

About Matan Ben Tolila's exhibition *The Young Mariner* / Nurit David

The archer aims his arrow into the empty cerulean sky over the Land of Israel, hunting for a painting. The empty cerulean sky craves expansion, pressing the painting down, leaving it nothing but a narrow strip at the bottom. Could the hunter – a well built, adept man with precise aim, who skillfully draws his bow – also be a painter? Will the scorched and arid cerulean sky acquiesce and agree to yield its harvest?

The antipode of the chiseled Aryan hunter and his weapon is Honi HaM'agel, a Jewish miracle worker who lived before the age of the Tannaim. Nevertheless, their purpose and resolve appear to be similar, as the latter draws a circle around himself, and vows not to step outside it until the rain of painting starts to shower. Here the claim for painting is rooted in ancestral heritage as well, since the painting quotes, you could say verbatim, a painting by Matan Ben Tolila's grandmother, who was also a painter.

An archer, a soldier, an acrobat, a mariner – these are some of the incarnations of "The Man" in the paintings. Matan recounts that he had to drop out from an elite unit at an early stage of his military service due to health problems; at first a source of anguish, this later brought about a transformation in his self-perception, for which he is now grateful, and which put him on the path to art. Matan attended my painting class at Bezalel for three years, and I can attest that I have never met a student who applied military discipline (in the best sense of the term) to art in the same way. I also used to say that I am a soldier in art. It seems that at least in that respect we are brothers in arms.

Little surprise, then, that one of Matan's models is a painter like Lucian Freud (on this point I find it hard to go along with him), and the exhibition took its title from one of the paintings, in which a large portion of the surface is occupied by a painting of a photograph of Freud as a child, playing the lead role in a school play based on Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Furthermore, while he was working on the series, Matan read and loved the book *Man with a Blue Scarf*, written by one of Freud's models about their sittings. In the book, Martin Gayford describes the painter in action, leaning forward, "shading his eyes like a sailor in search of land." His demeanor while painting is also compared to that of "an explorer or hunter in some dark forest," his brushes "protruding like arrows in a quiver." I believe that Freud could not have come to terms with his profession had he not attached to it ultra-masculine attributes. Painting is described as a long struggle – Freud worked several months on each painting – of risk taking. The presence of a model, the conversations while working on the process of conquering the model, about colleagues from all periods (when Freud is presented shoulder to shoulder with the Old Masters), about Freud's navy and underworld buddies, about horses and about wine and food (naturally, he prefers game meat, which he finds to have wild taste) – all these give the sense that there, in the dark studio soaked with the smell of turpentine, with the piles of tubes and brushes, and the famous heaps of rags, with the work stations awaiting their models, that is where the real thing takes place, that is where weighty decisions are taken; not, god forbid, on their purely intellectual level – what is at stake there is the flesh of life itself, with its process of aging

and withering, with the force of gravity weighing it down. There a living thing is created from paint, by way of a painstaking patchwork, as the metaphor of Frankenstein turns into a metonymy, the paint being the direct and immediate reincarnation of the flesh.

Freud's method is echoed in Matan's multicolored patchwork which he shifts from Body to Landscape, and which reoccurs in his works in different portions. Only here, there are no layers, the execution of the painting is short, there is no model and therefore no struggle in the fraught gap between reality and painting, as though there was some pure and correct way of representation, and as though the act of painting is a fatal pursuit of a deceptive elf whose trickery must be exposed. Most of the works in the exhibition share a similar composition and recurring components, to which I will give monikers. So far I have mentioned "The Man" and the high and empty blue sky which in the opening of this article I referred to as "the sky over the Land of Israel," and so these sections of landscape will be named "Freud wallpaper." "Freud wallpaper" is of course the opposite of style and looks as though it was cut from a fabric sheet (camouflage patterned?) as needed.

Freud, the painter, stands as a distant and unattainable pole, a painter who lives and works in a place where the sky is not empty, a place of a time-honored tradition of painting, for which temples were set up in marvelous museums. On the one hand Matan's paintings painfully mourn the gap and the difficulty to reach that place where the real world is in operation inside painting, not just a world of toys, and stickers, and quotes, a place where art is not in the margins and is not a game, but a real battle that reconciles the act of painting with masculinity. On the other hand there is an air of soberness about them, which gives up in advance on the option of truth and makes do with dare.

An early reincarnation of "The Man" is taken from a drawing of acrobats practicing on a simple contraption made of poles and a wire, by the 17th century Spanish painter Jusepe de Ribera. The contraption, which already in the original drawing looks a bit like a toy and not particularly dangerous, will later serve in Matan's paintings as a support for screens placed in the landscape, creating a composition of a painting within a painting. From actual wooden poles in the painting *The Acrobats*, in the other paintings it turns into an arrangement of thin lines, which I will call "quotation marks," because of the unnatural way they are presented in the middle of the landscape as a sign, and also because in all of the paintings that share this structure, their appearance indicates a quote.

In the painting *Jigsaw Puzzle*, the quotation marks become somewhat menacing and look like an obstructing border fence. They protrude behind what at first glance looks like a black charred tank, but turns out to be an enlarged jigsaw puzzle for toddlers, from which the shapes have been cut out. Toys and war are juxtaposed again in the painting *On the Run*. Matan is a father of three, and it stands to reason that fatherhood and painting fight for his time, one is always at the expense of the other. The children "cut holes" in the studio's precious time, where the painter faces the grand and fascinating puzzles in which he would like to immerse himself.

In the painting *The Young Mariner*, "the sky over the Land of Israel" has turned dark, it seems to be twilight time. In the low landscape comprised of "Freud wallpaper," an orange

strip of murky river and khaki soil – stand the "quotation marks" that support the painting within the painting that depicts a theater stage, thus generating double and quadruple quotation marks. The play *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, similarly contains several stories within stories: first there is the frame tale of the wedding, which serves as the backdrop against which the ancient mariner appears and stops one of the three guests who come to the service and tells him his story, as well as the backdrop to the play's ending; there is the actual story in which the ancient mariner recounts the tales of the young mariner he once was and on stage there are times in which we see both ages together; in the latter are embedded several scenes that bring to mind a very detailed painting, figments of the parched sailors' deceptive imagination.

It is interesting to note that Matan chose to represent Freud "The Man" in the form of a slender and delicate boy, in the humble gesture of bowing. In the play, the young sailor is doomed to the fate of "death in life" after he shot the albatross, a bird considered by sailors to be their companion and guide. As a punishment, the ship's sailors tie the carcass of the albatross around his neck, coining the idiom that denotes a heavy burden of guilt that serves as an obstacle in one's life. And here, like the young mariner who returns to his home at the end of the play, after countless upheavals, perhaps we too return home to the thorny essays of young men in these parts.

In the title of his poem, Coleridge chose to use "rime," a rare spelling of the word "rhyme," presumably due to its other meaning – "frost," which refers to the fact that most of the play takes place in the frozen landscape of the Arctic, but also concerns the mariner himself who is described as frozen (his beard is depicted as covered with frost, for instance). For a person who killed a magnificent creature such as the albatross undoubtedly has an ice-covered heart.

Two small paintings, which are among the best in the exhibition, are titled *One Centimeter from the Heart*, and allude to Matan's brother's severe injury during his military service, which left him paraplegic. Here, with the return home, when the soldier and the painter reunite on a theme that is close to heart, painting is no longer put at a distance, it resurfaces, and is placed right under the viewer's nose.