Chapter 1

Storytellers

Chapter 2

Untitled

University of Haifa
Faculty of Humanities, The Art Gallery
The catalogue before you is a document fusing two exhibitions featured consecutively: “Storytellers” and “Untitled.” The exhibitions sought to form two consecutive chapters, point and counterpoint, but later turned out to be point and sequel, or two sides of the same coin. “Storytellers” featured seventeen artists, “Untitled” featured thirteen. Three artists participated in both shows – Boaz Arad, Yossi Breger, and David Ginton. In many respects, additional “storytellers” could have been exhibited in “Untitled.” The titles of the exhibitions represent what appear to be the two poles of the art work: art that tells a story (external to it) and art that tells itself. Ultimately, however, the poles were less unequivocal than they may have seemed, for storytellers never tell a straightforward story, whereas the content of the works dubbed Untitled can often be described in narrative terms.

Nevertheless, “Storytellers” featured works which explicitly contained some story, albeit fragmented and interrupted, embedded within a structure that interferes with its coherence, yet still preserves basic narrative features. Once upon a time there was... there were. An ostrich family (Guy Ben-Ner), a girl whose father called “useless” (Tracey Moffatt), a mother and her three daughters (Nurit David), a guy named Thomas who is offended by a friend named Ronen (Yossi Breger), a girl who goes out for a meal with her grandmother and her best friend (Jenifer Bar Lev), and so on and so forth. A stroll in the exhibition “Storytellers” was accompanied by a constant buzz, an incessant murmur of speech...
and mumbling. The gallery space contained a surplus of stories that sought a platform and attention for themselves. Some had real sound that emanated from monitors and projectors; others were mute.

Ostensibly, what is the point in lingering on narrativity in art? Is it not an integral part of the work of art? The point is the pendulum of modern art which for several decades gradually inclined more and more toward the silent, non-verbal direction. Since the beginning of the 20th century, and once again after mid-century, art avoided verbosity, and established itself as an autonomous language whose syntax consists of form, color, matter, word (namely, via manifestations of abstract, minimalism, and conceptual art). Calling art narrative was, until recently, almost considered an offense. Only lately, gradually, art that tells a story retook center stage. This happened simultaneously with several processes: the return to the figurative in the 1980s, the penetration of photography and video into the heart of artistic practice, and the flourishing of many marginal stories: of women, minorities, individuals of different races and origins. The story which returned to art after being excluded, was, to a large extent, also the story of those whose voice had not been heard.

Thus, Jeff Wall’s 1986 work The Storyteller accurately marks the pendulum swing. The figure of the storyteller in the photograph embodies gender and ethnic otherness. The anachronism of oral storytelling acquires a subversive, alternative dimension. At the same time, the traditionalism implied in the storyteller’s figure elucidates the radical dimension in art which rejects the story. The story-rejecting (hermetic, incomprehensible, silent) art has spawned one of the most quintessential expressions of modern art – the untitled.

In all languages it is an expression in the negative. Negating and principally avoiding, presenting the absence and the void. Untitled signals to the viewer: you are on your own; there is no point to wait for help, for some key. A column comprised of truck tires runs from floor to ceiling [Efrat Klipshtein]; a row of rectangular objects is hung on the wall [Angela Klein]; colorful paper ribbons are suspended from the ceiling [Hila Laviv] – had they at least been accompanied by a more generous title, we would like to hope, these enigmatic objects would have given themselves more readily to interpretation. But the Untitled attached to them is impervious, blocking, preventing.

Untitled has accompanied so many art works since the mid-20th century that it can be regarded as a perfect representation of art that rejects the possibility of being articulated in words. At times it recalls caricatures from the past which were accompanied by the caption “Without words.” Such a caption (without the humorous dimension) sounds like the very essence of Untitled in the video piece by Boaz Arad and Miki Kratsman – forty minutes of Palestinian workers crossing at a checkpoint. Arad and Kratsman’s camera doesn’t move. Their work is devoid of sound. An endless procession of untitled men coming back home at the end of a day’s work in Israel, carrying bundles and bags. Some march vigorously, others – wearily. Rarely do we see women among them. Some look at the camera, others ignore it. Countless human stories and the entire Israeli-Palestinian conflict – without words; untitled.

