

FLUIDITY MECHANICS

מכניקת הזורמות

Michal Orgil
מיכל אורגיל

Michal Bachi
מיכל בקי

Inbar Horkany
ענבר הורקני

Rakefet Viner Omer
רקפת וינר עומר

Nouli Omer
נולי עומר

Efrat Rubinstein
אפרת רובינשטיין

GUTMAN

מוזיאון
גוטמן

MUSEUM

GUTMANMUSEUM.CO.IL



With paintings that are brazen, juvenile, sensual and crude, the women artists represented in the exhibition — Rakefet Viner Omer, Efrat Rubinstein, Michal Bachi, Michal Orgil, Inbar Horkany, and Nouli Omer — show works that draw on the period of childhood, youth and coming of age. In showing their works at the **Nahum Gutman Museum of Art**, however, it is interesting to note that a mechanism of social interpellation barely had any impact on them. In how they look at childhood, not much is left of the ethos of docile, adorable children as was delivered by Gutman to his readers. The works do reveal, however, the signs of an attitude in Israeli society which places great importance on childhood in general.

The artists in the exhibition put authority, order and hegemony to ridicule. They are rude and cheeky; mocking etiquette and respectability, they casually skip over the dictum to “behave themselves” and instead follow in the footsteps of Max and Moritz, Huckelberry Finn and Pippi Langstrumpfen. They sing in the rain, jump into puddles, dance around poles in racy attire, and generally don’t give a damn. In his influential **Ways of Seeing**, John Berger famously wrote that “men act and women appear.” While many of Berger’s insights are still valid, it is good to witness, nowadays, a feminine art that exists outside the entanglement of masculine-feminine gazes, informed by the work of feminist thinkers who, considered radical in their time, have since been absorbed across many fields.

The paintings of **Rakefet Viner Omer** are an example of how a feminine language is absorbed and applied onto the canvas in a fusion of body, text and image. The frayed, tattered characters that populate her enigmatic paintings appear over a backdrop of vertical and horizontal layering — a variation on the theme of the lucid, modernist grid. In Viner Omer’s version of it, however, it is made into a supple, loosened, patched-up weave, turning the rigid pattern into something shaky, ambiguous and open-ended, a substance rich in raw emotional contents.

In a painting by Viner Omer titled **Self portrait from before I started practicing Iyengar**, the artist’s face appears like a fluid netting of threads dolefully seeping to the ground. The face is akin to a white, droopy mask and the eyes are oozing, gaping holes, but someday — once she starts practicing yoga — there will be an “after” version made to it. Painted seven years later, **Untitled** shows a crevice nestled in-between two buttock-like curves, from which a magnificent, van Goghian starry night emerges, proudly spread out like a peacock’s tail. Gaining many followers in the West, Iyengar Yoga intersects with the feminist discourse of the 1970s. One such example is Luce Irigaray, the French philosopher and psychoanalyst whose ground-breaking writing presented the feminine body in a new and subversive light, turning writing itself into a portal to primordial bodily sensations. In **This Sex Which Is Not One** she writes, “But woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere. Even if we refrain from invoking the hysterization of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined.”

Challenging notions of sexual pleasure, **Efrat Rubinstein** infuses her dizzying paintings with themes drawn from pop culture, gender relations and eroticism out of a complex standpoint of self-awareness and parody. Her unvarnished approach to sex brings to mind the pseudo-pornographic writings by Anaïs Nin, which she wrote in the 1940s but were only published in the 1970s. Nin, who moved in Paris’s bohemian circles, took to erotic fiction almost as a joke, after being commissioned by a collector of the genre. The latter requested that she “leave out the poetry,” any descriptions “of anything but sex,” in order to “concentrate on sex.” “So I began to write tongue-in-cheek, to become outlandish, inventive, and so exaggerated that I thought he would realize I was caricaturing sexuality. But there was no protest,” writes Nin in her **Delta of Venus**. She goes on to say: “I had a feeling that Pandora’s box contained the mysteries of woman’s sensuality, so different from man’s and for which man’s language was inadequate.”

Rubinstein, who majored from Bezalel with distinction, makes a living working at stripper bars, and, thanks to first-hand knowledge, sheds light on the Pandora’s box of transactional erotica. It makes sense that, in a world where feminine imagery is constantly traded in, a strain of this trade will also emerge where women themselves reclaim the means of production, whether in writing pornography or by performing in seedy night clubs.

Irigaray points to a long-standing complicity between male rationality and a mechanics of solids; while femininity is tied to a mechanics of fluids — substances that have no fixed shape, assuming that of the vessel that contains them — the mechanics of solids is far less frivolous. In the works of **Michal Bachi** and **Michal Orgil**, watery substances are often present, manifesting their ever-changing fluidity, the fluctuations of self-containment and flux.

