

On the definition of the portrait and its boundaries in the Dubi Shiff Art Collection

A close look at the many works included in the Dubi Shiff Art Collection will quickly reveal Shiff's fascination and love for painting, and in particular, as known to all, for figurative painting. To a great degree, it was this passion that enabled this genre, as well as its practitioners, to gain a significant presence in the local art field – a field that was known for its slight distaste towards it. Signaling out the artists' portraits included in the collection – by Ofer Lalush, Elie Shamir, Leonid Balaklav, Maya Zack, Sigal Tsabari, Fatma Abu Rumi, Roni Taharlev, Samah Shihadi, Ilan Baruch, Daniel Elnekaveh, Amnon David Ar, David Nipo, Aram Gershuni and many others – will prove the dominance of the genre in the collection. Whether the portraits are self-portraits, portraits of friends, family or acquaintances; whether they are commissioned or spontaneous and personal, whether they are direct or more allegoric and fantastic in nature – at the heart of the portrait as an artistic trope stands a complex relationship between the appearance of the human origin and its plastic representation. As any other artistic genre, the painted portrait reflects a representation of what is perceived by the painter, a situation that summons various philosophical questions regarding the relationality of the painter's perception, and his subsequent creative decisions.¹ In his book 'Poetics', Aristotle argued that in order to imitate concrete details in a convincing manner, the artist must know and understand general aspects of reality. In order to form a convincing illusion, he must know his audience's perception of reality, and accord with it. The pleasure of watching a portrait stems, first and foremost, from the recognition of the painted subject, as part of a comparison process between the known human origin and its visual representation.²

Hence, those who find a direct relation between the words "portrait" and "accuracy" (in Hebrew the words carry an auditory resemblance³) are right in doing so. However, other than their auditory resemblance, the two words lack any linguistic relation. The Hebrew dictionary definition for the word "portrait" is twofold: a likeness of a person, especially of the face, and a painting of a person face.⁴ The word arrived to Hebrew from Greek, through the writings of Hazal.⁵ Etymologically, it is composed of the Greek words *Dyo* (meaning "two") and *Eikon* (meaning "image"). Hence, through the words composing it, the word "portrait" reflects its active formation, meaning – portraiture is an attempt to duplicate or multiply the image. The Greek word *Eikon* (εικόνα εικόνισμα) derives from the word *Eikenai*, meaning "to be as, to look as". The Greek Byzantine Catholic Church saw a fundamental connection between the icon and the divine spirit. This approach is present in the story of Saint Veronica, who offered Jesus, in a gesture of grace, a cloth in his Via Delarosa so he could wipe off his sweat. His features were imprinted in the cloth. For this reason, some argue that the origin of her name derives from the Latin name *Vera Iconica* (meaning the "true icon"), as she carries the true image of Jesus' face. Even though one cannot find a face or body in the work of Efrat Galnoor, it clearly offers, through the artist's knowledge and skill in *trompe*

¹ David Summers, "Representation" in: *Critical Terms for Art History* (Eds. Robert S. Nelson, Richard Shiff), Chicago University Press, Chicago and London, 1996, pp. 3-16.

² In this major text, which deals mostly with poetry and drama, Aristotle demonstrates the problem of artistic representation while aligning it with the plastic art of portraiture. Aristotle, *Poetics*, (trans. Yoav Rinon), Y.L. Magnes publishing, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2003, pp. 21-22; Menachem Brinker, *Aesthetics as a Critical Theory: Issues and Stations in its History*, Ministry of Defense Publishing, Tel Aviv, 1982, pp. 15-22.

³ Translator's note.

⁴ Avraham Even-Shoshan, *New Dictionary*, 1st Vol., Kiryat Sefer, Jerusalem, 1956, p. 228.

⁵ The Jewish sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud, translator's note.

l'oeil painting tradition, a contemporary reflection on the familiar presentational form of Saint Veronica, so that in Galnoor's painting the image of God is absent from the folds of the painted pink fabric.



Left: Efrat Galnoor, Untitled, 2011, oil on canvas, 80X40 cm

Right: Mattia Preti, The Veil of Veronica, circa 1655-1660, oil on canvas, 100x75 cm. Los Angeles County Museum

The Latin word “portrait” (which is in use in English, German and Italian) originated in the French word *Portraire* – which in turn developed from the French phrase *Trait pour Trait*, meaning “line after line”, as a description of the action and creation of the portrait. This origin is reminiscent of Pliny the Elder’s story of The Corinthian Maid, which tells of a girl who draw the shadow of her lover with charcoal on the wall, the night before he set out to the battle.⁶ This story is considered as one of the prominent tales on the creation of the genre. The creation of an image is in fact the creation of an object which represents the absent subject. By preserving and perpetuating its appearance, this presence of the absent fulfilled a basic human need in coping with death, which brings the disappearance of the body.⁷

It is on the backdrop of these insights that the work of Samah Shihadi expand our understanding of portraiture. Shihadi directly ties between the painting of the human face and body with a deep existential understanding of cessation, while simultaneously manages to challenge the genre’s traditional definition. The first painting presents a realist portrait of a head, detached from its body and placed on a tray that rests upon a simple wooden chair. The drawing, done with gray pencil, is accurate, meticulous and lacks any expressivity. The room is abstinent, with few details. All this stands in direct contrast to the depicted scene – a severed head served on a plate! The scene brings about the story of Shulamite and John the Baptist from the New Testimony,⁸ but filters it through a secularization process, which ultimately presents a death lacking any theological ethos or moral.



⁶ Pliny, "Natural History, Book XXXV" in *Natural History in Ten Volumes*, Vol. IX, (Trans. H. Backham), Harvard University Press, 1968, p. 271.

⁷ Phillippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, Vintage Books – Random House, New York, 1982, pp. 260-266.

⁸ Gospel According to Mark (Mark 1:1-8).

Left: Samah Shihadi, Still Life, 2015, pencil on paper, 120X100 cm
Right: Samah Shihadi, Untitled, 2015, pencil on paper, 151X270 cm

In a different large scale work, Shihadi paints a human body covered to the top of its head with a sheet adorned with delicate flowers. The drawing demonstrates impressive technical abilities. It brings to mind bleak associations, relating to mourning customs – from the flowers placed on the grave (a symbol of a fleeting existence) to the custom of covering the deceased's head with a sheet. Surprisingly, the body lays on no apparent surface, as if it was magically floating midair. Does this indicate a kind of transformation from matter to soul? In any case, the austere existential feeling and analogy bring about the hypnotizing act of aesthetic illusion. The artist combines a sense of absurdity and realism, cessation and actuality and truth and fiction, in a manner which brings forth the human subject and its essence anew, as a work of art.

Dr. Aya Lurie, Director and Chief Curator
Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art

Translated from Hebrew by Keren Goldberg