



## Art in Heaven

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His paintings are sold for tens of thousands of dollars and some of them are currently on show at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Yet renowned Jerusalem artist Israel Hershberg, also a widely admired teacher of art, often feels he has few people to talk to in the local world of culture

His paintings of cypress trees aren't landscapes. For a good many years now, Israel Hershberg, considered a virtuoso figurative artist, has been nurturing an antipathy to landscape painting. So then what are they? The answer came to him around three years ago during a powerful visual experience – like a dream. The cypresses demanded that he paint them in isolation, not in relation to their surroundings. The trees bore his gaze upward, heavenward, like the spires of a cathedral.

"I found myself so drawn to these trees, that painting the experience simply became inevitable, inescapable," he says. "I painted the cypresses as I would paint a human portrait."

One has to see the exhibition, entitled "Tree Portraits," now at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, to experience Hershberg's cypress trees and to feel how their power seems, paradoxically, to stem from their diminutive size – about 20 or 25 centimeters tall. Hershberg is convinced that, were he to paint them any larger, the viewer would feel that they were small.

Since moving to Israel about 18 years ago in his mid-thirties, having lived in America from the age of nine, the artist has had only one show here previously - "As a Passing Shadow" (a phrase from the High Holiday liturgy) at the Israel Museum in 1997. The current exhibition, like its predecessor, was not curated in Israel but came here from New York, ready to be hung. The elegant catalog was produced by the exclusive Marlborough Gallery (New York, London, Madrid, Monte-Carlo and Santiago), Hershberg's agents for the last 15 years. By way of local contribution, the "Tree Portraits" catalog includes an interview with the artist by Prof. Mordechai Omer, the Tel Aviv Museum's director and chief curator.

For four years, Hershberg concentrated on cypresses. Most of the 32 paintings now on display have already been sold to various collectors, fetching about \$20,000 apiece. "Sometimes one painting can take more than a year," he says. "I have to satisfy myself, and I have to be able to live with the painting somehow. I'm always feeling that I have terrible failings. Every painting comes out of my struggle with this feeling of failure. That's why it takes so long. What actually happens is that I do a painting hundreds or even thousands of times. If I don't like the outcome, I scrape the canvas and start over."

Sisyphus?

Hershberg: "No, Sisyphus isn't the metaphor I'd choose. Painting is a very gratifying experience and has a lot to do with love, with sensuousness, even if there's pain involved. Relationships with people I love also cause pain. Suffering is part of relationships - so does that mean we give them up?"

Hershberg is not an easy person: He is outspoken, opinionated, grating. A veteran Israeli artist termed him "a partisan of painting." His Hebrew is good, though in a pinch, he may resort to English. He lays down not a few ground rules for the interview: no discussion of money, politics or girls. His preference would be to discuss art, and only art.

My question about the price tag for one of his cypress paintings, in case I want to buy one, evokes a mocking response: "How should I know? Ask Marlborough!" (His gallery.) "I don't deal with that. Money isn't who I am. Being at the Tel Aviv Museum isn't who I am. I'm an artist in the studio. If I could earn enough, I would live in a way that there would be no interruptions to my work. That's all I need. I have no car. I barely make it through the month. I don't talk about money; I only want to talk about painting."

Career?

"A dirty word. Too materialistic. I was incredibly poor for part of my life. There were times when my wife and I had nothing to eat and no money to heat the house. We had this loft, and for two years, we heated only a small bedroom, and walked around the rest of the place wearing coats and mittens. That was true until '69, when I started to get some recognition in the United States.

"I'm not romanticizing, but I never thought for a moment back then that I wouldn't be able to paint. I came through that period without thinking about career. In Israel, there's an expectation among art students who know that if they make the right connections and do the right things, they'll get shown in a museum. In the U.S., no artist is thinking about that because it seems so distant and unattainable."

## On the edge

Hershberg is married, for the second time, and a father of six. He lives with his family in Jerusalem, in a completely renovated three-story house in a modern Orthodox neighborhood between Nahlaot and Sha'arei Hessed. The residents are largely immigrants from the U.S. and France who see themselves as living the correct Jewish lifestyle for Israel. Hershberg, who was raised as a secular Jew, appears angered by the term "religious," and the words *hozer b'tshuva* (newly observant) make him livid. "The appropriate term is 'a spiritual person,'" he counters.

