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CULTURE



Three artists, three questions

In surreal times

• BASIA MONKA

In 1924, when French writer, poet, and critic André Breton published the *Surrealist Manifesto*, no one likely thought about the impact it would have on the art scene and everyday vocabulary 100 years later.

Contemporary art wouldn't be the same without Surrealism, and personally, I can't imagine the art world without the works of Salvador Dalí, who elevated the imagination and subconscious, detached from reality, to limitless and fascinating realms.

Moreover, in Israel in the summer of 2025, the word "surreal" in everyday life seems very relevant to many of us, when little makes sense in our reality, and comedians call the next steps in the ongoing war parts of a matryoshka.

We, the art lovers, escape in art. The resilience of artists takes us to their imagined worlds. These, however, intentionally or not, often blend with the reality of the war and are sometimes even inspired by it.

In my monthly search for interesting artists for this column, I sought out artworks, but I also heard the most surreal stories from their creators.

Among them, I met an artist evacuated due to the war, who, despite having no permanent place to live, still exhibits her work. An emerging artist who began creating during the current war, serving as an IDF reservist, using shrapnel from rocket shells as the art material. And a young but experienced artist, who, after a few years' break, now feels ready to open his new exhibition.

Three Israeli artists, working in very different media, answered my three questions:

1. What inspires you?
2. What do you call art?
3. What, in your opinion, makes your artwork different from that of other artists?

Ronit Porat

Ronit Porat was born in 1975 in Kibbutz Kfar Giladi in northern Israel, where she returned five years ago after spending several years in London, Amsterdam, and Tel Aviv. The Oct. 7 war disrupted her plans for a quiet, stable life.

"The Upper Galilee Municipality suggested we leave the kibbutz on Oct. 8 [2023], but we left on Oct. 9. Then we flew for an exhibition in Paris, and then I went straight back to the Ohalo Manor hotel, where most of the kibbutz members were staying," she told the *Magazine*. She still hasn't returned home. "I'm evacuated," she explained



RONIT PORAT. (Basia Monka)

at the beginning of our conversation.

Porat works with photography, incorporating archival materials and biographical texts into her installations; she tells historical stories through collages. She employs optical illusions, such as stereoscopic double imaging, to create shadowy figures.

Porat has an MFA from the Chelsea School of Art and Design in London and a BA in fine arts in photography and digital media from Hadassah Academic College in Jerusalem. She is a recipient of the Culture Ministry's Award for Encouragement of Creativity, the Lauren and Mitchell Presser Photography Award for Young Israeli Artists, and has received scholarships from the Amsterdam Fonds voor de Kunst, Artis, and the America-Israel Cultural Foundation.

She has participated in several residency programs, such as at the School of Visual Arts in New York, the Keret House in Warsaw, and the Castrum Pergrini in Amsterdam.

She has exhibited in group and solo shows in Israel and Europe, and most recently (April-June) had her solo exhibition *Time Capsule* at the L'Space Gallery in New York. Her selected works are currently on display at Tel Aviv's Givon Art Forum in the House of Israeli Art's group exhibition: *Things That Never Happened: The Return of Surrealism*.

Inspiration: "Photography is my greatest passion. Over the past 15 years, I've found endless inspiration in German magazines and books from the 1920s and 1930s. The aesthetics of the Weimar Republic, especially the imag-

ery of the New Woman, cabaret culture, and early art colleges like the Dada movement, have had a profound and lasting influence on me.

"Photography is constantly evolving with time, technology, and perspective, and that's what makes it so inspiring to me. There's something powerful about how a single image can capture a moment or an entire story.

"Nature also inspires me deeply, particularly birds. I often return to the same bird image multiple times, creating entirely new and varied collages from it. There's something endlessly expressive in their form and symbolism. My never-ending inspiration is also Lake Kinneret [the Sea of Galilee], where I have been since I was evacuated.

"I usually work listening to music. I draw inspiration from musicians like Nina Simone, Ahuva Ozeri, Etta James, Concha Buika, and Haris Alexiou. Each of them brings something soulful and deeply human to their music."

Meaning of art: "To me, art is anything someone creates with intention, something that carries emotion and tells a story. It doesn't have to be traditionally beautiful or technically perfect; what matters is the connection it creates between the work and the person experiencing it."

Porat's art: "Many artists work with collages, and some of their pieces might look similar to mine. What sets my art apart, though, is the specific aesthetic I create by using images sourced from magazines from the 1920s and 1930s. I scan and carefully arrange these vin-

tage images to build a narrative through their combination.

"On top of that, I weave in short biographical sentences alongside the visuals, like no one has seen, and this creates a cohesive story that blends text and image. This combination has become my signature and something that defines my artwork."

ronitporat.com/

Eli Gross

Eli Gross, born in 1996 in Jerusalem to a haredi family of Biala Hassidim, is the 12th of 17 siblings. He is self-taught in art and just opened his first solo exhibition, *Simple Things*, at his own ARTillery Gallery. This space is connected to his art studio in south Tel Aviv, where he moved within the past year.

Gross received a traditional, ultra-Orthodox education: heder and yeshivas for boys. He married at the age of 20, which, he explained, gave him more freedom to make life decisions.

"I enlisted in *Sheyrut Ezrahi*, a civil service instead of the army, where I learned about technology, which enabled me to enter the world of hi-tech," Gross said. He worked in hi-tech for the next seven years. He quit after Oct. 7 and joined the army. "After training, I joined the Israel Air Force Reserve, where I could use my technical experience," he said.

