

# Yona Levy Grosman

Lives and works in the western Negev, Israel

**Y**ona Levy Grosman is a multi-disciplinary artist, whose artistic activity comprehends paintings, video art, drawings, poetry and essays. By her choice, she lives and works in the Negev, the southern part of Israel which is mostly a vast desert.

And the desert is the most influential factor of her artistic work. It seems that her whole creation is an attempt to understand, sometimes to conquer, sometimes letting herself being captured by the desert's power and magic. One may refer to her work within the romantic paradigm of the sublime, on one hand the admiration of the vast landscape, on the other the realization of the insignificance of human beings.

Her paintings reflect the desert topography, the harsh and blinding light, the emptiness. She uses heavy texture and bright colors keeping the

acrylic glossiness. The painting's surface reflects the desert dunes, but the acrylic glossiness bestows a sense of artificiality. The large canvases echo the desert infinity. Sometimes the artist adds to the main painting other painted canvas that act like and break the rectangular format.

Her style is figurative with abstract tendencies. But her paintings are by no means realist. They invoke the historical and cultural roots of the desert which is the borderline of two civilizations, ancient Egyptians and the Biblical Hebrews. It has symbolist affiliations, and above all the love of this rough country"

**Sorin Heller**

(Museolog Independent Curator)





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An interview by Dario Rutigliano, curator  
with the collaboration of Katherine Williams  
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*An effective synergy between a rigorous analytical gaze and a refined artistic sensibility allows Yona Levy Grosman to accomplish a suggestive investigation in the blurry area in which memories and perceptual reality coexist in an atemporal dimension. Unlike artists as Carsten Höller, she does not let the viewers in the foggy area of doubt: her analytic approach drives us to investigate about the relation between reality and the way we perceive it. One of the most convincing aspect of Levy Grosman's practice is the way she creates an area of intellectual interplay between perception and memory, contingency and immanence, that gently invites the viewers to explore the crossroad between human emotion and Nature's geometry: I'm very pleased to introduce our readers to her refined artistic production.*

*Hello Yona and a warm welcome to LandEscape: to start this interview, would you like to tell us something about your background? In particular, you have a solid formal training and you degreed with excellence at the at Maimad art school in Tel-Aviv, Israel: would you like to tell our readers how this experience has influenced your development as an artist and the way you currently conceive your works? By the way, do you think that your previous studies*

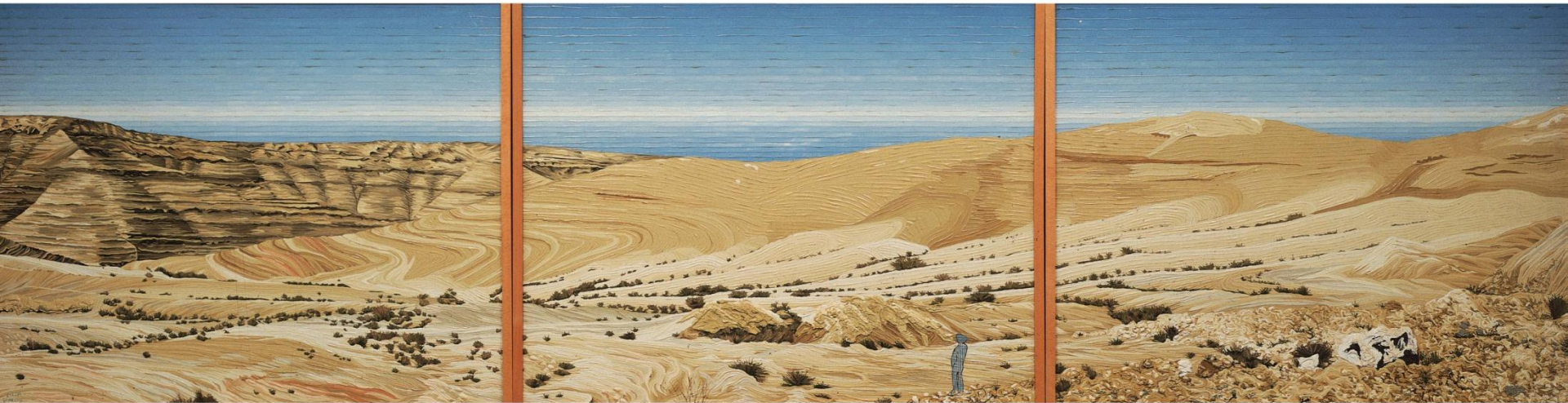
***Psychology may have informed your process as well?***

