

Memories from Joav
Ran Shechori

Every Friday evening, as in a sacred ritual, we would gather in Raffi Lavie's "living room" which was nothing but a former hen house left from the days when the Ramat Gan neighborhood was still a settlement with family farms. There we would sit – Lavie, Joav BarEl and myself – gorging ourselves on pies made by Ilana, Lavie's wife, and in between two bites, discussed the future of Israeli art. The three of us were behind the "10+ group" and a series of exhibitions. Raffi was the sole member of 10+ who participated in all of the shows. The underlying concept of 10+'s activity was the principle of "doing things differently" showing works that transcended the artists' signature style, so as to challenge the seriousness and aura usually attached to artistic practice; and with a hint of playfulness, boldness and self-irony, to experiment with new techniques and materials. Raffi negotiated with gallerists, and together we decided on the themes and participants of each show. Joav and I were both art critics writing in "Haaretz", so we were in charge of formulating their conceptual reasoning.

But there was a heavier side to this playfulness. At the end of the 1960's, Ofakim Hadashim (Hebrew for "New Horizons", another group of artists operating at the time in Israel) and its 'lyrical abstraction' reigned supreme in the local art scene. That was also a time when French influences were the order of the day at the Tel Aviv Museum, then headed by Haim Gamzo. We were a bunch of young artists seeking recognition, and this was the way to do it. But notwithstanding the sociological aspect, this provocation also meant opening the door to new tendencies coming from America, the UK, Germany and France's Nouveau Réalisme. We were subscribed to Flash Art Magazine, and could see that narrative elements in visual art were no longer considered a crime. Reuven Berman once gave a talk on American Pop at the Artists' House, and posited that to the suburban man, a usual sight when coming home mainly consisted of the bumper of the car in front of him. All of a sudden, reality and the old Realism regained a meaning. There was no longer a distinction between high and low: a soup can was as worthy a subject as a model's breasts.

Pop grew out of surrealism when André Breton's 'court' transitioned from Paris to New York during the war. This was an artistic atmosphere where Joav would have felt like a fish in water. Ever since his acclaimed first show at the Menora Club, where he exhibited his refined drawings made after stories by Kafka, and up until his later, lightweight Styrofoam reliefs evocative of prehistoric monsters, he remained a surrealist in a world of abstraction, where literary or thematic expression was dismissed. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Joseph Zaritsky, this 'high priest' of abstraction, had it in him to sense that realism was returning to canvases. It had returned, but in a

new formula: that of Pop Art. For Joav the transition into Pop was a smooth one: he opted for industrial paint, spray paint especially, which is synonymous with commercial art; made use of complementary colors, far removed from the subtle gradation of the conventional palette; and framed nude female body parts in close-ups – face and genitalia – as to defy and affirm that all is permitted. The influences of Tom Wesselmann, Andy Warhol and Larry Rivers are all visible in his works and 10+ was the catalyst to that.

Aside from his intellectual talents and strong analytical tendency, Joav was a man who admired technique and practical work. When I met him he worked as an airplane technician at Trans World Airlines, wearing white overalls that suited him very well, before becoming a lecturer at the Technion, alongside Yitzhak Danziger. One time, I visited him in his studio apartment at Gush Halav St. and noticed that the entire ceiling was covered with white spots. “Oh” he said, “I felt like making cream, so I bent an iron wire, attached it to a drill, turned it on inside the bowl of cream – and right there all the cream shot up to the ceiling.” To this day the flies of northern Tel Aviv lick their tongues in remembrance of that episode. He lived in a basement but at the same time, Joav being Joav, had his Sabra, an Israeli-made convertible sports car, parked outside. One day he drove me to Jerusalem, which was an overwhelming experience: you would sit very low, just above road level, with your legs stretched forward, and every passing bus seemed like a mammoth. It felt to me that the compliment that would have pleased him most would be a praise of his driving skills. Because above of all, what Joav wanted was to be “a man’s man”.

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