Bachi makes ample use of ink in her paintings. A watery, dilutable medium, ink also ties to writing. Given to spills and smears, it seems to overflow from the fingers, transferring on to the page in shapes that accrue and need to be kept in check. Bachi resorts to an imagery of watery substances from within the body and beyond, in both women and young girls — a cast of curious, droll characters that seem constantly suspended in feats of water acrobatics. As she moves her brushes over and across the page, the thinned-out paint turns the surface into

a damp, saturated screen. The use of industrial paint further exacerbates the thickness of the consistency, with a painting that seems to cling to the solid, rectangular aspect of the paper.

In her 1975 essay, **The Laugh of the Medusa**, Helene Sixous, the Algerian-born French feminist and thinker, coined the concept of “white ink,” a term with which she urges women to freely write their own bodies as a means of breaking loose from the patriarchal mindset. Sixous’s mother was a midwife, and the close proximity to the raw physicality of women’s bodies had a great impact on her writing. The “white ink” she refers to is an ink mixed with the metaphorical milk that overflows from a maternal body endowed with nourishment and regeneration.

In an essay titled **Attack, Abreaction, Expulsion**, she writes: “They, the feminine ones, are coming back from far away, from forever, from ‘outside,’ from the heaths where witches stay alive; from underneath, from the near side of ‘culture;’ from their childhoods, which men have so much trouble making women forget, and which they condemn to the in-pace. Walled in — those little girls with their ‘bad-mannered’ bodies. Preserved, safe from themselves and intact, on ice. Frigified. But the signs of unrest down there!”

And there are, indeed, “signs of unrest down there,” in a painting of Bachi’s titled **My Wonderful Undies**. A befuddled can-can dancer, light beams directed at her face, lifts up her robes to expose her petticoat (in Hebrew, ‘tachtonit’). In **Plutch**, another painting of Bachi’s, a woman, bare foot and in a flowery dress, stumbles into a puddle — to sully its waters. Afloat around her, gliding on water sprayed from the puddle, are three dainty little pantyliners (likewise ‘tachtonit’) that tie together the various elements: the absorbency of the paper support, the fluidity of the ink and the puddle it depicts — and these, in turn, with the feminine body part for which pantyliners are made.

With ‘tachtonit,’ the back-and-forth movement between word and image cuts across its current and dated designations (‘pantyliner’ and ‘petticoat’). Both, however, should always remain hidden, either under a skirt or between the legs. The wearer of the splendid petticoat brings to mind Jane Avril, the famed Parisian can-can dancer, as immortalized by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who painted posters to advertise her shows at the Moulin Rouge. At the time, can-can was tied to promiscuity, with dancers exposing their stockings and undergarments. Despite the resemblance of the two dancers — Bachi’s and Toulouse-Lautrec’s — the source of unease tied to each is different: In Bachi’s painting, too, the dancer’s flung-up skirt reveals legs and stockings, but more embarrassing still is the lump of excrement being dropped between her legs.

In **The Laugh of the Medusa**, Sixous urges women to write by way of their bodies, to invent a language that, dismantling boundaries of class, convention and norm, shatters and overcomes the confines of a restrained discourse. And yet, despite the nearly fifty years that have passed since they were written, it still takes considerable courage to follow these words through, to release the body and soul from the repressive shackles of norms that govern them. Placing themselves right at the center of cringe-worthy situations, Bachi’s women allow us to ease off our own sense of shame and embarrassment. Bachi’s ink is soaked in the bodily discharges it depicts, substances that, still today, are seen as a source of embarrassment, notwithstanding the cheerful tone in advertisements of feminine hygiene products.

A Jungian analyst, Clarissa Pinkola Estés looks at the modern feminine psyche to diagnose the signs of a longstanding repression which kept women apart from their authentic, wild selves. In her **Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype**, which became an international bestseller, she offers ways of mending the ailing feminine psyche and reconnecting it to its inner instincts and deep-seated vitality, based on a reading of ancient myths and folktales. Pinkola Estés’s book was greatly influential among those seeking a collectivist and shamanic type of feminism, centered on Mother Nature and the Great Goddess. The book’s feminist proposition resonated far beyond its direct readership, and many were exposed to its message.

Michal Orgil often depicts natural water reservoirs in her paintings. Her world is abundant with color, with loosely-executed, watery brushstrokes and drips that blend the subject matter into its surroundings, practically abolishing the outer edges. In two of her large-format paintings she approaches the transition from childhood to youth, a time when the body is charged with an explosive energy. The two young girls in **Creatures** are depicted with their arms and legs thrown in every direction, their gaze aimed at a viewer whose presence they are fully aware of, and for whose sake they might be fooling around. If there is any self-consciousness here, it is bridged over by their mutual presence, side-by-side. Theirs’ is an uncomplicated joy of bodily liberation and abandon; two friends together in nature, in cut-offs, high-spirited and carefree. They stand on the edge of puberty; with underarm hair and breasts already budding, and thighs curving, their bodies still betray a certain clumsiness characteristic of their age. Two girls with their whole lives in front of them, joined by the thrills of a shared homoeroticism reserved to the friendships of puberty. Pinkola Estés writes that in various communities in Africa, “the symbol of twin sisters is said to possess **juju**, the mystical energy of the soul.” Elsewhere she says that women likewise possess a twinning, dual nature: an exterior, “civilized” aspect and the inner self, a child-like entity or creature that guards the authenticity of

the soul and which in turns needs to be guarded. In this sense, Orgil’s two “creatures” are girls who have found a connection to their authentic selves — or have yet to lose it.