Most of my adult life I have lived in the Negev which is the desert region of Israel. Most of my artistic work happened while living in the Negev. [Works 70, 133.]  
When the poet wrote the words "Man is but a landscape of his homeland" they summarized exactly the smells, tastes, sounds, rhythms, colors and scenes that shape not only the place, but also the structure of the human psyche and the reflections which guide and build the private and public reality and its social context. And the spirit of the desert where I live, sends hidden forces into all of my work as the individual grain of sand builds the dune and together become a parable of man and society. [Works 271, 234,]

I think my way is not different from the way of many other artists.  
Artists, throughout the history of art, have never remained indifferent to insights, scientific innovation, and social changes that occurred during their tenure. Each milestone in the history of art drew its content from the natural environment and all humanity in its time. And it is natural that I derived some insights from my studies of psychology at Bar-Ilan University. For example, one of the areas studied is that of human visual perception. When we look at the well-known images of figures and backgrounds such as a white urn standing in the middle of the field and the two characters that frame and define it, we can see either the pitcher or the two surrounding characters at any one time but not all of them simultaneously. So it is also with the well-known image of the young woman or old woman. Which will be the figure seen and which







**Fall color of Paris**

Watercolor on Paper 14 x 11

will be the background depends on how we direct the mind

This is a small example that shows the main limitation of the person dealing with a reality which has infinite dimensions. And of course, when I delved into the subject of human perception, studies revealed a long series of limitations inherent in human nature. All of these are symptoms which are the result of a central limitation that I define as linear thinking.

I turn the limitation of linear thinking into a basic working tool with which I work to describe reality as one who comes to say, "These are my human tools. They represent the human in me

when I paint infinite landscapes. So in every painting, every subject, this human limitation is present." [Works 68, 69, 299.]

**Now let's focus on your artistic production: I would start from Landscapes, an extremely interesting project that has been featured in the 56th Venice Biennale and that our readers have already started to get to know in the introductory pages of this article: and I would suggest our readers to visit directly at <http://www.art-gallery-yona.com/> in order to get a wider idea of your multifaceted artistic production. In the meanwhile, would you tell us something about the genesis of this stimulating**

**project? What was your initial inspiration?**

Desert landscapes are unattainable. The ambivalent feeling which commands the heights of the cliff looking to the horizon visible where the sky above and the earth beneath meet in infinity and everything is visible. This creates a sense of human greatness on the one hand, and the smallness of man in relation to the place. This is the finite man's ultimate longing for the infinite.

Yearning for the infinite through art is not new. Caspar David Friedrich, J.M.W. Turner, Brancusi, Rothko, Miya Ando and many others have dealt with this problem in the images placed before

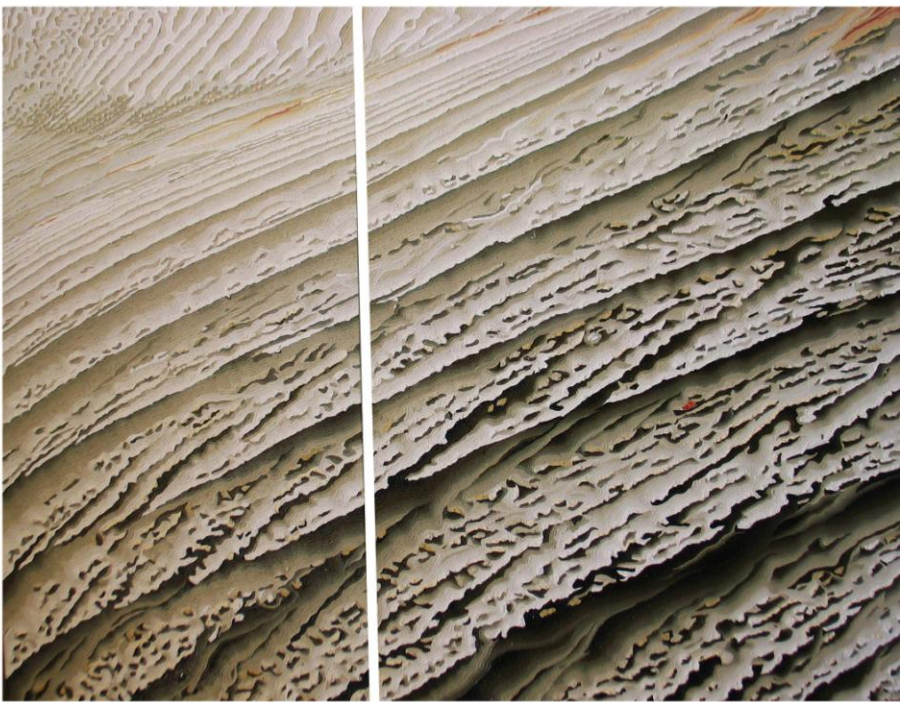
them. How to get the feel of this yearning into a painting on canvas or a sculpture of stone and iron.

