

"We Were Priestesses of a Temple"

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We can speak endlessly about artwork by Galina Bleikh, however this story will remain elusive, incomplete. What she creates are extraordinary works of Israeli holy lands. Applying the holy land grounds on a common canvas, she turns it into a contemporary icon, icon of our time and place. She shoots videos and creates video installations and performances dedicated to the memory of soul bringing them together with the real events that take place "here and now". She works in almost all media of visual art; her philosophy is so profound and inexhaustible that she eagerly shares it with others. For instance, with a fictitious personality of Anto Aum who she invented together with her collaborate Julia Lagus. Beyond other gestic, their creature succeeded to redress an injustice, returning hair to Samson and "punishing" the traitor Dalila, shaving all her hair off instead...

Galina, as far as I know you are not a very "award and competition" person. And yet ...

– ...And yet, I took part in the Trabut.ru competition. It was interesting to see, to what extent can my artwork today find a response from spectator. Actually, I never aspired to participate in competitions. While I have some experience with competitive selection of various art events. For instance in 2001, the installation "Can You Can It?" created together with Julia Lagus, was presented in the International Triennale of Contemporary Art in Osaka; we then passed a selection from 15 thousand applicants to be among 150 works exhibited.

As far as I remember, it was a huge, about 8 m long, painting on canvas, rolled up and sealed in a can ...

– We covered the inner side of the can with the painted canvas. In fact, when discussing where there is a place for traditional painting on canvas in contemporary space, we ended up concluding that there is none. Except, perhaps, preserving it. For the future... On the other hand, this was a view of a museum as canned goods, where the works of art are preserved.

You do painting, installation, video art, body art, make brilliant performances... How do you manage?

– Creative work is not a profession, not a job – it is a state of mind. I guess it's due to this state that I manage to manage. I have always been interested in creating synthetic ambience, bringing together different media. These days, I am engaged in two directions – digital art, and works made of holy land grounds applied onto the canvas. Also, there is my small book recently published in St Petersburg (Russia) – a “post-love” story called “Anait”, based primarily on description of my performances. So I have even tried myself in literature.



Ceramics from “Hebrew Letters” series. “Alef”

I think this is a natural result – if we go back to 1993 when you were awarded a medal of “Vivrisism is a Righful Cause” for your performace “Poet and Translator Vassily Kodratiev as a Window into Europe”, in a Russian-French festival of poetry...

– Indeed, I was then awarded this prize, established by a Parisian V. Tolstoy. This medal was minted by St Petersburg Mint specifically for this event, only a few items. Vivrism is the name of an art movement created by Tolstoy. His poems-manifestos state: “Artist! If art is the sense of life for you, do not leave its living sense behind, as art with no sense is lifeless.” Vassily Kontratiev translated the poems of French avantguard poets, his book has recently been posthumously published in St Petersburg. My performance was going as follows: his naked body was placed on a white sheet of paper and covered with texts: first, a text in Russian, in front, then with the text in French, from behind, running down both paper and the body. Afterwards, the body outline was cut with scissors from the paper, and the painted author of the translation reconstructed the text intermitted, stepping inside and filling the gap. The text of the poem written on the body was read by V. Tolstoy in two languages, emphasizing the implementation of the Vivrism ideas, when the borders between the creator and creation fades, and the author “pays” with his own body for the oeuvre created.

And what did digital art attract you with?

– It is just that today, the framework of visual has widen up, and three dimensional modeling that I use, allows creating a personal world in the round, doing the right lighting and then sort of take a picture foreshorten as you wish. Therefore many of my works were born on computer. And this despite the fact that I was taught to draw well. I wish to see these works full size of the walls in a huge hall. Then, the cosmogonity of my

spaces would speak many times louder. What is also important to me is the compositional working, free of the useless and excessive elements. I am interested in a human who is naked, rushing, pushed into this harsh world by the Creator, and natural to the fullest.



Alas, strange time that we live in, does not invite to contemplate...

