

A Bright Day for Women

The achievements of three independent women artists are cause not just for celebration but for the pleasure of all

Bernard Dichek

THREE ISRAELI WOMEN artists marked this year's International Women's Day by exhibiting their works at the Herzliya Artists' Residence gallery. Yet when asked about the concept of having 'a women's day,' they all expressed misgivings. "It's like we're being put in a ghetto," says Ayelet Carmi, referring to the annual March 8 event established as a political event at the first international women's conference in Copenhagen in 1910. "But it's important for me to see that women succeed economically and I get really riled up when-

ever I hear about how male painters make more money than their female colleagues."

Carmi refers to a study by the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts, which shows that women artists earn 75 cents for every dollar made by men artists and bemoans the dearth of female painters whose works are sold at public auctions in Israel.

Orna Bromberg also frowns when asked about the occasion. "I'm happy, though, that my paintings can be part of a declaration that says you can do whatever you want," she says.

And for Ruthi Helbitz Cohen, the day calls to mind the absence of women serving in managerial positions in Israel's art schools.

"So long as there is a need, I guess the day is worth having," she concludes.

All three artists, each in her own distinctive way, paint almost exclusively images of women.

Helbitz Cohen depicts, in a large number of her works, doll-like girls in various shades of pink and black, staring out at the world in an unsettling way. The contrast between the innocence of the young females and the terrifying shadowy figures that confront them creates for many viewers an edgy, emotionally stirring experience.

One series of her paintings, entitled "The Damsel's House," suggests by its very name the age-old theme of the 'damsel in distress,



ORNA BROMBERG: *Untitled*

COURTESY ORNA BROMBERG



AYELET CARMİ: Untitled

COURTESY AYELET CARMİ

the persecuted maiden who gets tied to the railroad tracks by a villain as a fast train approaches.

But Helbitz Cohen's damsel is in a different kind of distress. Unlike the classical female victim who is menaced by an external villain or monster, the threat facing her damsels clearly comes from within. The extreme extent to which the young women are preoccupied with their inner feelings is provocatively suggested by the display of their internal body organs. One painting called "Eat Her Heart Out" shows a delicate, gentle-looking young woman whose heart is visible and has turned to black.

As the damsels do not face an external threat, it can be implied that these women also do not require a male hero to save them. If anyone is a hero, Helbitz Cohen suggests in an interview with *The Report*, it is the damsel herself.

"The power of these young women is their ability to express what they are feeling even if there is a taboo about those feelings," she says, sitting in a Tel Aviv café, her left hand holding

a cup of cappuccino while her right hand sketches relentlessly on a paper napkin.

Helbitz Cohen chooses her words carefully, sometimes pausing for several seconds until she finds the precise word, continuing throughout our conversation to sketch on the napkin, mainly drawing flowers.

"It amazes me how little open discussion there is about the subject of death, especially among children," she says referring to the black skeletons, ghoulish figures and distorted insect-like creatures that swarm around the harmless young girls in their pretty hues of pink.

"I try to deal with things that disturb me, with my own personal state of mind and I admit that in my own life and in the way I talk to my children I also am afraid of talking about death," she says, while continuing to sketch the flowers. Although she is speaking in Hebrew, she suddenly scribbles in English the word 'free.' She continues in Hebrew. "But in my art I'm not afraid of anything."

Helbitz Cohen's ability to confront taboos

and draw attention to deep, unstated and painful feelings has gained her acclaim. Israeli playwright and art critic Joshua Sobol, speaking at the opening of her recent exhibit at the Julie M. Gallery in Tel Aviv, praised her in almost prophetic terms, describing "her courageous look at life" and noting that he sees in some of her works "a vision of the end of the world."

Helbitz Cohen, 40, has been painting prolifically for about 20 years, ever since she stumbled upon an art course while studying psychology at Haifa University. The middle child of three sisters, she grew up in Caesarea, at a time, she notes, when the coastal town was a relatively isolated community. Her father is a building contractor, whose mark can literally be seen throughout her mixed media works as she incorporates builder's security tape, with her father's company name on it, into her artworks.

Another surprising but less obvious ingredient that goes into her art materials, she reveals, is pink laundry softener. "I like the oily texture that the softener adds when I mix it with acrylic paint," she says. It doesn't seem necessary for her to explain why the softener is pink. The color has become inextricably associated with her work and a recent exhibit of her paintings held in Geneva was indeed called "The Dark Side of Pink."