Current artists also search for different paths in order to portray the sublime. For example; Hiroshi Sugimoto, Teresita Fernandez as well as the work of Catherine Opie in her series "Skiers". All of these artists test the ability to achieve the highest expression of the intangible and the sublime through the use of absence, empty space and reduction.

I, too, face the same task to find ways to convey the yearning for the sublime and infinite onto the canvas. Most artists utilize the sea, the



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mountains or any other scenery within which they live as suitable imagery to express the sublime in their work. It is natural that the place

where I live with its desert views, white light, waves of sand on the dunes, dry cracks in the thirsty soil and the relationship of the grain of





sand to the high dune become for me preferred imagery to achieve the feeling of yearning for the sublime. I do this by breaking the frame so that my paintings are composed of several frames that create incompleteness. And the thing that characterizes my work is that the human fingerprint of cognitive and perceptual limitation is present in every picture of every image of

infinity. [Works: - 181, 280, 286.]

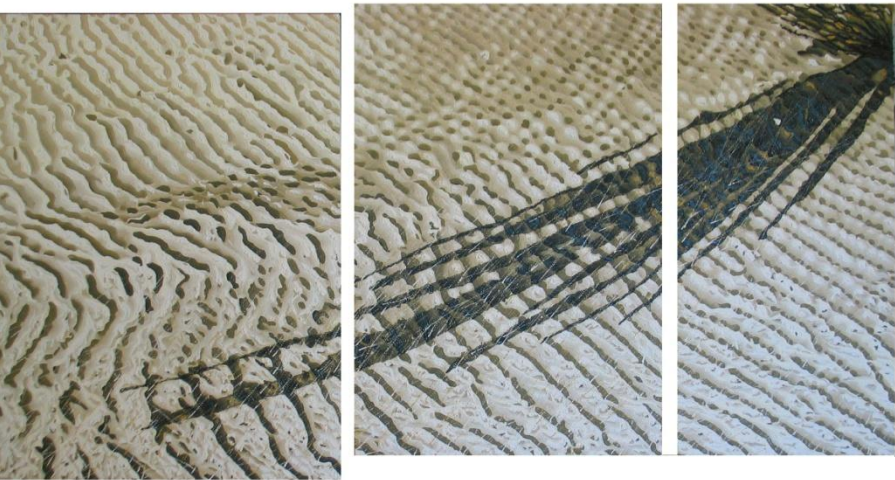
*The ambience created by Landscapes has reminded me the concept of Heterotopia elaborated by French social theorist Michel Foucault. What has mostly impacted on me is the way you have been capable of bringing a new level of significance to the sign of*

*absence, that invites us to rethink about the concept of the environment we inhabit in. This is a recurrent feature of your approach and as you once remarked, the core of your work consists of looking at the reality around, attempting to deconstruct and assembly of those endless sights... this urges the viewers' perception in order to challenge*

*the common way to perceive not only the outside world, but our inner dimension... I'm sort of convinced that some informations & ideas are hidden, or even "encrypted" as microscopic grains of sand in the environment we live in, so we need -in a way- to decipher them. Maybe that one of the roles of an artist could be to reveal*



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**unexpected sides of Nature, especially of our inner Nature... what's your point about this?**

There is truth in your words. Foucault spoke about the use of language as a rather limited logical instrument, to sort and categorize the reality in order to understand and explain it. Thus the words that make up language are rooted in the fundamental divisions of a binary system. But my language is mainly the language of painting. In my opinion the best person to describe this is W.J.T. Mitchell. Indeed, a person's inner nature is evolved as a consequence of the tools available to grasp a reality of endless dimensions, are restricted to only two dimensions (the time dimension is not considered here being a biological concept and

it is seen as a linear dimension). A human with her mental limits coping with endless reality, is the foundation and center of my work. On the one hand, I paint endless images while on the other hand, these images are illustrated by fine lines like the lines of man's linear thinking. It is as if it had become a large canvas of delicate embroidery where detail joins detail to create the element of infinity. [Works 77, 300] This is in contrast to the romantic artists and other neo-romantics who used the dramatic transitions of color or painted dramatic situations to convey a sense of the little man against the forces of nature such as the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich; or the exchange of colors and unique locations in order to create a meditative sense of longing for infinity as Rothko's works or works of Miya Ando.