Arad and Kratsman’s video is featured in the exhibition “Untitled” as a radical case of a work that explodes with story and narrative, yet prefers to appear behind Untitled. Possible reasons: the images render the words redundant; the materials are so charged that they require a
title that might cool the sizzling lava somewhat. The video photographs require a filter through which the transition from the documentary to the artistic will occur. **Untitled** is a perfect artistic filter.

Most of the works in the exhibition "**Untitled**" are called **Untitled**. Some have other titles which elucidate how a title can motivate reading and interpretation, and certainly create yet another screen of obscurity as well. Vis-à-vis the basic desire to tell a story, an equally strong tendency of art is revealed – to transpire on a visual level that is not necessarily decoded into words.

The mute story of Jeff Wall’s storyteller hangs in the air like a ball of yarn striving to be unraveled. Such are most of the stories concealed within the art works. This is perhaps the most accurate distinction between the "Storytellers" and the "Untitled" artists: from some of these balls you can easily pull a strand; others are tangled within themselves, refusing to volunteer even a lead.

**Eyal Ben-Dov**

**Jeff Wall’s Storyteller**

In January 2006 Jeff Wall’s first retrospective closed at the Tate Modern, London. A retrospective exhibition of an artist in his lifetime is a significant, meaningful event, even though it is often met with a raised eyebrow in the more established museum circles. Ever since the Tate Modern changed its appearance, the retrospective seems to have become a concluding, but certainly not a final station, a fact which furnishes the artist himself with a powerful experience and profound scrutiny, from the viewer’s vantage point, of twenty-five years of creation. As for Jeff Wall and the interactions of his art within and without the art world, we seem to have reached a concluding moment. We can already feel the new winds blowing, and seek new beginnings and additional circles. Perhaps these are the very same circles moving in spirals that return to the same spot, only slightly shifted.

Wall’s works embody several theoretical junctions. The most significant, to my mind, is the relationship between painting and photography, a relationship that has existed since the advent of photography, and has undergone many incarnations since. Wall’s lightboxes, which some dub "allegorical windows," the ultimate substitute to painting, strive for the "ethics of looking," to borrow Wall’s own words. Photography has always sought an ethical view of the world. Even when it is perfectly aesthetic, it is almost always contemplating, observing, reading – and telling. Rosalind Krauss maintains that photography has become art’s theoretical object. Ordinarily it is a small sheet of paper that reflects
the world, striving to talk and contemplate on it. The gaze at something, says Krauss, is not the thing itself. The most significant essence of photography is, perhaps, the substitution, displacement, distance.

Another major 20th century intersection is the one between the aesthetic and the ethical, between Adorno and Benjamin. Walter Benjamin, perhaps the most important philosopher of photography, defined the essence of the medium as political. Wall is deeply-rooted at this crossroad. His ethno-documentary gaze addresses political problems of Canadian society in particular and North American society in general, and at the same time, touches upon global issues of Late Capitalism pertaining to class, occupation, ethnicity, race, and gender. Wall’s “ethics of looking” tells stories about life today and about the history of art. He encapsulates these modern intersections decisively, junctions yet to be extensively discussed and of which we cannot rid ourselves with unbearable lightness, even though we yearn to move on.

Clement Greenberg argued that the essence of photography lies in its ability to tell a story. The medium’s documentary and allegorical power conceal its great paradox – its muteness, what Greenberg called the medium’s “transparency,” and Benjamin called “the dialectical image.” Greenberg’s transparency made for a politicization of art by flattening painterly aesthetics and underscoring documentary photography as artistic in the United States, as opposed to Europe. Benjamin’s dialectic concealed the aesthetic and the ethical, at times to the point of a true blurring of boundaries: the dialectic between politicization of the aesthetic and aestheticization of the political.

