**A Conversation Between Mayaan Amir and Efrat Galnoor**

**Maayan**: Your works are an ongoing study of the ways in which cultural clichés shape space, social and economic circumstances turn into landscape, and collective fantasies produce surfaces. It seems as if resonating deeply in this line of inquiry are questions about the relations between images and material objects and social existence and human intervention. Interestingly, in order to stimulate thinking about these relationships you avoid painting human figures. Could you expand on that decision?

**Efrat**: For me this is really a fundamental question that cuts across the visual as well as the theoretical space. First let me backtrack and say that once in a while people do "pop up" in my paintings, so it is not a hard and fast rule. But even when people do appear, it seems to me that their presence is less about presenting them as subjects: it is mostly about the question of space and the way in which space affects the general behavior of these subjects. For example, in the work *Tiyul Shnati* (*Annual School Trip*), what one notices is how the group of youths sits on the pile of stones, or in the work *Havura* (*Gang*) how they stand on the dome of a building and what cultural or social meaning is evoked by this spatial configuration. In other words, the question of how objects are arranged in a scenic and pictorial space and how images relate to each other is more important than the psycho-logistics of a scene or a story.

But let's get back to the basic state of things: usually there is no representation of people in my paintings. I think one reason relates to my initial approach to looking at a place. The impression one may get from the words you used to describe my exploration is that I am an anthropologist or a sociologist or a researcher of culture, but in fact, the starting point of my "research" is subjective. My observation is

personal: I wander around in the space I am exploring, I take in the impressions, and I am the one who creates a new space in the middle space which lies between reality and the painting. I am interested in that tension, the tension evoked in the midst of dealing with collective circumstances and in public spaces, but my interest is personal. So, maybe for that reason, the other people who use that space and taking their being there into consideration is an imposition as far as I am concerned. I "clear" the field (and I am aware that there is an element of violence inherent in this act) so that I can work. Maybe this explains why the medium most suited to me is painting and not photography.

For me, the viewer's immediate experience of the work is another reason that may account for the lack of people in them. The encounter of the spectator, of his or her body, with the pictorial space in front of them is important to me. For the same reason, a lot of attention is paid to the connection between the works and the architectural space of the exhibition hall.

If I am not mistaken, Alberti in his instructions to artists in *Della Pittura* (1436) about how to create perspective in a painting, suggested adding in the foreground of the work a figure who, with the gesture of his hand, would direct the viewer's gaze into the pictorial space. I, however, do away with any intermediary. It is just the viewer opposite the pictorial space. It is the viewer on his own in front of spots of color. Other than the painting and the body of the viewer there is no scale of proportion, or mediators; there is only the painting and the body of the viewer.

And another reason for the absence of people in my work relates to the method of painting through observation that I learned from studying with Israel Hershberg (based on American artists such as Hawthorne, Dickinson, Eakins and others) that

disassembles the visual world into splashes of color. The moment one looks at a world that is all spots of color, it doesn't matter what one is looking at, since every phenomenon is broken down into a system of relationships of colors and shapes that can be transformed into the two dimensional. The beauty that is inherent in this kind of looking lies in the eradication of the dichotomy between realism and abstraction, since the more one looks in an abstract manner at the world, the more one is able to paint it in a realistic manner.

This method characterizes my painting as well. For me a spot of color is an image as well as a material, and therefore, as you noted in your question, my pursuit of relationships between images, objects, and materials and the questions they raise applies both to the concrete space of reality and to painting.

How does this artistic practice connect to the absence of people? For me, this seemingly objective analysis of observing the human body as if it were a collection of spots of color is hard. Still wonderful paintings of people have been produced using this method; in fact, much contemporary painting makes use of it. But this does not suit me. When I turn a disassembling gaze onto landscape, rather than on people, I feel it is, in a way, less loaded.