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My landscape paintings, influenced by the place where I live, are provided with a white light meditation and include the drama presented as a result of the use of line and / or the creation of emptiness [work 286] when the viewer is

confronted with these two opposite feelings simultaneously. In this painting I increased the feeling of absence by combining several frames that created space and incompleteness of the frame. It seems that this gap creates a sense of





restlessness and longing for wholeness. In my work I examine the means at my disposal to implant in the viewer the feeling of absence and the sublime despite the painting being presented as almost realistic. The tools I use are first and foremost the line. For example, in work 77 the lines separate the landscape elements and create movement in the creation-like landscape of the Ramon Crater in the

Negev. Another tool is the breaking of the frame. One of the qualities of the person who is contending with the inconceivable reality is to build theories which are essentially frames of reference for action which give him confidence and a sense of stability and control. Most of my works are made of a number of frames which means that the image is only part of the whole. This creates a sense of

lacking a sense of instability and this is the longing for completeness. An example of this is work 286 from the landscape series or work 258 from the series about my insights based on the scientific theory of chaos. Other works refer directly to man's attempt at the impossible; the impossible of trying to completely control what is uncontrollable. Works **193, 200**, in which were created demarcations,

but the movement breaks the boundaries.

In addition the process of transition from the concrete to the abstract as in the case of reduction are part of the search for the optimum tools for the expression of the sublime. See works 70 and 129 and sketches from 1-5 to 3-5. I recommend that you look at the drawings in which there is a central place to the empty space on the page

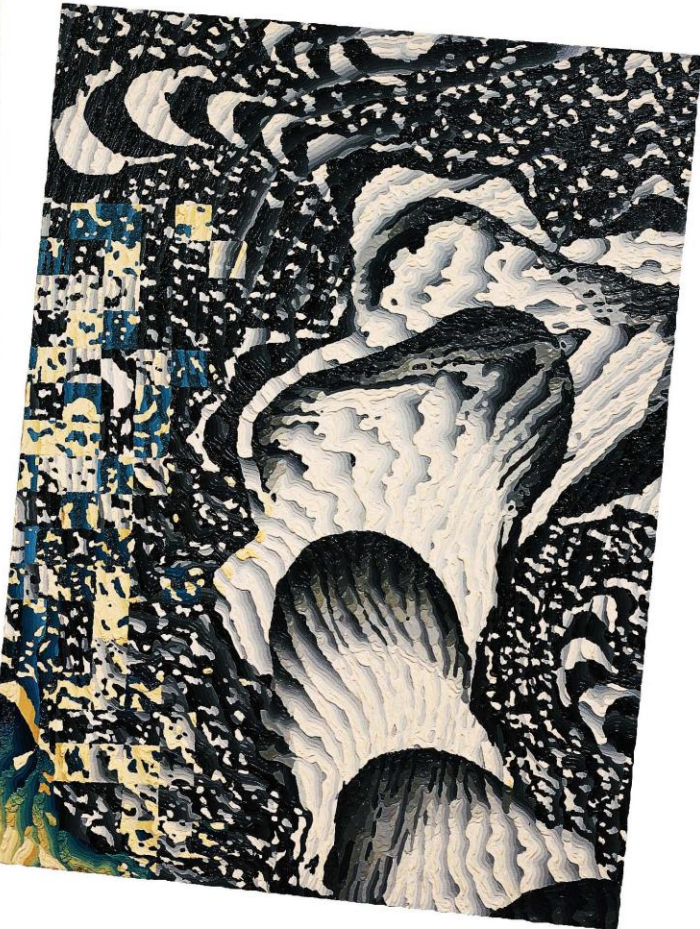
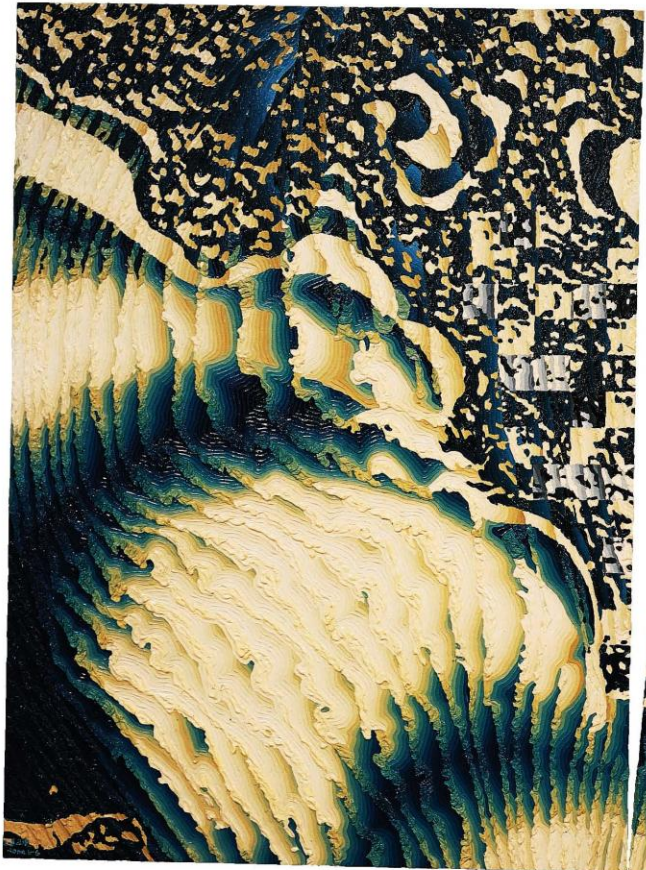


