

Alejandra Okret in conversation with Nurit David, February 2019

N.D. "Frutilla, Fragole, Strawberries" is the title of a large and beautiful book you published in 2011 following many years of preparation. In addition to your paintings, it includes photographs from your family album and texts from your father's memoirs. Your parents emigrated from Europe to Uruguay, where you were born. Finding a passage in the memoirs that recounts feasting on strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, cherries and other berries until the mouth was stained blue, while expressing the essence of Europe as a realm for yearning and longing, it illuminated for you your enthrallment with strawberries for so many years. Actually, you are totally a "strawberry" yourself, albeit a large one...and I can imagine that all this strawberry craze is strongly anchored in the origins of your family. A nectar that binds and accompanies you and in which you are together wherever you are: from the forests of Europe to Uruguay where the family used to eat strawberries as a *ceremonial act*; to Israel, where you discovered even larger, sweeter strawberries; to Italy, where you lived for six years and where, one day, on your way to a class at the Academy, the beauty and color of the strawberries drew you away from your academic career. In fact, strawberries take you as far away as Japan.

A.O. Yes, *sakura*, the cherry blossoms, are like strawberries with cream.

N.D. The way I see you, it's as if your base is somewhere else and those paper strips, immersed in pink, tie you to that place. You surround yourself with these ribbons, that connect you to that mythical strawberry zone, the source of which is in the family. What is Uruguay for you? To begin with, you have an accent that you just can't get away from.

A.O. I never tried to. When I land in Montevideo and smell the scent of the city, I know I'm home. On the other hand, Israel is a home as well. When I immigrated to Israel, my father asked me how I would cope with this double identity. My answer was that here, in Israel, everybody comes from somewhere else.

N.D. But perhaps in your work, with its red juice, you create something essential, the opposite of a melting pot? Something that, at the same time floods, melts, removes borders. What was it like in your parents' home?

A.O. I grew up in an artistic home, in fact, I got my love of art from my parents. My father was an actor and my mother a scholar of literature and languages. There were many art books and as a little girl, I would spend

hours looking at them and even scribbling inside. Needless is to say, this upset my mother. I also doodled with lipstick on expensive furniture and upholstery. When I was 11, I studied with the artist Miguel Ángel Pareja (once head of the Fine Art Academy of Uruguay), who included me in an exhibition together with his older students. That same year, my parents took me to Europe, to Rome, Madrid, London, Zurich, Munich, Berlin, Amsterdam, Vienna and Paris. When I was young, I was a museum-loving child.

N.D.: The transition from childhood doodles and from the gifted young girl to here, to the studio, was it a smooth one?

A.O.: Not at all. As a young girl, while scribbling in a book of Van Gogh, I imagined that I was painting like him. All those years, until I reached the age of 11, I experienced the “High” of art. But then, I started to feel that I would never be good enough. For me, art was always the highest thing, and, at that time, I began to think that I am just an ordinary person, not brilliant enough to be an artist myself.

N.D.: All this when you were just 11?

A.O.: Then I fell in love with Art History, which later led me to my extensive studies at the university. Towards the end of my bachelor’s degree and the beginning of my master’s degree, I returned to painting. And it’s only when we lived in Italy during the 1990’s that I decided to leave the academic research and devote myself to art.

N.D.: If we take into account Israeli culture, it’s difficult not to think of Yona Wallach’s poem, “Strawberries” with the line: “When you come to sleep with me/ wear a black dress/ printed with strawberries”. However, I don’t think that you share the poem’s extreme, sexual tone.

A.O.: I love the transparent threads. (From the poem: “...strings will lift you up/ invisible or visible” N.D). I have this duality within me. On the one hand I am heavy, and on the other, I feel very light. Despite the excess weight, inside I feel like a light-footed little girl, running and jumping. When I paint, I’m that little girl again, my soul unconstrained, elevated, doodling away, painting freely.

N.D.: And if I’m already holding her books, what about “...a little blood/ just a little blood to top off the honey...”, is there any blood in that red?

A.O.: I think that blood is life, but I have a problem with violence; in films, for example.

I look for the sensuality in a porcelain cup; in the mixing of colors; in the way the paper transforms to the touch of the brush.

N.D.: You're an aesthete?!

A.O.: Exactly. That's what I'm looking for, an intense sensory experience.