Another intersection reflected by Wall is that of painting and cinema. Wall’s still images are cinematic. Mise en scènes staged as part of a cinematic production, with lighting, casting, costumes, picturesque choreography, and reconstruction. Cinematic stills that also indicate the interrelations between cinema and photography, a junction far from conclusion. This junction is also populated by various types of video-art which pertain, in one way or another, to historical, political, and aesthetic questions. For still photography, the cinematic encounter is literary. Cinematographers consider stills as poetry, the epitome of the cinematic visual.

Nostalgic Archetypes

The Storyteller, a work from 1986, is among Wall’s largest, some 2.5 meters in height and more than 4 meters in width. A monumental lightbox. I opt for the Hebrew feminine form to depict the “storyteller,” even though in English the speaker’s gender remains indefinite, allowing for interpretive openness concerning the identity of the speakers and the story as a whole. Wall likes to leave the literary narrative open, even though he constructs it meticulously. At times it seems as though the narratives in his works even split, thus further complicating the viewer/reader. A close look reveals that the girl on the left, sitting in the company of two men around a small fire, is gesticulating, indicating speech. Her two companions look at her and listen. The girl is Hispanic? Native North American? Indian? The man is white; he wears jeans and a brown jacket. All three sit around a little fire in a place covered with grayish-brown, somewhat rotting, dead-looking grass. Above them, almost at the top of the hill, there is a couple on a blanket. The man is reclining, leaning on his arm, in a red shirt that protrudes from afar;
the woman sits next to him in a white sweater, her gaze is turned outside the frame. Another man sits on his own under a massive gray concrete bridge, crouching on gray stones, in a checkered shirt and jeans. He looks Native American as well, and his eyes are likewise directed outside the frame. Ostensibly assuming an observation post, however, he does not look like a typical warrior in full regalia. All these figures sit in a type of artificial, urban garden, weedy grounds under the highway, with landscaping that represents domesticated nature, defoliated trees in the colors of Canadian autumn: yellows, browns, dark greens, verdant grass, dark gray. Cultivation of nature at the margins of the road, color spots of white, red, embedded with black. The frame is cut by a crude high voltage line stretching from the highway overpass to the dark trees.

Wall restages Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe: photography as the ultimate painting in the late 20th century. Peoples’ gatherings in a park-like public space. Nature is replaced with the margins of the freeway. Wall corresponds with the urban facet of Manet’s Déjeuner: the group of three, the elbow’s placement on the knee. In Manet’s case, the woman is naked, in Wall’s – she is the storyteller. This is Wall’s response to feminist theories, a symbolic recognition of the woman’s regained strength through her voice as a storyteller, precisely due to photography’s muteness.

Wall explores marginal figures within the urban fabric, which he defines as “ruined people,” “images of potential.” Wall positions his actors/models, whom he located at a job-training center for unemployed Native Americans, in a place that attests to lack of placement, much like the majority of his works where the place itself is displaced, a displacement that is generated by deviation from the familiar symbolism. Nature is domesticated and the freeway’s marginal space becomes a park. The human margins are set at the story’s core. It is an intricate technique of photographic positioning which serves political narratives. Wall addresses social and political life in Canada and North America, as well as capitalist globalism. He creates a type of urban utopia subjected to total dystopia. Capitalist racism is organized as an artificial garden that reinstates the Native American woman with her tribal power as a storyteller. It is a philosophical piece that deals with the social state of affairs through art history, staged photography, and cinema. Wall’s works must be read as manifestos. They can be studied in depth.