– Indeed, contemporary civilization has contaminated the world with artificial visual signs that attack us from TV and computer screens, comes out of our mail boxes, stares at us from the building tops, fills the ground below our feet and the sky above our heads. They all claim to replace the real life. What I propose is that we have a rest from their haunting insistence. If we speak about the works that I do from Israeli holy land grounds, they are free not only from visuality, but also from any other visual dependability. They represent clear spaces, where only a prayer can exist.

Has Israeli holy land ground become your main material?

– Yes. Here, in Israel the land is filled with the spiritual light. Its radiance possesses such an energy that many people feel it, both among those who visit and those who live here. I started by bringing home some of this radiant matter. I didn't want to paint with oils any more when I had such an amazing material in my hands. I started to apply it onto the canvases, exposing and focusing its spiritual light, in which any visual image was excessive, except for the sacral, faceless.

The solids that I apply onto the canvas have each their individual character. Each behaves differently in the process of work, each requires an individual approach. In return, the result is also individual.

I am sure that people will want to pray before my paintings. Not because I am such a genius as an artist. But because my "paints" are batched with thousands of years, saturated with the sun and consecrated by the world religions. That is why their divine energy is so powerful.



Certainly, each time has its icons.

– As well as each time finds its form of expression. Why what is contemporary art? What is contemporary for me is the art that “vibrates” in the same waves as the main idea of the humanity at this very moment. Or even anticipates is, as true artist must be a little bit a prophet. Pompously sounds, but in essence that is the way it is. For instance, the XXth century was called the century of the planetary perception. That is to say that the frame of references has changed, the scale, the time perception, world perception, culture perception. Those who were the first to capture that were probably truly con-temporary to their time. The history will keep them. Those who only look back will as we know turn pillars of salt.

The readers will probably not forgive me if I wont ask you to tell more about your holy land ground works.

Ground on canvas is a naturally determined phenomenon as since most ancient times and until now the artists use color grounds as color pigments. These pigments are solid, resistant against atmospheric impact and light. They often bare the name of the place where the closest pigment was found first, for instance: natural Sienna, natural Umbra, English red, Shakhnazar red, Gutankar lilac, Podolsk black. I could name my colors as follows: Neve-Yackov red, Pisgat-Zeev gold, Maale Adummim ocher, Eilat black.

In classical paintings, pigments are first thoroughly milled and mixed with binders. Unlike other artists, I use “pure material”, exposing its natural look. I do not try to use sand as foreign material (Bracque called this technique “using material substance”) or material to build a relief (as Dubuffe). My aim is to achieve a state when the ground itself sounds, transforming from material substance into spiritual. That is where absolute minimalism of the composition comes from.

In St Petersburg you were one of the brightest “female non-conformists”, regularly taking part in non-conformist exhibitions of the Fellowship of Experimental Art that then attracted a lot of interest, you were often exhibited abroad, awarded by international festivals... And now – since 1993 you are in Israel. New country, new people, new frame of references...



– When I came to Israel, my situation has dramatically changed, nobody knew me here. But on the other hand, I was ready to changes, my St Petersburg stage of creative work had ran its cause, and I was looking for new forms. It was an interesting time – new place, new goals. Together with artist Julia Lagus, we invented and created a new personality, new artist. Our mythical Antro Aum (that is the name we gave him) worked in visual objects, video, computer graphics. His exhibitions were accompanied by performances, he was invited to take part in festivals, he received a grant from Israeli Ministry of Culture to have a studio in Paris, regularly organized “week-end” exhibitions in his Jerusalem studio. Thus, under this pen-name we lived happily quite a long life filled with events (1994 till approximately 2003 года). We were interested in transforming the space