during the process of my translation of scene to paper. <http://goo.gl/dqHcCw>  
Additional drawings can be found at, <http://www.art-gallery-yona.net/draws11.html>

*I like the way your careful approach offers a rigorous but at the same time lively visual translation of the sights tha pervades our reality: in this sense, your practice is intrinsically connected to the chance of creating an area of intense interplay with the viewers, that are urged to evolve from the condition of a merely passive audience: I definitely love the way In the Land of Forgetfulness questions about the concept of Self, taking an intense participatory line not only on the way we enjoy Art, but also and especially on its conception. In particular, your investigation about the intimate consequences of constructed realities has reminded me of the ideas behind Thomas Demand's works: while conceiving Art could be considered a purely abstract activity, there is always a way of giving it a permanence that goes beyond the ephemeral nature of the concepts you capture. So I would take this occasion to ask you if in your opinion personal experience is an absolutely indispensible part of a creative process... Do you think that a creative process could be disconnected from direct experience?*

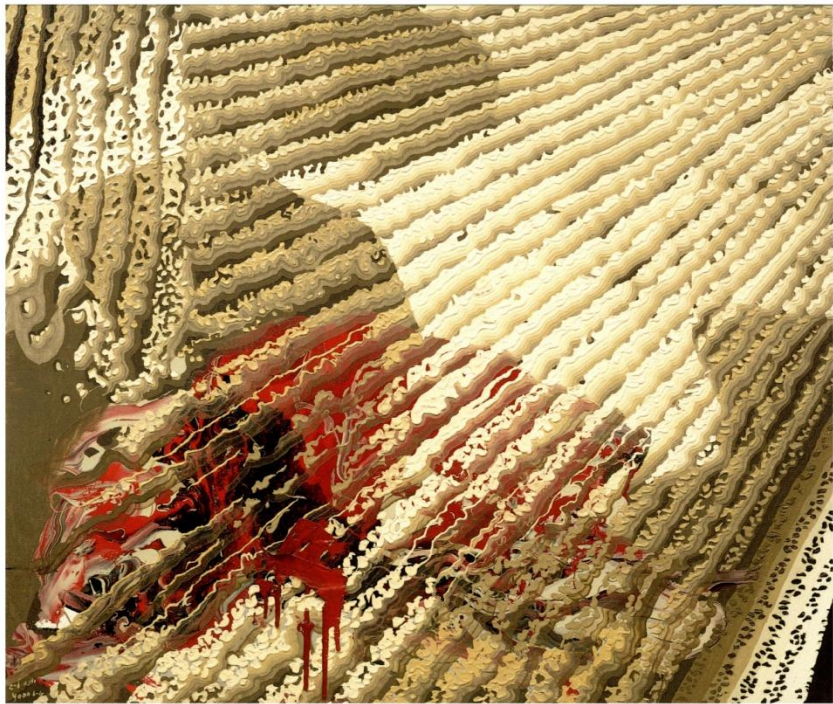
The vivid visualizations probably originate in the white light of the Negev sun. And just like in the work of other contemporary artists in my work the light and lively colors are not in opposition to the sublime.  
About a month ago I road on highway 101 in Morgan Hill to Gilroy, California. The mountains on the horizon were a hazy blue just like the in the paintings of American and many Europeans artists. In Israel the horizon is not blue and on a clear day it is sharp

As for your question, the answer is yes and yes.





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A large part of the work of any artist is at the subconscious level. The spirits of the place, time, culture and processes of the artist's life lead him to the way he meets and analyzes the reality around him and also directs him to what interests him as well as with what and how to express his art work.

