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Oren Eliav Israeli painter Oren Eliav on technique, Tel Aviv's art scene and what makes an art object

by [Julie Wolfson](#) in [Culture](#) on 8 August 2011



Hollow-eyed portraits, glittering ornamentation and cavernous architecture haunt the canvasses of Israeli painter [Oren Eliav](#). The [Rappaport Prize-winner's](#) otherworldly imagery creates tension between doubt and faith, exploring the historical implications of his subject by reworking old-world painting techniques to effects that toe the line between the grotesque and the beautiful. Following his solo show "Two Thousand and Eleven" earlier this year at [Tel Aviv Museum of Art](#), we asked Eliav about his journey as a painter and the art community in Israel.

Were you always creating art as a child?

I painted and drew like every other kid does. My "discovery" of art was only when I was studying Political Science at Tel Aviv University and started taking courses in art that I realized this is my true fascination. I then applied to the Bezalel art academy, so I could finally be "at the driver's seat" to practice art and not just learn about other people doing it.

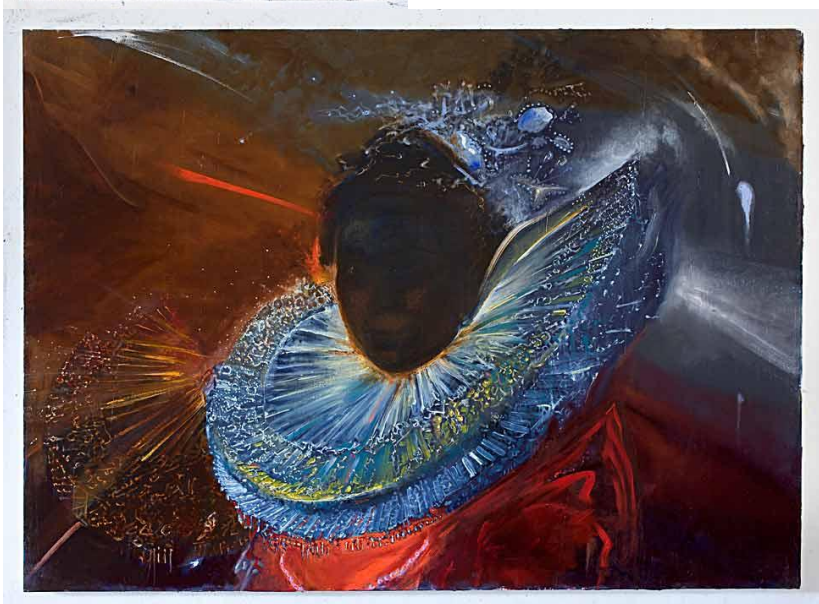


How did the time you spent at Cooper Union affect your painting?

It's hard to separate the Cooper Union experience from the New York experience. I went to see art almost every day at Chelsea galleries, the Met and other New York venues. This proximity to art, not as a tourist but as a resident, had a deep effect on me. For example, being able to visit a specific painting at the Met every few days and understanding it differently every time opened my eyes to what I consider the mark of truly great art: the ability to generate different meanings and emotions over time. As a painter, I really benefited from the more technical classes that unfolded a wealth of painterly know-how, from watercolor to tempera, fresco and advanced oil painting techniques.

Did you have a mentor at Bezalel University?

I learned something from everyone I encountered. The learning process for me was mostly to realize how differently people perceive the same work. In my opinion, this is what makes the "art object", a painting in my case, a very peculiar kind of object. Each of us see the same thing in a completely different manner.



Do you feel a connection to other artists' exploration of the dark side of life?

I don't think I'm necessarily exploring the dark side of life. I'm attracted to places of ambiguity and uncertainty, to the subtle but swift passage from known to unknown. But it's not necessarily dark. It's just a bit shaky, other artists have this capability. If you look attentively and long enough at Velazquez, for example—I have "The Spinners" in my mind—you can sense how what you thought you were looking at is actually something else. Reality starts spiraling and becomes convoluted.

In many of your newest paintings, images seem to be appearing and disappearing at the same time.

The brushstrokes are both layered on and stripped away. The whole process of painting for me is based on pushing and pulling, or in your words, "appearing and disappearing." Technically, it is a result of working with many successive transparent glazes. A painting has a double presence. It can act as a window, so we look "through" it and things are sort of in there. But it also has a material presence, as an object hanging on the wall with its own surface qualities and physicality. So

during the painting process I try to be on the lookout for a point of balance between "out there" and "in here." Where I sense this weird double presence, I stop painting.



Can you tell us about the art community in Tel Aviv?

The Tel Aviv art scene is very vibrant and bustling with activity. Israel is a not a simple place, and I think good art often appears where there is tension and complexity. The art community has expanded remarkably over the last decade. There are more artists, art schools, galleries and collectors than ever before and it brings with it a variety of interesting positions.





What are you working on now?

Right now I'm working on the last chapter of a trilogy. It started with my show in June 2010 at Braverman Gallery called "They'll Never Wake Us In Time." In March 2011 there was the second solo show at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art titled "Two Thousand and Eleven." The last part was planned for a gallery in Berlin, but plans changed and it is now going to be shown elsewhere in Europe or the States sometime next year.

In this cycle of works I'm trying to construct a haunted present, to convey a sense of things that belong in the past and suddenly come into life or movement in the present. As if objects, styles and persons that are long forgotten and obsolete manage to shine through darkness for one last time.