He describes his relationship with Israeli art as one of distance and strangeness. This alienation is partly attributable to his critical stance vis-a-vis the local creative output. He says the Israeli art world seems like a ghetto, out of touch.

How are you different from Israeli artists?

"I'm different in my cultural point of departure. My personal dynasty harks back to Gustave Courbet (a 19th-century artist in the realistic tradition), and my teachers were Edwin Dickinson and Lennart Anderson. That's how a tradition is handed down, from father to son, meaning from teacher to student. Even without these great teachers, culture is something organic; it exists even in the way Manhattan's Central Park was designed, or the way the adjacent building was planned. This becomes part of your inheritance over the years, it's engraved in you and becomes part of you, and you don't have to learn it at some school or other."

What happened to your relationships with people in the Israeli art world?

"They see me as strange. In my opinion, there's a difference between the artists and the art establishment. At the Israel Museum and the Tel Aviv Museum, they're less tendentious. They know that what I'm doing with my art has an existence in the world outside and that there are important artists doing this kind of art, and they're glad it's come here. But others see my painting as something strange and not as part of the culture here.

"It's hard for me to relate to the Israeli art world or the American art world. There's just art, and when I find something wonderful, I don't define it as 'Israeli' or 'Spanish.' In Israel, I haven't found people who have reached the level of what I see as the right paradigm, but there are very talented people here. I think that Moshe Kupferman is a special artist, if not all the time."

Hershberg notes that he is away from Israel three months out of the year, and when here, he is busy with family and painting – so he doesn't take an active part in the local art scene. "Certainly I didn't come to Israel on account of the art world; it was for other reasons. I like the curiosity and the aggressiveness, in a positive sense, that artists here have."

Do you work well here? Do you feel productive?

"Yes, very well. Every artist tries to find a place, whether a house or a city, where he can do his best work. In Jerusalem, I feel good and I work well. I'm calm. But there's also the question of being continually in a confrontation with matters of life and death. You live on the edge, and this provokes me to define myself – where I stand, how I react to all kinds of things.



"On the other hand, I know that during Rembrandt's time, there was a war going on that came to be called 'the 80 years' war,' and yet it is not evident in Rembrandt's paintings, or Vermeer's. An artist doesn't have to address reality and can immerse himself in a dialogue with himself and with his art. I feel that if I were living in New York now, I'd be doing something different. In Jerusalem, I feel it's a privilege to be living here, because of the amazing things that happen here. The way people cope with living in Israel, the struggle people go through to define themselves. I'm continually struggling to define myself."

You? An artist of your stature, whose paintings are sold by Marlborough for \$20,000 apiece, a fabulous price from the perspective of Israeli artists?

"What's the connection? Terrible things happen here all the time. They change you, and you try to find yourself amid all that. One day I feel this way, and another day, differently. I don't live by any ideology. I'm a radical empiricist. I live by what I see at any given time, and I respond. I always feel that I'm changing and redefining myself, which is a great privilege. You try to construct your own picture of the world. This has no connection to Zionism, although there are people who would claim I'm a Zionist. I find it hard to define myself. I love this place and the people, but it's very hard for me to be connected with an ideology. When I go away, I'm very homesick for Israel."

## **Ever the outsider**

Hershberg has been living here 18 years and still feels like a "complete outsider," on account of the suspicious reception he evokes as a painter who persists with figurative conventions and who paints from nature. "I was an outsider when I lived in the States, too. The first line in my biography says that I was born on November 7, 1948 in a displaced persons camp in Linz, Austria. Since that's the opening line, I have to say that everywhere I go, I feel uprooted. When I come to New York, for instance – a city where I spent so many years – and I go into the subway, I don't remember or feel as if I've ever been in that city. It sounds strange, but it's very real."