One of my favorite age-old sayings of Confucius is, "To an ignorant man a mountain is a mountain, the valley is a valley and a river is a river. To an educated man a mountain is not a mountain, a valley is not a valley and a river is not a river. To a man of exceptional intellect a mountain is again a mountain, a valley is again a

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valley and a river is again a river." All the artists who broke the creative boundaries set by their predecessors, are artists who have passed through all the mental processes and knew how to combine strengths in their subconscious and research process into a personal statement which simultaneously draws on both the subconscious and the processes of conscious investigation always seeking a new perspective. In work 176 I drew an unconsciousness bursting out over the neat top layer of the conscious. Later the technique of

creating a gaping wound will serve me in the series "The sand will cover everything." In my opinion, every encounter and every new experience, always rests on experiences that preceded it. However, an experienced artist will always seek, examine and break through the known boundaries while acknowledging that everything is limited and temporary.

**Another interesting project of yours that has particularly impacted on me and on which I would like to spend some words is entitled**





*The Sand Will Cover It All: in particular, when I first happened to get to know with this piece I tried to relate all the visual information and the presence of a primary elements as sand to a single meaning. But I soon realized that I had to fit into the visual rhythm suggested by the work, forgetting my need for a univocal understanding of its symbolic content: in your work, rather that a conceptual interiority, I can recognize the desire to enabling us to establish direct relations...*

*Would you say that it's more of an intuitive or a systematic process?*

What is clear to me that this is a process. Even the insights I gained did not come to me at the beginning. Some were the result of pure thought, which is directed into a practical process that gave rise to insight and so on. One thing led to another and as I persisted in the work, the work enriched me. So all I can say from my experience is that a systematic process integrated with the intuitive, enrich each other over time.





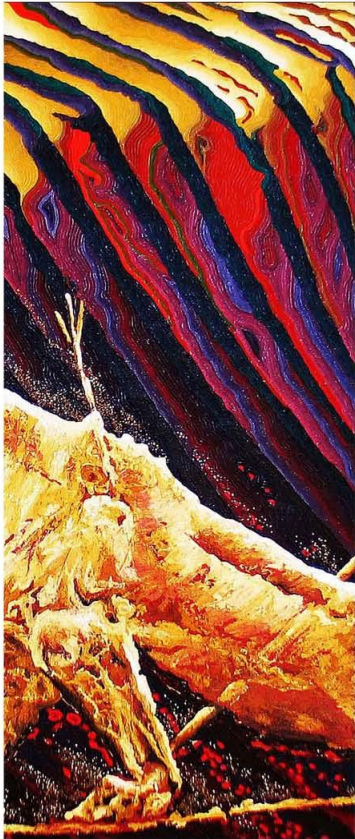
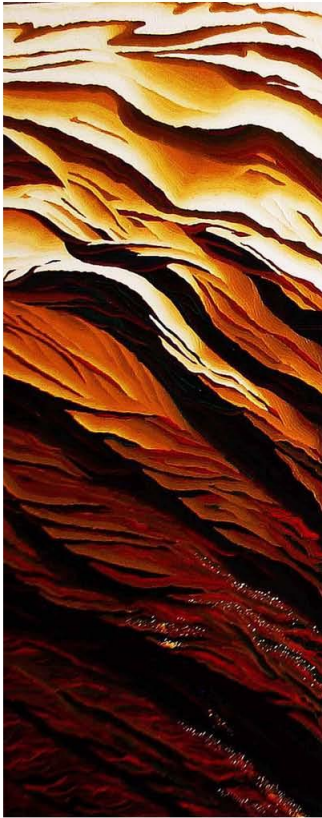
For example: - the beginning of the series "The Sand Will Cover It All" started with an order for a work which would incorporate the use of soil. It was only natural that roofing shingles that are produced from the sandy loess soil and covering most of the roofs in my area, would be integrated in a picturesque dune with the grains of sand forming wave after wave which cover the people from the burning sun of the desert both in life and in death. [Work 189] The sand is also a well known metaphor for time. [works 196, 220]  
And subsequently I created a large series where waves of sand cover bloodstains. [works 214, 278]. And, sand / time covering vast cultures as well. [works 213, 251].

*The recurrent reference to a universal imagery suggested by natural elements seems to remove any historic gaze from the reality you refer to, offering to the viewers the chance to perceive in a more atemporal form. In this sense, I daresay that the semantic juxtaposition between sign and matter that marks out your art, allows you to go beyond any dichotomy between Tradition and Contemporariness, establishing a stimulating osmosis between materials from an ancient era and a modern, lively approach to Art: do you recognize any contrast between Tradition and Contemporariness?*

I would like to divide the answer into two levels.

