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An artist's dilemma

Ariel Asseo looks for redemption in both the past and the future.



A Martian landscape. One can see in the background a rendering of what the artist views as 'Beersheva's brutal architecture' (photo credit: Courtesy)

By SHULA KOPF

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Ariel Asseo's intriguing paintings turn either to the past or catapult to a sci-fi future determined to sidestep the present.

His exhibition in the Hanina Gallery in Tel Aviv is fittingly titled, “Not Here, Not Now,” perhaps the only sane response by an artist to today’s cascade of catastrophes.

“All art is political,” he says in an interview a few weeks before the exhibition opening last month. “I see the way immigrants and Arabs are treated, the way people are treated who don’t have money for private medical treatment, people who are sent to wars but don’t return. There are plenty of places that are much worse, but why compete with those?”



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The interview takes place in his studio in the Kiryat Hamelacha neighborhood in Tel Aviv, a gritty, graffiti-covered industrial section being taken over by artists and galleries.

So if the present is untenable, to where does Asseo escape?

The answer is surprising.

He paints with dazzling skill that leaves the viewer breathless, imaginary scenes set in late 19th-century Krakow, Poland. His other escape option is a sci-fi human colony on Mars.

Did we say surprising?

Asseo, 54, studied four years at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris clocking countless hours at the Louvre, but it was a painting he saw by chance a few years ago in Warsaw that left him transfixed. It was by Poland's greatest historical painter, Jan Matejko.

"It was amazing," he says. "There is richness that belongs to Polish culture, the aesthetic of Krakow. It was original. I never saw anything like it. It looks like what you know about Western classical art, but yet it is not. It comes from another place, another spirit, a local Polish spirit of pride."

His attraction to Polish art is interesting given that Asseo has tenuous Polish roots – a grandfather who may have come from Galicia, and a grandmother who spent one day in Poland on the train from Paris to Auschwitz. A large portion of the paintings in the exhibition attempt to synthesize Polish and Jewish cultures, suggesting an alternative trajectory for Jewish history, one in an imagined liberal, tolerant, multi-cultured society.

Envisioning Jewish integration into Polish society, Asseo paints the Polish legend of 14th-century King Casimir the Great and his Jewish mistress, Esterka, echoing the story of the biblical Queen Esther.

Matejko was director of the Krakow School of Fine Arts in the latter part of the 19th century. One of his favorite students was a young Jewish painter, Maurycy Gottlieb, whose iconic painting “Jew Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur” is in the collection of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Gottlieb left Poland for Vienna and Munich at age 15 to study art, and like Asseo, a painting he saw by Matejko drew him back to Krakow, an artistic backwater at the time. Matejko warmly embraced the Jewish artist.

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“I imagine that Gottlieb and I were students there at the same time,” says the tall, lanky Asseo, who paints his own image into the monumental canvasses, usually at the lower right side, an outsider. He paints a masterful painting of Matejko with his arm placed affectionately on Gottlieb’s shoulder.

“I started imagining European history taking a different course and I became a bit surrealist,” he says. “My project deals with the question of the place of the Jews.”

In one of the works Asseo paints himself and Gottlieb admiring Matejko’s masterpiece, “The Battle of Grunwald,” a heroic representation of the Polish victory in 1410 over the Teutonic Order.

“I thought about the place Jews can take in western history, always the outsider,” says Asseo. “We look at the battle and see what happens. We are outside the event, unless it’s directed against us. It’s sad because we cannot reconcile history. I think Gottlieb’s question of identity was never solved

because he died young. I don’t know if it could have been solved. In any case, there is no going back.”

If there is no going back, there is always the future.

Several paintings commanding in scale and presence depict a human settlement on Mars, a barren, silent landscape framed by the profile of a meditative, beautiful young

woman. The earth and distant mountains are an ethereal shade of purple, the sky an intense saturated blue. The human-built Martian structures come directly from Asseo's childhood in Beersheba, which was ground zero for a style in architecture known as Brutalism popular from the 1950s to the mid-'70s, and most often institutionally commissioned. Its guiding principle was the use of exposed concrete to build efficient structures using clean, straight lines. The vast open spaces of the Negev and the Zionist ideal of making the desert bloom served as an ideological catalyst. He grew up in such a concrete creation, the Pyramid Building, designed to foster communal living.

"It was a crazy beautiful building and now it's a crazy slum," Asseo says. "There was the utopian Zionist idea of building an equal society, building public spaces the expression of which was the Brutalist architecture in the 1970s. The idea failed. We built an Israeli society but a not an equal one, and much suffering was caused by the effort to implement this vision. But I don't give up on this vision. There was a lot of beauty and much justice, and I believe in justice and aspire toward it."

When the exhibition's curator, Jonathan Hirschfeld, visited Asseo's studio in the process of selecting works, he was reminded of a visit to an archaeological site, a city destroyed thousands of years ago. At the entrance to the site was a map.

"It was a map in two colors, green that represented what existed in the past – houses, a market, bathhouses, worship sites," Asseo says. "Purple represented what exists in present time. It was a map of a place that no longer exists. I remembered that map during my last visit in Ariel's studio – whose paintings work in a similar way. They help us get our bearings in a landscape that doesn't exist, either in an imagined future or a lost past, spaces and identities that are not here, not now," he writes in the text that accompanies the exhibition.

"Asseo has realistic and traditional training but he's very contemporary in his attitude," says Hirschfeld in a telephone interview. "He doesn't paint out of observation, or still life or copying other paintings. Art is the process of participating in a conversation, and he is voicing his unique point of view about politics, life, redemption, hope. Although Ariel comes from the tradition of realistic painting, he

doesn't feel beholden to it. For him the act of painting is entering a conversation and doing whatever the painting requires of him."

To describe Asseo's way of working, Hirschfeld uses an Italian art term, *pentimento*, repentance, used to describe changes an artist made while creating the artwork, evidence of which can be detected with x-ray or infrared reflectography.

"One of the things that is typical for him is that he is very tormented, he brushes off, he scratches off, he changes," says Hirschfeld. "Every centimeter on the canvas was once something else. It is a very tormented canvas. For me, Asseo's canvasses are especially intriguing. He can lose sleep over what of shade of purple this should be. He looks at the canvas and asks if this is right. The result is very convincing. You feel like you are listening to someone who really thought about what he wanted to say. When you see the other realistic painters, it feels like the musical partiture was already written and the artist just played the right notes. There is no suffering, no regret and no going back.

"This is an anguished painting, broken, refusing to solidify: always on a journey. This seems to me an important point: not only is it the heart of the painting's beauty and the secret of its credibility, but also from a mathematical point of view, it would be strange to paint with complete confidence something that doesn't or didn't exist with the certainty of a documentary."

Among all the works that harken to a past that didn't take place, or a future that never will, stands one work that speaks to the present. It is a cast plaster sculpture of a naked man crouching on bended legs, his empty arms laid limp on his thighs, his head bent down in grief.

Asseo modeled the sculpture on a photo he saw in a newspaper of a grieving Syrian man holding his son killed in a bombing attack. If in Michelangelo's *Pieta* the mother holds her dead son in a similar pose promising redemption, here in present time, the arms are empty. There is no promise of redemption, not here, not now, only endless grief.

The exhibition will be on view through October 19 at the Hanina Gallery, Shvil Hamertz 5, Tel Aviv.