His parents, Miriam and Shlomo Hershberg, were born in Poland and met after World War II. They were Holocaust survivors who had been in Auschwitz. Israel, their firstborn, was born in Bindermichl, the DP camp in Linz. It had been built as a high-density neighborhood at the edge of the city, an industrial center that was decimated during the war. Living conditions in the camp were terrible due to the crowding, the lack of basic necessities, and the freezing cold.

Hershberg's father was a member of the directorate that ran the camp. Israel's godfather was Simon Wiesenthal, a good friend of his father's.

In 1949, the Hershberg family arrived in Israel and settled in Givatayim. Shlomo opened a leather goods store selling wallets and handbags on Sheinkin Street in Tel Aviv, and in 1954, another son was born.

"My parents survived the war and down through the years, never wanted to open the wounds from the past or talk about it. My

parents found it hard to live in Israel under the continual security threat. The beginning of the 1950s was a delicate period and they felt a need to look for new options."

There were troubles at home and in 1958, the family split up: Shlomo and Israel, then nine years old, went to Boston and, five years later, to Brooklyn. Shlomo did well as a handbag designer and eventually landed a senior position at Liz Claiborne, the well-known fashion house.

Were you born an artist?

"I suppose so. I was always drawing and painting, as far back as I can remember. On Sundays, my father used to take me around Manhattan. Sometimes we would stop in front of a shop window and my father would take out a little notebook and start to sketch. He was good at it, and meanwhile he would be gathering ideas for his own designs. Walking around with him, mostly I was entranced by the buildings and the architecture of Manhattan.

"One day, we came to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and went inside. I saw a girl sitting and copying a Greek sculpture on her drawing pad. I understood that she was doing what my Dad used to do in front of shop windows. I was about 13 at the time, and I remember that I looked at that sketch and it seemed wonderful. After that, I began sketching, too, and copying artwork by master artists in museums."

Shlomo expected his son to be a doctor or a lawyer, or an accountant: "A Jewish youngster didn't become an artist in those days. But then my entire life has been one long, quiet revolution: back then, and now, too. Whatever the conventional thing happens to be, I turn my back on it. Establishment things repel me. I was quite young when I knew I was going to be an artist; there was no way to prevent it."



"Painting has always involved absolute devotion. It's very complicated and a little crazy. On the one hand, I have a strong connection to the history of painting, but I'm also very cowed by it. Who am I, anyway? What kind of statement can I make, after artists like Velasquez or Vermeer? On the other hand, I have this crazy idea that somehow I can do it. But for someone like me, always in competition with the past, almost fixated, and at the same time, a captive to my love for painting and the history of art – it's not easy. This is how I am, I was born this way, with this tremendous passion for painting. For me, it's really a love story, not some assignment or some objective I undertake ... I just paint what I see, and I paint the 'observed' world."

### **The 'guru' and his 'cult'**

When Hershberg decided to study art seriously, his education was, in his words, already formed. He started studying so that, as a painter, he would be able to make a living from teaching at university. He studied at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and in 1973 completed a master's at the State University of New York. Thereafter, until 1984, he lectured at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, and later taught painting at the New York Academy of Art.

About five years ago, he established the Jerusalem Studio School, in a large space in the Talpiot neighborhood. Funding came from donors and foundations in Israel and abroad – but Hershberg, as noted, is not the one to ask about money. For that he has assistants. He teaches a master class with 13 students; he says it is about excellence, and is very selective. A quarter of the students come from abroad.

"The students accepted are completely devoted to painting and don't do anything else for five days a week, from morning till night. In my view, an artist should earn a living after he finishes studying."

According to Hershberg's system, says Aram Gershuni, who is 34 and the son of painter Moshe Gershuni, everything is "total." The younger Gershuni, who says he paints what he sees in a realistic mode, says that Hershberg's studio approach is the obverse of what is customary at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, for instance (where he himself teaches). There, the student is invited to take various courses, to taste a bit of this and a bit of that, and very gradually to formulate a worldview.

"With Hershberg, the worldview is clear: You paint what you see," says Gershuni. "The students are exposed to the deep and ongoing tradition of painting. It's a whole world of values and beliefs that are integrated with each other. Belief is the key word – not just in painting, but in the way that Hershberg means it. A lot of people say he's a guru and it's a cult, but Hershberg taught me a lesson on how to be a teacher and how to be an artist. His parameters are very clear in terms of what is successful and what isn't, and there's no hiding behind some theory."