1. Although at the intellectual level I chose to engage in groundbreaking content involving my understanding of consciousness. But technically I made sure to do this by working with traditional tools of painting; brush with oil paints on canvas stretched on frames.

Indeed, there is a conflict. But art loves opposites, involving and expressing with their help. Just look at the contemporary artists in China or Japan who are not abandoning the traditional tools and yet expressing a contemporary statement. Therefore, I do not see any reason for contemporary artists in the Western tradition to throw away the traditional tools of their rich culture into the trash can of oblivion.





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2. At the philosophical level, when I explore the reality of contemporary tools and try to help break barriers to the future, including rebelling against the past, it does not mean that the past is not present. The past is present everywhere, in all cultures, at all times, even when there are those who seek to delete the past and memory itself brutal ways. And perhaps in such cases the presence of the past is even stronger. In my opinion, every artist is a link in a long chain

of creation. And as the artist more deeply explores the past, his creativity is enriched. Hence as I understand it, even when the focus is on contrasts between traditional and contemporary, in the end the tradition remains present. I suppose you're asking about a series of my work in which I raise in my own way, the memory from archaeological artifacts of the peoples of the Middle East, Assyria and ancient Babylon, which are being crushed to fine dust today. [works

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**190, 296 and 302.]** I rarely give names to my work. This time I called work 302 "I Cry for Nineveh"  
**Multidisciplinarity is a crucial aspect of your art practice and you seem to be in an incessant search of an organic, almost intimate symbiosis between several disciplines, ranging from paintings and drawings to video art, poetry and essays: while crossing the borders of different**

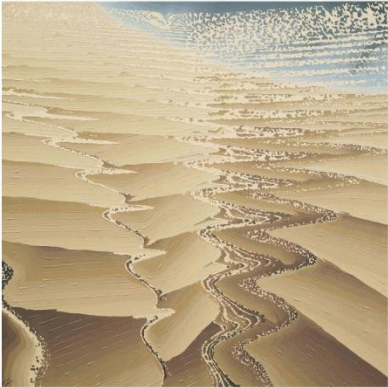
**artistic fields have you ever happened to realize that a symbiosis between different disciplines is the only way to achieve some results, to express some concepts?**  
In most of my exhibitions, rather than a scholarly explanation of the exhibition, I prefer to add poetry. Since I don't give names to my work I let the poem be the guide for the exhibition. For one of those exhibitions I wrote the following explanation:



It is not uncommon for painters to write poetry. There is a close relationship between development of visual acuity and the analytical selection of a single image from all perspectives with the analytical selection of language and composition as used to convey a unique experience. This time, this small exhibition in gallery "The Steam", I chose to bring the relationship between the perspectives as reflected in paintings and poems. And perspectives? Are these not reflections of musings? And the poems? Reflection of thoughts into words. And reflections? Words, words, words. Where they came from? Sights. I travel to and fro, but I am nothing but a reflection. Once expressed in poems. Once expressed in paintings. Sometimes my work is an encounter with people nearby and sometimes with other worlds. Each painting is connected to many poems. Each poem to other paintings. And this totality provides just a taste.

As for your question, every discipline is a working tool. Reflections and human consciousness are beyond any discipline. The consciousness needs all the disciplines to achieve expression at its best. I invite you to watch a short video that I made. In this film can be heard the voice of a biblical figure mourning her life. The landscape that is largely presented is not a landscape. It is a view that results from the camera wandering across the two paintings. In this work are fused poetry, painting and video.  
<http://www.art-gallery-yona.net/slide-show-kan-1.html>

**The impetuous way modern Technology and Science have nowadays came out on the top has dramatically revolutionized the idea of Art itself; in a certain sense, Art has been deprived of most of its transcendental aura that was an hallmark of classic age. However, it goes without saying that the scientific gaze on reality cannot be assimilated to mere Reductionism (בייניקציה) and especially the**



**philosophical consequences of Quantum mechanics has most to share with Parmenides and Henri Bergson than with neopositivism's ideas. Personally, I think that our analytic gaze on reality does not downsize the instinctive fashion communicated by Art, rather, it makes it more conscious: maybe because I have a scientific background that still informs the way I relate myself to Art, I'm sort of convinced that the intellectual awareness that marks out our era will definitely fill the apparent dichotomy between Art and Science and I will dare to say that Art and Technology are going to assimilate one to each other... what's your point about this?**

Thank you for sending me to study the school of Parmenides. There are some who contend that the impact of Parmenides is also greatly evident in



Spinoza's theory. Spinoza held that what is necessarily one, while all the world is but a plurality of different ways of God / nature. And since Spinoza's teachings guide the way I see

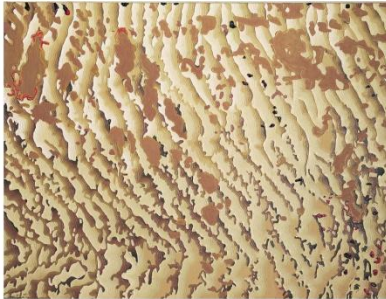
the human reality, I was pleased to learn about Parmenides. This is precisely the example which demonstrates that the past is present in the current time.