Wall taught at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada for many years. He specializes in 19th century painting, and is especially fond of Courbet and Manet. He often issues declarations, gives interviews, and provides explanations for his works. About The Storyteller he says that her figure “is an archaism. A social type which has lost its function as a result of the technological transformations of literacy.” He describes the scene as a “relic of the imagination, a nostalgic archetype.” Wall often quotes Walter Benjamin, especially with regard to historical memory and political moves that erode values, mainly in the processes between Marxism and Capitalism. Benjamin pointed at social destruction that preserves an erased historical memory of values. Wall shows “ruined people as being images of potential,” thus preserving the memory of Manet’s painting. “This memory recovers its potential in moments of crisis.” The native peoples of Canada at the margins of society, whose lives have been destroyed by Capitalist economy, preserve the memory of a cultural heritage embodied by the Native American storyteller and represented in the photograph. “The crisis is the present,” says Wall.
Native Indian culture has been dispossessed, but the culture of oral literacy and mutual aid has not been eliminated altogether; it has been preserved in the cultural sphere in weakened forms. The image of the storyteller represents the historical crisis of the native peoples of North America, a crisis that can lead to rediscovery of Indian cultural identity and result in reconstruction of the historical narrative. The storyteller is a reinvention of an archaic figure “that could maybe provide a new figura within modernism, one ... which would emblematize peace, knowledge, frankness, sympathy, high spirits, fearlessness, acumen, dialogue, cunning, economy, passion.” At the beginning of the 21st century, this may sound somewhat naïve and overly optimistic, but Wall made these statements in the 1980s, when winds of change were blowing. Looking at the state of affairs today, it seems to have deteriorated, perhaps not in all respects, but certainly economically. Global economy is in full swing. We can clearly feel its bitter, harsh toll. The gaps between gain and loss gradually grow. The global economic situation becomes more and more tangled, more complicated, insoluble. The cultural situation, on the other hand, seems to be improving at times. More knowledge and money are invested in cultural endeavors pertaining to ethnic identities, artistic developments in broader fields that fuse into new social forces. Greater money is invested in culture. Still, this may be but a passing illusion, a computerized game of money exchange, a post-modern bubble, a pendulum swing, the materialist dialectic at its prime.

The feeling triggered in the late 20th century, that something grand has gone awry, in fact becomes more acute. Good and evil have not disappeared, but have become radicalized. Wall’s work still strives to convey a naïve hope, but in effect reinforces the sense that the situation is insolvable. His sophisticated messages conceal good as well as bad. His recent works have become gradually less naïve, reflecting an existing, growing evil. Evil is becoming legitimate, thus the modern relationship between good and evil alters.

Wall’s works touch upon the topical through the imaginary and its symbolization. His symbolic order is based on the structuring of language and speech. It is a representation of the economic condition through North American culture and the identity of the native minority: through dress codes and positioning in space, historical symbols of painting and their transfer to the imaginary realm in a sphere of “archaic” values of Native American culture. The literary dimension is likewise intertwined in this imaginary, symbolical sphere; the creation of a “cinematic,” namely narrative, still photograph that deals with the imaginary storyteller as associated with the tribe’s historical symbols. For Wall, the re-introduction of the symbolical order is akin to an act of social rectification of the present crisis. Wall’s works do not strive to be documentary. They offer ideological manifestoes, social utopias, whose very utopianism prevents them from being realized. Wall positions the topical in the realm of the imaginary; the ideological is the realm of the imaginary, which is Wall’s place. Jeff Wall of the late 1980s believed in the ideological rectification which he imagined through the work of art.

Jeff Wall’s quotes were extracted from:
www.sterneck.net/cybertribe/vision/jeff-wall-storyteller/index.php
Abstract art has been puzzling its viewers since it was first introduced at the beginning of the 20th century. It seemed that abstract painting required no particular skill, and in fact was claimed by many not to be art at all, for even a one year old baby could produce similar results. Many attempts have been made to make sense of abstract art. It is commonly claimed that abstract painting is a kind of refinement of the painterly problems with which painting has always been engaged. In this respect, abstract painting is perceived as representing the essence of painting. It was argued that the essence of painting is an application of paint on a flat surface (Greenberg), or a quasi-scientific inquiry into the qualities of paint (Elkins), while others have argued that it is an expression of the artist's personality.