Referring to that exhibit, Helbitz Cohen, who happens to be wearing two layers of black clothing with a pink strap peeking over a bare shoulder, adds with a smile:

"Some people said it should have been called 'The Dark Side of Women.'"

AS IN THE WORKS OF HELBITZ Cohen, male figures are almost totally absent in the paintings of Ayelet Carmi. But Carmi insists that she isn't making a deliberate attempt at affirmative action. "What preoccupies me is exploring the limits of art," she tells *The Report*. "The form of the woman is simply a human shape and subject that I know well."

Mexican painter Frida Kahlo was an important influence on her. "Kahlo was not afraid to show a woman in a way that displayed her pain and humanity," says Carmi, while laying out works in progress on the floor of her tightly-packed studio in the Herzliya Artists' Residence.

Like Kahlo, Carmi also uses vibrant colors. But unlike the agony that Kahlo's life story and paintings evoke, Carmi's theatrical, dream-like representations of women and her

own ebullient personality offer a much more jovial experience. Carmi's women tend to be active and engaged in some form of serious activity, whether it is holding a flag or drawing with an engineering compass, but humor and a sense of fun are everywhere.

A series of paintings that Carmi created in 2008, which she called *Alexantropia*, is typical of her playful approach and the complete freedom she exerts in choosing the content of her works. The starting point, she recalls, was a photograph she saw of the grave of Alexander the Great, the 4th century BCE Greek king. "In the eyes of a little girl, he might be considered a romantic, heroic figure. Someone who conquered the world and then died in battle at a very young age." Pausing to laugh a bit, she continues, "But this is of course silly nonsense. For me to take this male icon and in one painting to call him Alexandria and then combine it with the idea of utopia is, well..."

Without finishing the sentence she points out that storytelling is part of the world of women. By way of example, she turns to a painting showing what a casual observer might ascertain to be simply a bare-breasted woman draped with a white toga-like cloth holding a branch with stubbed outgrowths. "You could say that the background in this painting, which looks a bit like Jason Pollack's sprayed colors, is a masculine element that defines the space that the woman is in," she begins.

"But the woman herself is in control of the situation. She is about to do something with the branch. Something violent. She is just thinking about it but this is the moment before she is going to cut off her own head. The space may not be hers but she does what she herself decides. Nobody is telling her what to do. She creates the situation."

Carmi laughs a bit more in her good-natured way, pauses to turn off her cell phone, which rings with the theme song from Quentin Tarantino's film, "Kill Bill," and then goes on to describe an exhibit that she is currently working on, that, once again, owes its origins to a male figure – Leonardo Da Vinci.

Carmi points out that she was inspired by the scientific sketches of human flying machines that Da Vinci drew more than five hundred years ago. The sketches, based on his observations of how birds fly, correctly predicted the forms of modern day helicopters and planes, even if Da Vinci himself did not succeed in building a flyable object. "I was attracted by his fantasy of wanting to be able

to fly," she explains. "I love the idea of constructions and structures, even those that don't succeed or fall apart on you."

In building her new series of artistic works, Carmi demonstrates how she forms each artwork by juxtaposing two layers of transparent material that she calls "painting

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peelings.' One layer contains an illustration of a wing or engineering tool based on Da Vinci's sketches, while the other shows images of women. "Some people will know it is a combination of two drawings, some will not. Some of the combinations are planned and some are by chance."

Carmi, whose mother is an art teacher and father a computer expert, grew up on Kibbutz Beit Hashita in northern Israel, during an era

when children from the age of 3 months lived separately from their parents in communal children's houses. "One thing I remember vividly from my childhood on the kibbutz is participating in flag-waving processions on occasions like Independence Day and Memorial Day. I have a strong recollection of how we used our bodies in order to hold the flags," she recalls.

Carmi, 42, who today lives in Herzliya, expresses aspects of collective living both in her work style and in the contents of her paintings. She bases her paintings on photographs she takes of other women – usually friends – and the characters that appear in her paintings, even if they appear alone, often seem to be part of a group that is working, traveling, hunting or doing some other activity together.

She has exhibited her works in many of Israel's leading galleries, including a series called *Hamaccabiah*, which she presented at the Tel Aviv Museum in 2005. She also created permanent wall murals installed on an entire floor at Tel Aviv's Art Plus hotel. The murals, based on self-portraits, are known as 'The She-Joker.' "The murals had to be faces only because, as it was a hotel, I couldn't do nudes," she quips.