One exhibition of landscapes I presented works which their image was taken from nature that could be seen with the eye. Therefore I titled them "place". [works 121, 263] Next to these works I placed works which I titled "No Place" because the image was a diagram taken from an electronic device and worked to appear as a landscape [works 165, 146]. Later works included elements from nature combined with elements taken various charts. [works 153 and 166] For works of this kind I could not find an exact classification just as there is no special definition of a person whose body parts were replaced with the fruit of current technology. To the best of my understanding, any attempt by man to copy nature is inevitably a process of reduction. And in the process of contraction there is created a process of falsifying nature. As to the question of reduction and its effect I see them as interchangeable like the chicken or egg puzzle. It depends on perspective and distance of the mind of the viewer or artist from the object. [Work 281]

On the subject of the integration between art and technology, in my opinion, the contemporary artist has a greater wealth of tools, and the question to him is, where and how to focus. Indeed, the relationship between technology and insight about the realities that come with them will deepen with art. And I wonder whether in this dual game between matter and spirit, the world of art sometimes emphasizes the wondrous material rather than examining how the technological marvels will they integrate with art in order to germinate deeper insights into the role and position of the human being in real life?

*Since about a hundred years ago an artwork was considered a tactile materialization of an idea: we had to wait Impressionism to run across again to the apparently naïf question: what is Art? We are nowadays mostly forced to rethink about the abstract ideas behind an image: an instant later we receive an emotion from a masterly brush*



*stroke we are lead to find such an Ariane's Thread that could explain, even on an intuitive viewpoint, any metaphysical or even sociopolitical concept behind a landscape, as in Edward Burtynsky or Michael Light's works...*

The question of what is art, always stands in the





center of the art world. Especially at a time when technologies and different insights will be replaced at an increasing rate. But, in the world of the language of art the search will continue for paths to the language of the subconscious mind of man. And, as we discussed earlier, the artist's subconscious is attracted to the patterns and rhythms upon which it has been exposed. Do you know in the Hebrew language there is a word like "traffic artery", meaning the roads and trains? Here the terms relating to traffic patterns acquire meaning because of their tie to our own physical bodies. Chaos theory has brought to my door of limited images of nature, products of the computer upon which I added different levels of detail. This is the converse of reduction.. [Work 258]

The artist always finds in his environment shapes and rhythms of himself.[works 208 and 244]. However, I do not think that the question "What is art?" is permanently in the artist's workshop. While there are quite a few philosophical aspects in the work of art, but most of the time an artist is a kind of alchemist who investigates, tries and fails. The artist learns techniques and examines their suitability to his ideas or vice versa, and all is aimed at the same subconscious. First the subconscious of the artist himself, then he examines the influence of his work on the subconscious of the audience.

***Before taking leave from this interesting conversation I would like to pose a question about the nature of the relation with your audience: in particular, do you consider the issue of audience reception as being a crucial component of your decision-making process in terms of what type of language for a particular context?***

It is important for me to get a response and learn what my work does to the viewer. Of course, this is after the work is finished. However during the creative process which includes idea, collection of information and

planning, I am clear of any thoughts of the viewer's opinions. Otherwise I might lose my personal statement.

The only language which is involved in the work is the language of the unconscious mind / my personal emotions within the context of my personal examination of visual and psychological concepts.

***Thanks a lot for your time and for sharing your thoughts, Yona. Finally, would you like to tell us readers something about your future projects? How do you see your work evolving?***

I wish I could put into practice all the programs and ideas that are waiting for me. I'll tell you about three from a long list.

The first idea that I consider is to collect imagery from nature, process them by computer and then use them as the raw material for my oil paintings. I am currently busy with other work which now belongs to the series "The Sand Will Cover Everything" that I mentioned earlier in connection with the destruction of archaeological works in order to destroy all traces of historical people and cultures that were in the Middle East. I hope other artists, each in their own way will not let this memory fade away.

And, recently, I was exposed to a group of artists who paint with cement. It very much interests me to use this material to draw the wandering dunes, that have been my interest.

But, every day ideas come and go, and time is short.

An interview by **Dario Rutigliano**, curator  
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