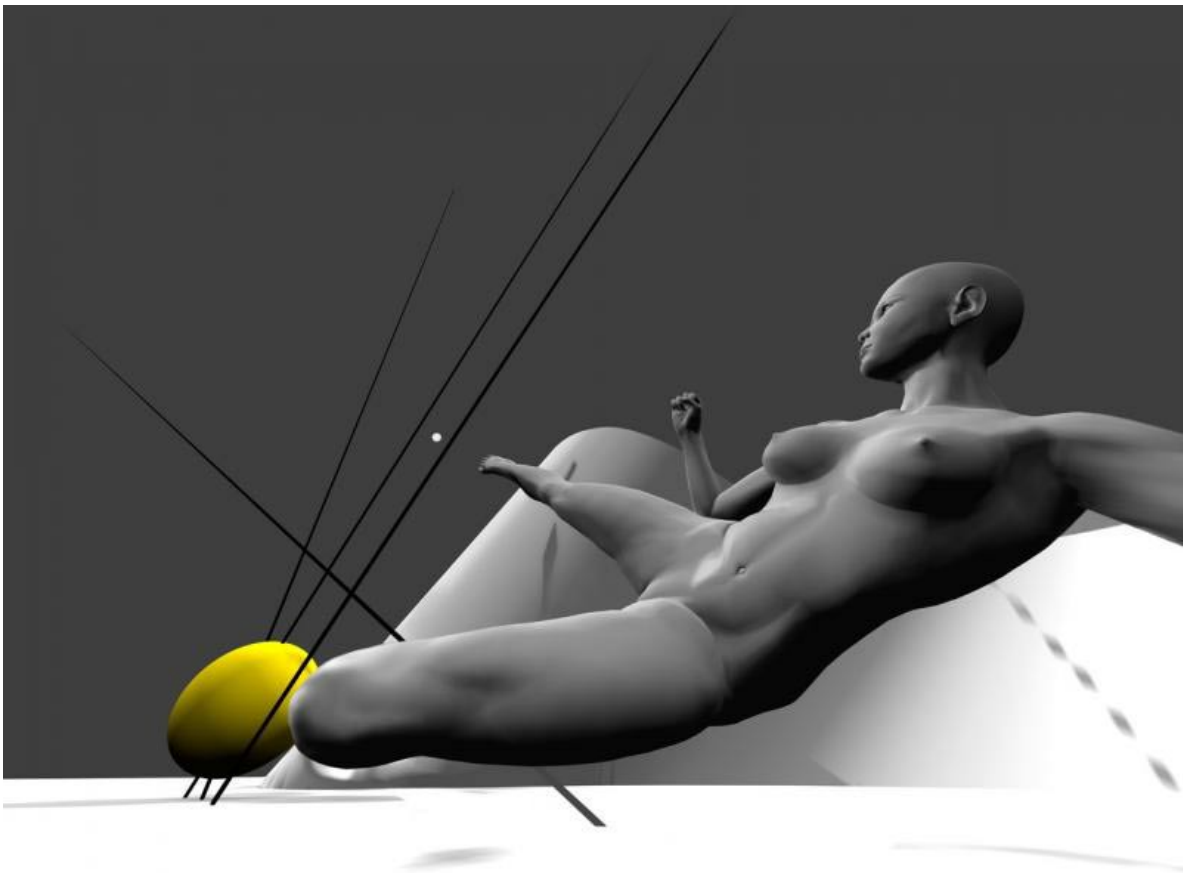
creating game-like situations. In fact, the majority of our video art with Julia, we both did and exhibited under our pen-name. In 1996 Antro Aum was even awarded a diploma “Challenging Video” for his video film “Installation in Sultan’s Pool”.

Oh, Antro Aum was a grand mystification, indeed. He was born, if I remember right, in the Northern Aumland, in the town of Anburg ...