ORNA BROMBERG, LIKE CARMİ and Helbitz Cohen, devotes her painting to portraying female subjects. But unlike her two colleagues, who occasionally drift onto other topics, Bromberg always has a young girl at the center of her paintings. In fact, she has devoted more than 30 years to variations on just three themes: a girl walking in profile, a girl dancer standing on one leg and a girl dressed as a queen.

Often the girl is accompanied by a bird, fish, butterfly or flower, depicted in a one-dimensional symbolic way that brings to mind the style of North American aboriginal art.

Bromberg, whose paintings have been exhibited at Tel Aviv's prestigious Dvir Gallery since the 1980s, notes that sometimes people think that the simplicity of her imagery means she is making fun of them. "But in the last ten years the public has been more accepting," she says.

Her style is in some ways reminiscent of the *art brut* (raw art) approach developed by the French painter Jean Dubuffet, but Bromberg is quick to distance herself from his technique and philosophy.

"I'm not trying to draw like Dubuffet and

to look like an adult imitating a child's way of drawing," she says. "I just try to find the most primeval shapes that I can express. When I paint a fish, I paint it the way that I feel a fish needs to be painted."

Bromberg's attempt to reduce a feeling or idea to its simplest and purest form seems to be at the core of her work and is what can cause her seemingly facile images to have as strong an impact on adults as Little Red Riding Hood does on a child hearing the story told for the first time.

"My goal is to tell with a minimum of means a certain story that for me doesn't end. People will always ask [about the characters] 'when do they get there?' But they will never get there," she suggests enigmatically in an interview with *The Report*.

Bromberg works in a studio located in her home apartment in central Tel Aviv. As a visitor enters, she turns down the classical music she has been playing and the work space is completely quiet. None of the sounds from the bustling street corner outside can be heard. The studio walls are monastically bare and the single opaque window lets in light but nothing else.

Asked how she is able, while working in such an austere setting, to create works of art filled with such rich images of nature, she points out that the models for her art come from memory, not from nature.

"My world is the world of words, of literature," she says softly.

The authors who have influenced her include Marcel Proust, Robert Walser and Samuel Beckett. "They are writers who can describe the whole world without leaving home."

Bromberg notes that over breakfast earlier that day she had read a chapter from "In Search of Lost Time," Marcel Proust's novel written in a stream-of-consciousness style. "From the moment I started to read him, I said that the way he writes is the way that I want to paint. It's not so much the words he uses that stay with me but what he makes me feel when I read him."

Bromberg grew up in Tel Aviv. She credits her storekeeper father and her Belgian-born mother, who is a chef, with inculcating in her a love for reading and a sense of 'good taste.'

"The issue of what is good taste and what is beauty are two things that I remain preoccupied with," Bromberg observes.

By way of example she refers to a series of paintings she did of girls wearing the green and blue uniforms that El Al stew-



RUTHI HELBITZ COHEN: Eating Her Heart Out

COURTESY RUTHI HELBITZ COHEN

ardesses once wore.

"To me the uniforms didn't exactly appear to be in good taste. The paintings dealt with the subject of good taste: how to spoil it, how to appreciate it and what its significance is."

This type of exploration, she adds, leads to questions about what the ideal of beauty is. "I wanted to see what the limits of beauty are, what ugliness is and to slowly, through all this, create a new kind of beauty."

In addition to painting, Bromberg teaches art to gifted children at the Tel Aviv Museum and at a school for children with special needs in south Tel Aviv.

"I work with both groups of children in the same way and I'm often amazed to see the power that art can have."

She tells the story of Tali (not her real name), a girl with special needs, whom she taught for more than ten years. "During the first few years, she didn't participate. She just sat there, not drawing or speaking."

But one day, Bromberg relates, Tali started to draw things, mainly ornamental repetitious patterns, and slowly began to talk about what she was painting. "It became clear that she was drawing musical rhythms and from what she said it was evident that she had incredible knowledge about Mizrahi [Middle Eastern] music."

For the first time Tali began to gain recognition from her classmates. Her paintings grew more colorful. She started to participate in class discussions. Her self-confidence grew.

"Art creates possibilities," concludes Bromberg.

Not just for Tali. Women's Day, originally founded to assist women in their struggle for equal rights, has in recent years shifted to celebrating women's achievements. Anyone who visits the Herzliya exhibit is certain to find that the achievements of three independent women are cause not just for celebration but for the pleasure of all. ●