

TOWARDS ORANGE

"And where was the very first place? Because the very first place, without any previous reference was the colour orange, all orange, orange orange, entirely and completely orange..."

*That's where it all started, before everything that came later, the beginning of heaven and earth, the warmth and the day and the wind, and mother carrying you in her arms, with a mother's smell. That was the first place." **

The orange experience, "orange showing gentle waves, illuminated orange and shaded orange" is described by S. Yizhar as a substructural experience, the first childhood memory of a baby in its mother's arms.

Batia Grossbard reaches the spread-out, whirling, swinging orange expanses as a mature and ripe artist. Her evolution towards these orange surfaces (at times red and yellow, but mostly orange) seems to me the climax of her struggle for self expression as an artist and a woman. For years she had been looking for a means of spiritual self-expression in a language whose signs are made up of lines and paint spots laid/written on the surface of canvas and paper. She steers her own course through innumerable precedents, influences and traditions with an increasingly pressing need to say something, like one going through life with a soul in turmoil, to say it in the only language she can really speak.

She started out on her way to the large-scale orange canvases with landscape painting, rendering the texture of tree foliage into a twirl of lines, captivated by the dancing linear movement. For several years (during the seventies) she would sit opposite large mountainous landscapes: Mount Carmel, Mount Meron, the Jerusalem ridge, Mount Gilboa. With a black pencil she would embroider and knit their texture onto the expanse of white paper, shaping coils and curlicues, a seismographic drawing of the soul's quintessence and of the landscape's quintessence.

Under close observation, one isolated component turns out to be a twisted and contorted swirl closing on itself. The swirl recurs almost mechanically, as if by some ritualistic gesture, at times turbulent and scratchy and at times calm and relaxed. Footprints of a ceremonial dance seem to fill the page and recreate the spacious expanses of the landscape.

Concurrently, towards the end of the seventies, a new element is introduced into the works - colour. Using bright water-colours, Batia Grossbard dances twirls of colour painted with virtuoso brushstrokes on paper, with delicate pastel curlicues inside them, echoing their dance movements. The result is a polyphonic formation on paper which requires simultaneous observation of the details and the orchestrated whole. Grossbard restrains her colourful dancing characters at the outer boundaries. They refrain from touching the adamantly enforced line of demarcation. Sometimes they are allowed to deviate just a little from their confines. The wrestling soul dances in the delimited space, aware of the constraints and the narrowness of the "room of her own".

In these perfectly abstract paintings, there emerges the link with American abstract expressionists. There one can find the echoes of Jackson Pollock's aggressive paint spillings, Arshile Gorky's colourful twisted linear creatures, Sam Francis's swirls of paint, and later - Mark Rothko's colour vibrations and hazy margins. Yet she does not attempt to become one of them. After all they are all men living in a different material and cultural milieu, with constitutional rights of "the land of unlimited opportunities", While Batia Grossbard is a woman, a mother and an artist living in a tiny, constricted Mediterranean country, in Haifa, sharing a small three-roomed apartment with a husband who is also an artist (Yehoshua Grossbard), working in a studio which is in fact a kitchen.

Grossbard's expressive approach is different, unlike theirs. Its physical origin is the "room of her own", the kitchen, and its spiritual origin is her internal space which gradually opens up and unfurls but is still resigned to its confined boundaries. The paint-impregnated papers crop up at this time. The colourful curls are impregnated into the white paper very densely, producing a variegated vibrating surface whose pigmentation is warmer and tends towards the orange pink. This vibrant layout is reminiscent of the abstract quality of Rothko's work.

From now on, the shift to the canvases of the eighties is natural. The unfolding soul dares to increase the maneuvering space - the painting area. Grossbard pulls herself together and accentuates the colours and forms that had gradually been blending into one another. In the tiny kitchen huge monochrome orange canvases come forth.

At first she isolates and magnifies one orange twirl on top of an orange background - a pictogram which is actually a brushstroke, a passport photo of one of her dancing characters from her previous series. When Lichtenstein isolates one brushstroke and gives it a pop-style treatment, he does it from an ironical, critical standpoint, posing a question about the validity of painting, and deglorifying the touch of the painting hand. Batia Grossbard, on the other hand, isolates the brushstroke lovingly, cuddling it, since it is the basis of the workmanship of painting and her art. This brushstroke performs a virtuoso self-sufficient dance, orange painted on orange.

In other paintings she juxtaposes smoothly painted surfaces with aggressive paint sweeps, or creates huge diptychs or triptychs which grapple with the problem of the junction between them and the shapes in each of them. These works depict on the whole sculptural, roundish, Titanic configurations forming architectural facets which can be applied to a three-dimensional space. This is her new grand and powerful "room of her own". This is the culmination of a process that began as a monotonous script of linear swirls densely fashioning a landscape, and ends in large-scale, wide-open, brightly lit landscape paintings.

That is how Batia Grossbard reveals to herself and to the spectators the orange experience. That is the sun, the heat, the power, the daring, the expansion, or to put it in S. Yizhar's words, "*The knowledge of this complete orange, unique and general and total and universal*".

Exhibition Curator
Ada Na'amani