconstruct a dim memory that has been suppressed beneath the threshold of consciousness, or in a groping for an event that preceded consciousness; an event that cannot be located by means of memory and that continues to trouble the mind for an elucidation, like a concealed source. The body is a stronghold of memory that bears the imprint of events anchored in a distant past (birth and separation from the mother's body, for example) and also a site of a fluid identity and of frequently changing physical and sensory experiences.

This model dictated to the artist a quest within the medium of painting, and only in this medium, and it was right for her as long as she dealt with body organs such as the navel – which is also a landscape, sealed and stained with the separation from the mother's body, suffused with a sensuality in which the sense of loss already nestles. The shift to dealing with skin and with stitches (closing of wounds) in the late '90s led her to deliberations that dictated more radical means to her and pushed her to break through the circular frame of the painting. This breakthrough enabled her to go beyond the slow duration dictated by painting, beyond its long tradition and its ritual (the preparation of the canvas), and, primarily, beyond the sense of muteness that stems from the detailed treatment of the hidden, non-explicit, and so cultural elements of this medium.

The latest work by Merav Shinn Ben-Alon, done a short while before the opening, is a wall installation that incorporates work with red thread and a narrative text composed by the artist and handwritten by her on the wall. Already in 1991, at an exhibition in her studio in New York, Merav Shinn Ben-Alon incorporated both works in painting and texts (a sort of lexicon of concepts), in an endeavor to develop an additional experiential layer of writing, language, language and speech. For ten years after this, Merav Shinn Ben-Alon devoted herself to painting while processing events from life that seeped into the depths of her work. Now she has again found the words she needs, and today she is engaged in a dynamic of examining the connection between text and image.

If in Merav Shinn Ben-Alon's works the pictorial landscape contains an implicit promise of meaning, in the works of Ram Samocha the promise of meaning is implicit in the power of the image and its endless contexts from the traditions of art (Rembrandt's shell), advertising (a button, a coffee bean), design, and even science (a chain of chromosomes). An examination of the image's pictorial power provokes a charged discussion about the "aura" of the artistic, about the "fetishism" of the commercial object, and touches on the course of action initiated by Pop Art in the 1960s. What does the image contain within itself beyond the depiction of a banal object? What is the secret of the magic that has been instilled into the structure, the texture, the subtle tension of the encounter between object and background?

Ram Samocha works in a direction that is opposite to that of Merav Shinn Ben-Alon: he creates a critical distance, seeks for the meticulous, the self-conscious, the designed and the controlled – that which is almost not a painting yet still is a painting – and for an enigmatic world. In the early '90s his paintings of objects were incorporated into three-dimensional objects that he created in epoxy and silicone. But study of the image demanded a commitment to painting, to illusion and to the craftsmanship in it. In the mid-'90s, delicate overlapping layers of color in pastel shades were already building the presence of the object in his works. The struggle with the fragile boundary that accords the image the radiance of its existence or enables the void to emerge, led the artist to negotiations with texture and surface – an external aspect the study of which might lead to the exposure of an internal essence and to a clarification of the essential affinity existing between them. From here, the series of works from the late '90s developed: eggs, mustaches, the breast, bald pates. The concentration on the texture was directed to the boundaries of the painting, to its minimal means and to the increasing identification with drawing, which has always been a significant medium in his work.

Samocha's engagement with body parts such as a breast or bald pates, and his concentration on hair, touch upon questions of change in the course of time. In other words, one can describe this as an engagement with the breakability of drawing, with the breakability of the line, with a dynamics of construction and collapse as entailed in one another. Paradoxically, the drawing became the organizer of a system that is anchored (perhaps) in absence, in the void of the paper. The works in painting, which became painting on the verge of drawing, as well as many drawings (some of them very large) convened, side by side, the regimented implicit in the hidden intimate, the organizing implicit in the sensual, that preserves the enigma of sexuality and ambiguity that nestles in the disintegrating image.

In the exhibition gallery, opposite Merav Shinn Ben-Alon's wall work, Samocha created the Love Wall, which is composed of a network of lines done in rapid, repetitive, quasi-decorative drawing. The expanding network of lines has a significant character that preserves strata of experience and memory in the ostensibly designed façade. In the center of this wall networked with drawing, a heart work – a painting on canvas – in radiant red, was hung; hovering or perhaps pulling inwards, integrating with the seemingly transparent of the pencil drawing, or, better – celebrating the autonomy of a painting in space.

In the works of Merav Shinn Ben-Alon and Ram Samocha the engagement with the body takes on a private and personal context. In the charged political climate of Israel, on the background of wars and terrorist strikes, the two artists choose to preserve the continuity of the little moments, the intimate, the bodily, the near, not the heroic or the victim-focused. They seek to expand the intimacy of their collaboration to various spheres of life – to the street, to the gallery, to interaction with diverse spheres of action and contextual fields. "Collaborators" at the Museum of Art, Ein Harod is a political statement with implications for the personal and the social spheres.