In another painting, **In the Sands**, things have changed. At the center of the canvas is a girl sitting cross-legged on the sand, her back bent over her chest to cover slightly a stomach bared by a revealing crop top. Turning to the viewer, her gaze is meek and apologetic, aware of the body that cowers with discomfort. The strength that was shared by the two girls is now gone.

Both self-taught, **Inbar Horkany** and **Nouli Omer** came to art from the worlds of competitive sports and the stage. A former world champion in karate, Horkany was studying acting when she began painting one day. Omer, an actress and stand-up comedian, had always practiced art.

Horkany aims her focus at portraits of friends and family, working in paint on plywood or graphite on paper. There is an unmannered expressivity to her works, depictions that strive to bring out the sitters’ inner makeup. In a series of children’s portraits she observes with keen clarity the bodies of her young subjects, lounging about and at ease in their surroundings. They are each to their own, contained in a painting, absorbed and finding repose. There is a lucidity and room to breathe in Horkany’s depictions of children. Their childhood is their own, specific to them, and the space of the painting is organized in such a way as to accommodate each of them, individually, to harbor and contain without closing them in.

Given her exceptional mastery of karate, it is compelling to think of Horkany’s art in connection with the archery and painting that were practiced by Buddhist monks. Writing in his introduction to Eugen Herrigel’s **Zen in the Art of Archery**, Buddhism scholar Daistez T. Suzuki notes that archery is defined, crucially, by not being aimed at aesthetic gratification, but rather at training the mind in facing reality and achieving a harmonious, non-deliberate coordination of consciousness with the unconscious. And, according to Herrigel, “this unconscious state is realized only when, completely empty and rid of the self, he becomes one with the perfecting of his technical skill.”

In several of Horkany’s paper drawings, ordinary scenes from everyday life are combined with odd, unlikely additions, such as a woman with a dog’s body, or a girl lounging on a couch alongside a tiger. There is a sense in which Horkany is in complete harmony with her medium, a notion that seems to run counter to the raspy, ragged quality of her rough-edged drawings. For Horkany, however, the aim is never to carefully discipline and elevate her skills, but rather to peel off the surface of the seen in order to penetrate, pointedly and with precision, with a single stroke of the pencil, to the very heart of things. In **Untitled**, a drawing from 2018, there is a woman lying on a couch, with, at the center of her chest, a dense, circular black spot like a burn or a hole. We do not see her skin directly; the spot is only visible through the garment she wears. “But the dress, she said, the dress is on fire. / What are you saying, I shouted, what are you saying? / I’m not wearing a dress at all, what’s burning is me.” (Dahlia Ravikovitch, “A Dress of Fire”) In the drawing, the figure remains still, emitting no sound as she lies on the couch, with a black, burning hole gaping in the middle of her chest.

A multi-part installation, **Nouli Omer’s** festive aesthetic recalling the handicraft shops at Nahalat Binyamin. The space where it is installed was accommodated to resemble that of her home, which serves her as studio and where the works are normally on display. Omer’s works have a neat, girly and decorative appeal to them, as does her home. While women artists have been entering a manly world of paint smears and the strong whiff of chemicals, Omer surrounds herself with cleanliness, organization and order. But her embroidery is so dense and frenetic as to spill over.

Omer recounts in her embroideries stories of love, desertion, sex and betrayal. Staging something of a domestic theater filled with beauty and dread, she places her characters amid the drama of the relationships between the sexes. Somewhere between pleasure and punishment, the arduous, laborious craft of embroidery that Omer commits herself to brings to mind a score of myths and folktales around themes of womanhood, threads and spindles, among them that of Penelope, wife of Odysseus, who weaved by day to undo her work by night; the tale of the miller’s daughter, who in vain tries to spin straw into gold; or yet Sleeping Beauty, who pricks her finger on a spindle of the spinning wheel; all had practiced handicrafts. There is always a man at the background of their stories — either absent, menacing, or a savior.

In studios all over the city of Tel Aviv-Yaffo — in a living room, an industrial building, over or below the ground — good vibes abound. In rooms that are wonderfully tidy or messy, in the auditoriums and on stages, women are at it — painting, practicing karate, doing yoga, loving their children, dancing around poles. The women participating in the exhibition offer ways of befriending wounds of many kinds, the signs of age, the losses and aches of the soul. Casting a direct gaze at themselves and those around them, they create art that is attuned to others, essentially, to relationships, interactions and human beings. They are straightforward, unfussy with their bodies, filled with humor and compassion with regards to themselves and the girls they once were. It is a celebratory show — despite, occasionally, the bleak recesses of darkness.

Monica Lavi, curator of exhibition