

"Army of Me"

Anat Betzer – Paintings

By Hadas Reshef

In order for us to understand the brave dimension of Anat Betzer's artworks, we should reflect on the dominant features of Israeli art: conceptual, sophisticated and cerebral, at times anti-sensual art, which traditionally stays clear of realism, oftentimes perceived as kitsch or art in the service of ideology; an art scene in which depictions of still life and landscapes are often considered commercial and hence non-legitimate. In the spirit of this rigid patriarchal militarism, anyone who dares deviate from this "party line" will often find himself in the margins. Material painting and the exploration of the painterly medium are ideologically pushed away from the forefront of local art. In this vein, Betzer herself created in the early stages of her artistic path sculptures, installations and paintings of conceptual nature. Her work in recent years is a profound study of a return to more traditional painting techniques, and presents a synthesis of the themes she engaged with in the past, such as femininity, gender, integration of text and painting, literary quotes and more.

The exhibition's title is borrowed from a song by Björk:

Stand up, you've got to manage, I won't sympathize, anymore.

And if you complain once more, you'll meet an army of me.

Betzer does not apologize, does not wish to please. Her sensual painting deals with seduction, still life, images of colorful animals, laden with references. The emotional depth moves center stage. Many of the images are quotes of famous artworks, photographs, places, stories, various visual languages, even Betzer herself. It is a thoughtful study of representations as a source of language and feeling.

One of the leitmotifs in Betzer's paintings is the forest. Her first works in the series (2004-2005) depicted houses built on trees in a snowy forest. This sight is not a familiar one in Israel, and the image conjures up many associations – on the one hand European romanticism, a house that is not rooted in the ground, Slavic fairytales of the witch Baba Yaga or the tale of Rapunzel who waits for the prince who will save her from her solitude in the tower, using her long hair. On the other hand, in Israeli collective memory the woods are associated with the Jewish history in the Diaspora and the Holocaust.

The image of Rapunzel reoccurs in the paintings time after time in the figures of the women, a reproduction of the portrait of Betzer herself – the portrait of the artist that became a prototype – with flowing deep black hair. A temptress who reads books in bed in the nude, or in a pair of jeans and a tank top on the rim of the sea of fog, dancing in the forests, traveling like a hunter with ghost dogs at her side. The hand gestures wish to please and take pleasure, others are bound and bleeding, portraying violence, anguish and restriction. The sublime beauty of nature in which the artist had never visited, is a replication of a fantasy drawn from culture: cinema, literature, music, art history – delving into it turns it into actual reality. The closest to a sane distance from the Israeli chaos.

Betzer herself is a reading woman who is always hungry, gulping literature like water after a long journey in the desert. In conversations about art she mentions Flaubert and Nabokov. The love for words infiltrates the canvas and at the same time emerges from it in the form of quotes or defiant sentences. Instead of signing her name she sometimes orders: "Forget me not", or warns "Army of me"; demands of the viewers to look and remember – despite the romanticism and lyricism, she demands of us to look directly at the material, asks of us to reexamine the images of flowers, peacocks, without hesitation allow the body to feel the coldness of the snow, let the cold sensation permeate thought, social criticism, feminism, the family unit, self image and the possibility of being hurt by the exposure. The circles are visual disturbances, aliens that took over the world, they underscore and hide elements, a blessing and a curse, they are the epitome of the connection between traditional painting and conceptual art.

The works as a whole pulls into the complexity of female power: fragility, clinging to the beautiful as a means of survival, using the aesthetic as social criticism, using sexuality that always seems and is perceived as objectified when it comes to the female image, and loneliness; loneliness that allows wandering to fantastical realms, bravely facing the forces of nature and a rigid reality.

Exhibiting the show "Army of Me" in Toronto, a long way from Tel Aviv where Anat Betzer lives and works is interesting. The viewer might feel close to the images reminiscent of the local climate, however, the snow and romanticism, just like classical painting, are exotic to Israeli eyes, which will always look at them from a distant and alienated perspective.