**Maayan**: Interestingly, it seems that this present exhibition explores more deeply the question of the connection between painting and mediation. Now especially, the question is sharpened through the portrayal of the museum, and specifically the Ramat Gan Museum, as a kind of agent. Your starting point for the works in the exhibition was a walk along the streets of Ramat Gan on the way to the museum. This turns into a photomontage that you assemble from photographs of the route, which you finally translate into paintings. In a certain sense, it is possible to see in the

sequence of these actions a kind of mapping process that is not motivated by any aim to familiarize or orient yourself with your surroundings, but rather attends to the movement between different mediums. Moreover, it seems to be asking what are the connections and the conflicts of interest between painting and the Ramat Gan Museum, which in our conversation you stressed was “the lowest building in the neighborhood and located on a kind of traffic island.”

**Efrat**: l like the parallel you drew between my concrete movement—the act of walking to the museum from 1 Abba Hillel Street to 146 Abba Hillel Street on a pre-specified date and time—and the movement between media—from photography to painting and finally to the exhibition at the museum. This walk, which you called the starting point, is indeed a sequence of acts whose goal was not mapping. And if such an act was performed at all, its intent was to map the gap between the things.

This is an opportunity to ask questions about the mediation between mediums via the question of space. After all, a map is a form of mediation between reality and the two-dimensional, but it is a transformation that is supposed to create a sense of security, orientation, direction, absolute points in the topography; whereas I am looking for the turned away gaze and remaining in the gap so that one can actively feel the transition (whether it is the transition between media, the physical transition between houses, paint canvases, or spots of color). I return to the act of painting, because both the dissecting and the gap carry great significance for me, both are fundamental tools. Among other things, these are what maintain the presence of the wandering and the photography in the painting. They also enable internal pictorial movement, a kind of leap of faith between various pictorial acts.

This is one of the reasons I chose the museum. I was fascinated by the fact that it too is found in an in-between space, planted on a traffic island, in the space between streets, a kind of "filler".

**Maayan**: Another fascinating matter about the museum came up in our conversation. You said that the shape of the museum reminded you of a bullet and in your conversation with Meir Ahronson, the museum's chief curator, you brought up the fact that on the roof of the building there is a Palmach-era gun post. On the one hand, this topography resonates the influence of weapons technology on the architecture of the urban space—an environment that came to be designed in accordance with the needs of warfare, from a city surrounded by walls to a city without gates—and in the case of the Ramat Gan Museum, its architecture makes it simultaneously an object and an essential combat zone. It is possible that in this case what emerges from the architecture is its active role as a product of the will to produce a means of defense (perhaps in the local reality it has always been difficult to separate defense from offense). In your opinion does the painting in the exhibition evoke thoughts about the connection between space and violence?

**Efrat**: Quite possibly. Besides that, in the dissection of the canvas there is an element of violence; it seems that the works are often experienced as documenting violent acts in real space. This is how some series were perceived. They were painted in red and pink with spots of color spilled on the canvas in which playgrounds, intersections, constructions sites could be made out[1] . . . these are works that begin from the local landscape, and it seems obvious to me that our landscape is violent and the memory

[1] The painter Alex Olson in an Interview
http://blogs.walkerart.org/visualarts/2012/10/05/remarks-on-surface-an-interview-with-alex-olson/

of the landscape is mostly militaristic, so that I have no doubt that this affects the experience of viewing.

But regarding the pictorial space, it is more precise to say that I think about the values of subversion and instability. I remember the first time I laid the painting on the floor in order to spill paint—a painterly action that destroys the image and creates it at the same time.

**Maayan**: The subject of the museum's location and structure bring to mind other passing thoughts such as: what kind of exchange do the works of art have with the exhibition site? What turns one space into a landscape and another into a museum? Do these typological definitions attribute meaning in a significant way to the place they refer to, and to what extent do they freeze social constructs and not match the dynamism, the fact that place constantly changes?

