

ASAD AZI: Portrait of the Alienated Artist

Standing outdoors in worn jeans and an undershirt, artist Asad Azi is trying to fix a leaking sewage pipe. "That's what you get for heading the tenants committee," sighs Azi as he struggles up four flights in a seemingly run-down apartment building in downtown Jaffa.

Although every possible living space is covered with Azi's canvases — the few pieces of furniture seem a feeble nod to domesticity — the apartment-cum-studio is tiny and, well, rather dismal. Not quite the scenario one would expect from a leading Israeli artist who has had some 26 individual and 50 group exhibits throughout Israel, Europe and the United States. But not quite the romanticized Bohemian garnet stage set, either.

Yet somehow it befits Azi, who conveys so much alienation-outsider angst that it is hard not to imagine him reading from a worn Joycean script. Do artists still talk like that? What is his problem, anyway?

For one, Azi does not feel at home anywhere. Not in Shefar'am, the Druze village in the Galilee where he was born in 1955; not on Gordon Street, Tel Aviv's upscale gallery row where Azi's works have been exhibited. He speaks Hebrew fluently, but with a strong accent — the mark of an outsider. And he has spent too much time in the Israeli heartland — high school in Kiryat Atli, three years of army service (his father was killed in 1961 while in the army), undergraduate and graduate art studies at Haifa and Tel Aviv Universities — to feel comfortable in the milieu of his youth. He can't chat with Israelis — "They expect me to relate to Bialik, while they know nothing of Arab culture" — nor can he converse with Arab friends who have no appreciation for the plastic arts. Living in a kind of cultural no-man's land, it is out of this moral landscape that most of Azi's striking canvases emerge.

Noted for his eclectic and painterly style, Azi's works display a rich and varied blend of East and West — European fabrics are implanted among a plethora of crisp oriental designs. Arab vases, biblical sandals and Islamic floor tiles sit alongside Victorian dollies and cropped figures from Rembrandt and Chardin. Druze folk traditions inform much of his work, as does the influence of

Rothko and Fontana.

It is not only conflicting traditions Azi chooses to combine. Working with oils, textiles, wood carvings, photocopies of photographs blending high and low art ("my way of reconciling Asad the villager with Asad the artist") for Azi, mixed media is the only conceivable way "of talking about the complexities of our post-modern, high-tech society."

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He points to the clutter of newspapers — along with a sketch pad — that cover his coffee table. It is from the local Fleet Street — and not cafes or beach scenes — that Azi derives much of his material. "Look at this: an ad for a luxury apartment is placed next to a story on domestic violence. What's happening to us? Are we completely desensitized?"

By now Azi is all fired up. "Here's an ad that promises beauty, another that promises instant weight loss — all lies and deception." Puffing on a cigarette ("I have to quit one day"), Azi rails against the numbing effect of television and the Internet. "With everything available on one's cyberspace, people don't need to leave their homes. They don't need other people."

A quirky statement from a self-proclaimed hermit. But for Azi, isolation — he rarely even answers his telephone — is part of

his cultural crisis thing: its not that Azi wants everyone to speak the same language, he just wants to see a "bit of mutual respect. Culture should be a dialogue," he says. "I want to discuss common problems — the loneliness of old age, meaningless relationships — in my own individual way."

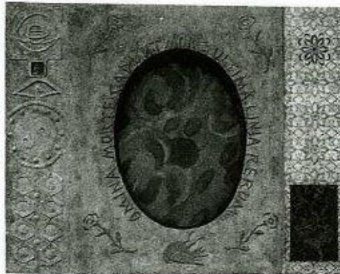
"Art is society's alarm clock, its warning bell," insists Azi, a fervent leftist (he refused to accept a government prize last year as a form of political protest) whose art work is surprisingly devoid of anger or anguish. He says his paintings are intended to "ignite the senses against the vacuity of urban living." Azi now wonders if that's enough. "Perhaps my pieces should be more disturbing, more of a reflection of our disoriented lives."

Azi sighs, "I don't know. Maybe I would only be adding to all the confusion that's already out there."

Shelley Kleiman



Asad Azi



Untitled, undated, mixed media on canvas