N.D.: You believe in your sensations and feelings. Aren't you afraid of not being credible, authentic? ... don't you fear emptiness?

A.O.: No! Certainly not! I am so full I could burst!

N.D.: What about Moshe Gershuni. Do you think that it was him who made it possible for you to make these red color stains?

A.O.: Yes, no doubt. Not specifically the red stains but yes, the freedom of brush strokes.

N.D.: With Gershuni, along with the freedom of brush strokes, as you said, the composition is also very important. With you, it's different, the paintings are flooded, more like the American "*All-Over*".

A.O.: At 15, I visited the United States and was shocked by all that Lyrical Abstract Painting. I didn't know how to process it but, in retrospect, this had a huge influence on me. I believe that my art wouldn't be what it is if I hadn't been exposed to so much Lyrical Abstract Painting then in San Francisco.

N.D.: Expansion, flooding, dissolving, the lack of boundaries are all important for you.,

A.O.: To dissolve, that's a wonderful word. That's what I do all the time – I'm making an exact sketch and then dissolve it. On this Artist's Wall as well, here at the Tel Aviv Artists House, I wish to melt the wall, to shatter it. I work on tracing paper that becomes three dimensional like a bas-relief as the fluid paint touches it. I love to mix liquids with liquids, to let the paint drip into wet paper and thus alter its existing structure. I love clouds, abstract shapes that flow and change. I love the potential for transformation as expressed in Matsuo Basho's (1644 – 1694) - Haiku poem:

you make the fire

and I'll show you something wonderful:
a big ball of snow!

Matsuo Basho (translated from Japanese by Robert Hurst, Poem Hunter)

It's beautiful, don't you think? The moment you get close, it's not there anymore. That's my quest, chasing the elusive. That's also what's in a strawberry – in a short time it transforms. It has a short life span and it's beautiful in all its stages. The beauty of petals, a beauty that soon will be gone.

N.D.: In Japanese culture there's the concept of *Mono no Aware*, the pathos in and the compassion for things that are transient.

A.O.: I can also see the beauty of an empty wall . Of the white. When I'm working, I take into account the blank walls surrounding it. I could make do with a single ribbon on the wall. A strawberry too was white first, before it turned red.

I love daydreaming. I'm interested in the potential for evolvment. For example, the possibility to complete in my head the arms of Venus de Milo in endless variations. I see infinite possibilities in blurring, in clouds, in what is uncertain.

I thought of calling the work here “Accelerated Thoughts,” a thought follows another thought, a line follows another line. Yanai Segal who was the curator of my last June solo exhibition said that my works seem to be a moment before a thought becomes a word. Therefore, it's hard to put into words – it's smell, sensation, transparency.

I tear up the paper by hand, I like the sound as it rips, as it's taken apart. I have a strong sense of synesthesia. When I see colors, I hear sounds.

When we were in Japan, the girls were dressed in a *yukata* (a cotton summer kimono). The gestures of the saleswoman wrapping the obi (sash) made of pink silk, stayed in my eye's retina. I could see the silk moving. I didn't really understand what she was doing, but just watching the elegance of her movements made me want to catch the smell of the silk. Something sensual and fluid. I worked in layers until I achieved some kind of a cloud. (Open Pink Silk Kimono, oil on linen, 2016)

N.D.: The Beatles sing, “Strawberry fields/ nothing is real”. What is actually your attitude towards the REAL? It's a fact that you live an organized life with a family, you like your neighbors here in Modi'in. Is art the opposite of reality or does it complement it.

A.O.: Art is a holy place.

N.D.: A holy place has, for the most part, a defining line. Up to this point is the secular, and what is beyond is considered sacred. With you, there is no real distinction, the living room walls are painted with the same pink using fresco techniques.

A.O.: As my husband says: we have a studio with a home, not a home with a studio. I'm constantly trespassing and spilling over, onto reality. I love it when the lines between reality and imagination are blurred.

N.D.: Magical Realism, we've returned to South America. Does this mean that you trust that people, out there, will accept what you do? Here, in the studio, you are immersed in deep concentration, aren't you afraid to be suddenly awakened by someone from the outside world?

A.O.: I use an alarm clock, as time is fluid. I might have been here for five hours or was it only five minutes?!