**Efrat**: And also passing thoughts like where the painting positions itself—the eternal, the commemorative, the stagnant, the glorifying—when it is aware of its part in this chain of fixation, in its weak attempt to deal with definitions and expose them, hoping to remain flexible and not only affirming and fixating.

When a space that has been decided to be called landscape is opened up to questions like: who decided that this is worthy of being called landscape; where does the landscape end; who looks at the landscape, etc., strong, dynamic options with potential that cannot be ignored become valid. Similar questions hold as well for space that was decided to be called museum, in other words, space that functions as a temple for cultural preservation (a fixed shape) as opposed to its dynamic potential.

Is it at all possible to create a dynamic painting? I try to create practices that allow for randomness so that I can continue to wander on the canvas as much as possible. For example, from a small snap-shot I will immediately draw in a large scale format, almost without projecting the image. This practice makes for mistakes and distortions, and it allows doubting during the traditional compositional process. Thus, for example, I begin from the middle of the panorama, and as I progress I cut more and more canvas until I get to the edge—the boundary of the museum's wall. These of course are abortive attempts. In the end the painting is fixed in place.

**Maayan**: In that sense, it is interesting to consider the process that seems to erupt from your work: the ability of the painting to create a reconstructed presence of all the fantasies that are stirred up a specific place (*museum, Kfar Yona, Kibbutz, Housing Project*), and at the same time your ability to isolate the points of friction of these encounters of space and environment, whether they are the product of the encounter of image and materiality, inside and outside, or of ideas and emotions and political, social, or economic circumstances. It seems that precisely the kind of spaces that are created from these gaps end up being, in a certain sense, the building blocks of the architecture through which your painting creates a place that arouses thoughts about painting, about formal organization, about colorfulness, about the power of attraction . . .

And in general, at times it seems that thinking about the structure of the museum in the urban setting, in other words about its architecture and location, becomes the grid of the exhibition, its internal grammar. Instead of the triptych, closed in on itself, a painting in which its materiality helps it to maintain a certain openness, the museum at a certain point becomes the real scenic lookout. As can be seen in the two series

*360 Degrees* and *Observation Tables*, that seem to want to enable a view of the gap between the semantic meanings connected to the museum and the concrete site that it embodies, the choice of the view of Ramat Gan is nearly the opposite of the view visible from museums in Europe.

Referring back to remarks you made during our conversation, it appears that in the case of this exhibition your particular kind of process seems to challenge the very walls of the museum, both in a very real and a symbolic, cultural way, and perhaps it evokes the sense that your works encompass a number of painting traditions that are engaged in a scathing conceptual battle about the role of painting in the museum.

**Efrat**: Not long ago I came across the claim[2] that oil paint on the one hand has the property of material abilities, from graphic to physical qualities, and on the other hand, that the application of color has such a broad history, that in fact it is impossible to put a stroke onto a canvas that does not have a historical referent. The free quoting of Olson is relevant in my opinion since the question of painting traditions, and among them also the ones from which I come—Hamidrasha, Israel Hershberg, and of course the Israeli landscape tradition—are, as far as I am concerned, all found at the heart of the painterly act. It is important for me to note that in my view, the "conceptual battle" that you referred to, which I call "the question of painting traditions," does not only deal with historical understanding and knowledge. It is first of all a physical question—how does one move the body, and with it the paint, on the area of the canvas, and after that comes the painterly meaning. In this context there is of course also significance to the placing of paintings in the museum, the latter being an institution and an archive that creates that history.

**Maayan**: I want to develop a bit the idea that the works in the exhibition relate to the space that surrounds the museum, and to think with you about the experience of looking which you produce. It seems that finding oneself in the exhibition space opposite images of the museum building, as it looks from the outside, refers the viewer to an earlier moment in that space, back to when he or she was walking to the museum, which could be considered a secondary or marginal act, simply the means to an end, and at the same time, this same place that the viewer finds him or herself in, directs them to the next moment—the exit from the museum. In other words, the sense is that through the treatment of specific architectonic representations a question about time is also raised. The works confront the viewer with recent memory through a kind of feeling of rewinding, and simultaneously, upon exiting, lead him or her to look at the same space anew, this time from even more recent memory—the memory of the painting.