The war also triggered in him a need to create from unusual materials: shrapnel from missiles, rockets, and fragments of the Iron Dome. Gross cuts, grinds, and welds, transforming these instruments of destruction into Israel-shaped pen-

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BOAZ LEVENTAL. (Meydad Eliyahu)



ELI GROSS. (Lilia Megera)

dants, mezuzah cases, and sculptures with minimal intervention, allowing the fragments to speak for themselves.

Visitors to Hostages Square are familiar with his two-meter high *hanukkiyah*, made from missile fragments, on which people hang yellow ribbons in honor of the hostages.

In part of his exhibition, Gross gives his testimony to the massacre that took place on Simchat Torah 2023 in Kibbutz Be'eri.

"With the permission of the Kedem family, I collected objects and reconstructed a burnt-out section of their family home, largely consumed by the fire. The sooty clock on the wall stands motionless at 5:45, the moment when time stopped. Toothbrushes, a chair, and children's toys – all these objects are silent witnesses," Gross said.

Inspiration: "I find inspiration in materials that already carry traces of human experience – metals that were twisted by impact, fragments of objects that once served a purpose but were broken. I'm interested in how these remains hold memory. There is something powerful about taking something that was part of conflict or destruction and turning it into a symbol of resilience.

"I'm also inspired by everyday gestures of strength: people who rebuild their lives after loss, communities that come together to support each other, or simple acts of care and responsibility. These moments remind me that creativity is not only about making something new but also has healing potential."

Meaning of art: "Art is an honest encounter with reality. It is not about making something flawless or decorative. Art begins when material,

memory, and feeling come together. Art does not always offer comfort; sometimes, it challenges or unsettles us. But I believe that is part of its value."

Gross's art: "I believe my work is different because it does not try to hide the past of the materials. I choose to leave the scars, burns, and traces visible to show where they came from. I want them to keep the marks of their history.

"For example, when I create a mezuzah or a sculpture from fragments of iron or metal used in defense systems, I don't fully polish them. I let the contrast remain between the raw, damaged surface and the new form.

"This tension reflects the reality that beauty and pain often coexist. My intention is not only to produce an object but to offer an honest testimony about transformation – how something wounded can also become a source of meaning and connection."

www.instagram.com/artillery2026

Boaz Levental

Boaz Levental was born in Tel Aviv in 1981, where he lived until this year, when he moved to Even Yehuda. He paints in oils, and he loved drawing and painting from a young age.

Levental earned a BFA from the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design and continued his studies at the Hatahana Studio of Figurative Art and Calligraphy under the supervision of Kazuo Ishii at the Shiboku Studio in Tel Aviv. He has won several awards, such as the Lauren and Mitchell Presser Award for Excellence in Painting in 2010 and the Oscar Handler Award for Art in 2023.

His work has been featured in numerous solo and group shows in

Israel. On June 10, the artist opened his latest solo exhibition, *At the Violet Hour*, at the Rothschild Fine Art Gallery. The exhibition's title is taken from T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, which addresses the shattered and disintegrated post-World War I reality.

Levental said that for the past three years, he has struggled with presentation and has had to work primarily in his studio, resulting in a complete body of work that he is presenting for the first time in this exhibition.

His paintings draw from a variety of sources: an observation of painting, photography, and reality itself. When asked why many of his figures are faceless, he replied, "They have faces, but you can't see them. Sometimes I paint them, then I paint over them and add more paint. Sometimes they become blurred."

Interestingly, on the contrary, looking at his portrait of a woman from the 1920s [pictured in the article], with large eyes, Levental explained that he was not interested in her face but in the way she holds her hands.

Inspiration: "Music gives me immense inspiration. When I just started painting, I worked in a record store and would spend a lot of time looking at album covers, like Robert Wyatt's *Rock Bottom* or albums by Roxy Music. The covers featured images that truly moved me and made me want to paint. I was deeply into jazz and progressive rock. Jimi Hendrix had a huge influence on me.

"When painting comes in... I am channeled between consciousness and conscious thought, and the shapes and colors, with no mediation. I love most

in painting when I feel led by an unstoppable force, and the painting almost tells me what it wants, without intellectual interference. The translation of this state onto the canvas is purely sensory – colors, shapes, painting.

"Another thing that inspires me is depth; people who spend most of their time researching and asking questions."

Meaning of art: "I really don't know what art is. But when I see something and feel that the world wouldn't be the same without it, I recognize that as art. Van Gogh, for example, I feel that without him, we wouldn't even be able to imagine or conceive that such a kind of painting could exist. Or when I think of a world without Cézanne, I feel we would be missing something.

"But most of the time, I don't care whether what I do is considered art or not. I place greater importance on the act of painting itself. To me, it's almost therapeutic."

Levental's art: "For me, life and art are completely intertwined. Painting recharges my life with vitality, with a sense of purpose (however minor it may be). I often work on bodies of work that are radically different from one another, simultaneously. One painting may be done from observation, while another comes entirely from imagination.

"Another thing that might set my work apart is the wide range of sources from which I draw inspiration. The different paths I take and decisions I make alter the paintings so that the same figure can appear entirely differently in another work, creating a completely different outcome."

rgfineart.com/artist/boaz-levental/?img=5508