– ...Moved to Jerusalem in 1992 and even obtained a stipend from the Ministry of Culture to work for half a year in France, and won a prize of the festival “Alternative video”. Was fluent in many languages, but was a reserved person and tended not to show up at the exhibitions. He was also a founder of an art movement called AntrArt (probably after himself). His ideas were borrowed from a French philosopher Ortan de Mou; it is to 100th anniversary of the philosopher that he dedicated his exhibition “The Temple of Sensuality” that took place in 1999 in Jerusalem House of Artist. The main idea of his practice was that the sensual perception of the world predominates over the reasoning perception. This was our response to those, who were looking for only ideas in art. The installation was the Temple of sensuality: the floor of the first room was completely covered by a carpet with relief images of a naked-figured circle dance. In order to get into the second room which was the altar of the Temple, one had to step over these white pillow-like bodies. Moreover on the preview night, Julia and I were priestesses of the Temple, and, wrapped in transparent fabrics we rolled along the floor right at the feet of spectators, forcing them to step over us. The Altar of Sensuality was a two-meter phallus, directed at the spectator; it had wings looking like organ pipes – it opalized in all the shades of red and, with the voice of Ortan de Mou “gave a lecture” in French (played from a said to be old LP discovered in a Paris flea market). Here is what an article said on our exposition: “the space of the exhibition is organized in such a way that what becomes the participant is a naked foot, eye, ear of the person who first entered here as an observer. Fond of provocation, Antro Aum offered to sense art with your feet. Naked feet, stepping over a relief carpet repeating the contours of a human body, these feet are entrusted with the softness and defenselessness of the fragile human coating”.

Antro Aum had another very interesting project – “Translations” ...

– It started when we asked Alexander Altshuler, a poet, to write a poem about memory of the soul. Then this poem was translated by our friends coming from all over the world, into their native languages. This was a fascinating process, each person understood the text in his own way, depending on mental codes and “temperament” of the language he was translating into. We obtained 8 translations – a full spectrum of Israeli aliyah. We recorded reading the poems by the translators, and this phonogram became a base for a whole list of installations, performances and video art. In the film “Translations”, all the characters are played only by hands, doing certain activities in step with the text, in Hebrew, English, French, Spanish, German, Lithuanian, Georgian, and Russian. This was an exciting process, but as each impetus has its phases of birth, development and decline, the project Antro Aum ceased at some point to satisfy both of us, Julia and me. Gradually each of us found new personal ways. I came back to the “flatness” and do today digital art, video art and painting.



You are a lucky person as you continue to do “pure” art.

– I have to do a neighboring activity as well, design: graphic design, 3D design, web-design, interiors. I own a private design studio “GalaStudio” – together with Lilia Chak, artist and designer who also graduated from the Stieglitz St. Petersburg State Academy of Art and Industry.

So, your works continue in design?

– A painting, a visual object, video installation – all that is a part of interior (or exterior). In any case, they create the space, whether it is an exhibition hall, a public space or a private house. Laws of visual harmony, based on the notions of image, composition, color, proportions are

universal both for “pure” art and for design. Actually, the language is the same, and the border between them is very much relative. As design is my professional occupation, I of course include my works into the ambience that I create. For instance, I built interior of my home in such a way that my paintings and sculpture, as well as printing on fabrics and even video-art are not simply “hung” or “placed” or “put” inside, they themselves have become organizers of the space. In fact, a TV channel Voyage from France liked it very much – they found the photographs of my interior on the web, and made a film about me as an artist and designer of my own house, for their series on the dwellings of designers in different countries.

Do you agree with the saying that “No man is prophet in his own country”? Is it necessary to become first famous abroad, in order to be recognized in your own country?

– Well, if “famous” means a solo exhibition in Guggenheim museum, then, yes. However if it means a solo show in a regular foreign gallery and a couple of articles in foreign press, this would doubtfully change the situation. However, it is the same in both of my motherlands, Russia and Israel. Israel is a small country, almost unseen on the map. But when you stand in the middle of the mountains of the Judean desert, the space around you is absolutely cosmic. And then, the scale changes: new yorks and parises become small, and the desert grows to the size of the Universe. It takes your breath completely away. It is these energies that I try to accumulate in my works.

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