I am curious to hear about the configuration of space-time, about your attitude to time in your painting, to understand how much the ability to remember and at the same time to forget the surroundings is an integral part of your work.

**Efrat**: We already talked about the stagnation of painting where the question of time is connected mainly to history, and I like your reference to the “viewer’s time” that is not a historical time, but as you described, is connected to the immediate lived space—the entrance to and exit from the exhibition, that naturally creates a continuum in which the visit to the museum is not a beyond-time or time-at-a-stand-still experience. It’s a chance to experience looking at an exhibition that has a certain familiarity. There is a kind of continuum that evolves from the fact that the museum is wrapped up in the everyday, and through this, the viewer also possibly has more tools

with which to react to what he sees. Being familiar with the scenery enables him to create his own narrative. In my other site specific exhibitions, viewers were able to identify what was painted where, and could understand the deliberate distortions in a complex way, which was different than the way I, the proclaimed guest artist, experienced them. Through this familiarity, the painting can perhaps also create a small disruption in the feeling of distractedness that usually characterizes our routine walk along a street. And here, perhaps this brings our conversation back to the options that open up for the viewer to actively face the canvas, the landscape, the experience of visiting the museum.

As to your question about the tension between amnesia and memory, I can say that within my ongoing activity there has to be a kind of forgetting of the previous experience. The act of photographing at the site is fast and intense; there is almost no checking of the frame, but rather a distracted act that tries not to select targets in the space. Afterward, during the painting process, the photographs are cut up and glued to each other, and at some stage are abandoned and forgotten in order to allow for a flat (two-dimensional) painting, and when the time comes for the paintings to leave the studio, the curator comes and creates viewing time in the exhibition space, which also requires forgetting the acts that took place in the studio. So memory and amnesia are present all the time.

**Maayan**: The series *A4*, that includes Xerox drawings and depicts children gathered around paintings in the museum alongside a guide, is somewhat unusual within the corpus of your work. You chose to create these drawings in a different, more technical, and more structural language. You also deviated from the uniformity of the space as an organizing principle of the starting point of the painting and chose to

incorporate drawings of guided tours that remind one of similar situations in museums in Israel and in museums around the word. The practice of guided tours in museums raises questions about agency, education and sometimes sparks a broader discussion about cultural colonialism and epistemological violence. This practice emanates from this series mainly as something that turns the painting into a monochromatic site: children gather around it in a clear hierarchy, the guide points toward it, but the painting appears as a blank canvas. And perhaps here too the same act of pointing to the guided tour hints not only at the painting but simultaneously to the moment before and the moment after, this time not necessarily from the encounter with the physical space but the cognitive encounter, and the painting appears structurally unsound.

Regarding painting, what kind of access does art education provide in your opinion?

**Efrat**: Like you, I also have thought about the act of pointing, about an authority figure whose role is to give the painting meaning, to be its mediator, guiding the eye and the gaze. In the other works it is my eye and my gaze. In the drawings the gaze is someone else's. It's a little bit like painting yourself painting a picture. There is an understanding that on the one hand someone will come between the painting and the viewer, will direct the gaze, explain, write a work sheet, give an assignment, and on the other hand there is the realization that this bureaucracy is unavoidable, and that of course it bears significance.

Alongside my thoughts that have to do with pointing, I thought about these drawing as they appear in the exhibition space: small size A4 pieces of blue paper, abstract works in which the drawing is almost absorbed into them, half disappearing, and as a result, from far away there is nothing to point at, the page appears imageless, a blank slate like the painting the children are looking at in the painting. But this emptiness is

full of intense potential. In order to see what is drawn there, one must get up close to it, and this almost forced closeness turns the didactic, educational moment of looking into an intimate experience.