"Plus Hershberg's personality stands out. He has a big mouth and it drives people up a wall. On the one hand, he's extremist and egocentric and closed, but if you're willing to go with him and to accept what he has to give, it's endless. This is most unusual for a teacher. Some people find this threatening, but others, like me, flourish in that environment."

Hershberg likes to talk about cultural mobility. Students at his school travel, as part of the curriculum, to the United States to concentrate for a time on copying the works of the great masters displayed in museums in Washington and Baltimore. They also go to Italy, to the great cathedrals – to see Giotto's frescoes of St. Francis, for instance.

"To be inside a painting" in that way, says Hershberg, "is an experience that changes people. It's like taking this tremendous culture and injecting it straight into the vein. It's hard to absorb that culture from here, so one has to build something to get the wheels turning, so that Israelis will start to think in a more visual way," he says.

"Words are what rule in Israel, which is why art here is so cerebral. Just one image a day is all we need to improve our PR abroad. The Palestinians are much better than we are at that."

### **Life in an aquarium**

Hershberg's wife, Yael, was born Jane Scalia in New York, to Italian-Jewish parents. Scalia was a pupil of Hershberg's at the art school in Baltimore. They were married 22 years ago and have five children ranging in age from 13 to 21. (Hershberg has another son from his first marriage.) Yael worked until recently as a children's book illustrator and lately has gone back to painting.

The journey back to Judaism is one they made together. "It was something that developed in our lives," explains Hershberg. "My wife was looking for an inner life and this kindled her interest. The quest for the spiritual began in the 1970s; it was part of the Judeo-Christian culture that shaped Western culture. I know that here in Israel, people look at this differently. Here the compass is always pointing eastward, and for me, the compass of Judaism is pointing westward. I don't belong to any particular stream, not in my spiritual orientation, not in my art, and not politically. Religion is a terrible word. I am connected with a tradition and I study Torah and keep the commandments."

So why are you sitting here now without a skullcap?

"To confuse you. I'm indoors and it's comfortable this way. My quiet revolution includes this, too. I keep commandments in my own way. I don't like to be in synagogue. Sometimes I do go on the Sabbath. I'm against the term 'religious' because I know what it means in Israel. I'm disgusted by the fact that in Israel, religion is a political matter. Our children study at yeshivas. The youngest attends an experimental religious school. Four of my sons take Ritalin. It's hard for them to sit still in class, and in certain ways, they're very much like me as a child. I didn't get Ritalin and I had to learn to cope. [Thomas] Edison also had trouble writing a coherent English sentence."

Did you vote in the last elections?

"I care deeply about what happens. When I lived in the U.S. and went through the Vietnam War years there, I didn't vote. I've voted once in Israel since we came here, I won't say when and I won't say for whom. I'm not right-wing in my worldview. Socialism makes me puke. When it comes to security for Israelis, I believe in being tough. On social issues, I'm very liberal."

Are you an Israeli?

"I'm an Israeli artist. I'm a Jewish Israeli, although lately I find it difficult to see the difference. They've created Israeli society here in a situation that leaves nowhere to go, as if you're stuck in an aquarium. I believe in the Jewish renaissance, but I have no illusions, and I don't think that I can influence an entire society and certainly not in my field of work.

"When I got here, they didn't know what to do with someone like me. They didn't know what realistic painting was. They only knew one thing – they believed in modernism – and for me, that died during the 1960s. Here it's alive and well. Here, everything is the establishment and in Israeli art when I first arrived, there was a kind of thought police, so I couldn't teach or lecture here."

What are you doing these days?

"I'm working on still-lives. I brought over some very beautiful boxes of pressed paper from the U.S. and I sit in the studio and look at them. When I think about what other people have to do in life, waiting for retirement and a pension, I'm happy. The idea of a pension is revolting. I get up every morning and roll right into my studio, which is full of light from the north, because there's a big floor-to-ceiling window on that side. That light is my inspiration. I pray and begin working until the sun goes down. After that, it's the kids and the wife." n