

Amir Shefet: Painting of a Painting

BY: JONATHAN HIRSCHFELD, AUGUST 27, 2022

Flowers transpire on the line between nature and culture. They are like domesticated animals, a potted jungle; nature's wide open reproductive organs, designed to receive and give pollen with the help of insects and bees, who penetrate and tickle their ovaries, their overflowing hearts, as a sign of refined beauty. Flower painting historically oscillates between two poles: the rigid pole of Dutch realism in the style of Brueghel or Boulenger, which attempts to capture the shape of the flower, its botanical form, to delimit it, to decide for it that it is culture, on the one hand, and flower painters, such as Henri Fantin-Latour or Édouard Manet, who sustain transient beauty.

Where should we place Amir Shefet's (b. 1978, Jerusalem; lives and works in Kibbutz Givat Hayim Ichud) flowers? How should we construe them? In a special issue of the Israeli literary magazine *Ho!*, in which dozens of Israeli intellectuals were asked: "What is literature?", novelist A.B. Yehoshua replied, that literature (and by implication all art) is the design of psychological contents, which elicits aesthetic pleasure.¹ Prima facie, it seems like a rather limited formula, and the expression "aesthetic pleasure" sounds strange: do we not take aesthetic pleasure in Shakespeare's tragedies or Quentin Tarantino's spectacles of violence? But I think Yehoshua is onto something: the scream of panic of one who is terrified by a horror movie, or sobbing in view of a melodramatic piece are types of pleasure; and not mere pleasure, but aesthetic pleasure: you do not enjoy what happened to the murder victim in the film, but what happened to you when you watched the aesthetic design of the events. Shefet's flowers are a modelling of psychological contents, which elicit aesthetic pleasure precisely because what we respond to is not the artist's feelings, thoughts, and views, but the way they are modeled.

For Shefet, flowers are a language. They are a language adapted to painters because its basic units are line, stain, color, movement, duration, vibration, thickness, transparency, light, and shadow. Shefet feels that there is no human emotion or experience that he cannot express in the language of flowers. He moves between the flower as an image (as children depict it), the botanical flower, and the flower drawn from observation. His work mode resembles a patchwork. He creates an image and erases it. The white obstructions sometimes appear like a wall or a background, but they often stand between the viewer and the image. Flower heads float in the thick space, detached from their stems. These are neither Boulenger's flowers nor Manet's; these are colorful excuses for expression, emotion, thought, composition, and painting.

The painting *The Field* leads this trend to its called for conclusion: the flower field becomes a recurring pattern, what would be termed "all-over painting" in the context of American color-field Abstract Expressionism, namely a painting that feels as if it could continue indefinitely in all directions. The flowers enjoy complete autonomy, with no world to decide their fate; pure signs that evade significations of a single concrete meaning. Moreover, due to the delicacy with which some of them are painted and the thickness of the white obstructions, the flowers are also cracks of light and color in the opaque plaster screen; flickers of optimism, of affirmation of life, of breathing within the white suffocation. The viewer finds himself repelled and attracted; sharpening his attention and sensitivity to a petal, folding into itself and taking a step back, driven away by a powerful, stormy color application.

In the painting *The Flowers were Writing on the Wall II*, one may discern a possibly antithetical attempt to furnish the flowers with a world, with a center; an attempt to provide the viewer with the ability to distinguish between "subject" and "background." The flowers themselves, however, behave strangely, transforming into autonomous color fields, one against the

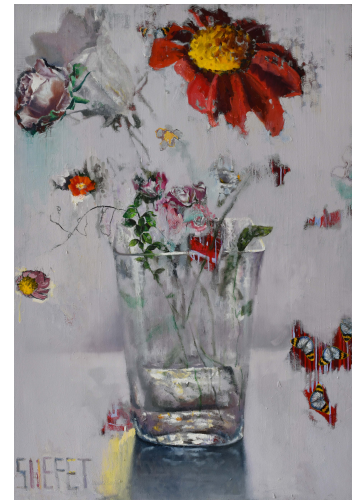
backdrop of the other; swallowing and swallowed within the abstract nature of the paint. Some have been obliterated, and they exist as mere specters of former flowers; some have not yet been born, and they exist as a pencil-drawing promise for a flower to come. And one flower—purple, childish, schematic, almost Ori Reisman-like in terms of the quality of its stain—functions as a barrier to the possibility of a real world-background: because if it is there, it means that this vase has no table. Still, this is not a depiction of a vase and flowers; it is a painting of a painting.



The Field, 2020, oil on canvas,
70x50



The Field (Chrysanthemums by
Night), 2021, oil on canvas, 30x40



Flower Painting (Butterflies
Bursting from Below), 2019–20, oil
on canvas, 130x100, private
collection



Flower Painting (With Blue Vase
and Erased Yellow Flower), 2020,
oil on canvas, 60x50



Flower Painting (Rose and Many
Shades of Red), 2019–20, oil on
canvas, 100x80, private collection