In what follows, I would like to suggest another reading of painting: that art veils nothingness and at the same time points at it. I will argue that it is the hidden thread that links the earliest perceptions of art, to be observed in Pliny’s myths regarding painting, and twentieth century art theory and philosophy, in particular that of Rosalind Krauss, Jacques Lacan, and Martin Heidegger. I shall show that abstract painting, by its very refusal to represent anything, presents us with what we are most afraid of, with the most common trait of any living creature: the nothingness we came from and to which we shall return.
The Corinthian Girl

Pliny, in his *Natural History*, recounts two myths pertaining to painting, in which the relation of art to nothingness is implied: that of the Corinthian girl, and that of Parrhasios and Zeuxis. The former could be interpreted as indicating that representation is the essence of painting, while the later shows that its essence is veiling. Both stories link art and nothingness, although in two different ways. The first perceives painting as (re)presenting the absent. The latter could be interpreted as concealing nothingness, but at the same time making us aware of the possibility of nothingness.

The story of the Corinthian girl tells of how she traced the shadow of her lover on the wall of a tent before he went abroad. The story implies that because painting is producing an image of someone who will be absent in the future, it presents something that is absent in reality. The act of making an image stems from the desire to conceal an absence in reality by duplicating the lost object, but it succeeds only in capturing its trace. Her drawing is a commemoration of her lover’s image that attests to his absence in reality because it is able to capture only his shadow, frozen in time and space, and unable to duplicate reality completely. The painting, then, is a partial concealment of absence, and as such, points to the absence of the painted object in reality.

A similar perception of art, as presenting absence, can be found in 20th-century art theory. There is, however, a difference in emphasis regarding which absence and presence the painting is to portray, as 20th-century art theory emphasizes the painting’s capacity to evoke the presence/absence of the painter, rather than the object it depicts.

Zeuxis and Parrhasios

The second myth concerns the story of the competition between two Greek painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasios. Zeuxis painted grapes so well that birds attempted to eat them. Parrhasios painted a veil. Seeing the veil, Zeuxis wanted to see what was behind it. Parrhasios won the competition, but Pliny does not tell us why. It could be said that both painters almost perfectly represent reality, so why is the one better that the other?

Lacan in his seminar concerning the gaze argues that Parrhasios won the competition because he succeeded in deceiving a human being and not only birds. Based on my reading of the essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” by German philosopher Martin Heidegger, I would like to suggest another interpretation: that Parrhasios won the competition because by painting a veil he represented the true essence of painting; that painting is itself a veil that simultaneously conceals and points at nothingness.

In his essay Heidegger maintains that what is unique to an artwork is that it allows the happening of a truth. He derives his notion of truth from a quasi-literal understanding of the Greek word for ‘truth’, ἀλήθεια, which Heidegger construes as “the unconcealment of beings.” But why must beings be revealed to us? Is it not obvious that everything that
exists is unconcealed to us? If so, then why do we need the artwork to reveal them?

In "What is Metaphysics?" Heidegger writes that "only on the ground of the original revelation of the nothing can human existence approach and penetrate beings" meaning that entities can be revealed to us only against the background of nothingness. In other words, we must be conscious of nothingness in order to be aware of beings. This means that in order for the truth, as un-concealment of beings, to happen in an artwork, it must be somehow related to nothingness; and if an artwork differs from any other entity in the world, then it must have a much more intimate relationship to nothingness than any other entity.

An artwork, according to Heidegger, is characterized by two main features, both of which, as I shall show, associate it with nothingness. The first is that a work of art is something created; the second is that it is preserved. A work of art is something created, and it corresponds to Heidegger’s notion of “truth” because it brings something new into appearance, something that has never been before and will never come to be again. The createdness of the work is not demonstrated by the fact that it was created by a great artist, but by the simple fact that it is:

...the simple factum est ... is to be held forth into the open region by the work: namely this, that unconcealment of a being has happened here, and that as this happening it happens here for the first time; or, that such a work is at all rather than is not.

The last phrase calls to mind Heidegger’s assertion in "What is Metaphysics?" that nothingness makes possible the revelation of beings: "that they are beings – and not nothing." which points to the relation that an artwork holds towards nothingness. Because the work of art is something and not nothing, however, it conceals nothingness and points, by its very being, to the possibility of nothingness.

This could be said about any human artifact, therefore we must establish the difference between an artwork and other human products. Heidegger’s answer is that an artwork is preserved. In everything that is present to us we can observe the fact that it is. Yet, Heidegger maintains, usually we use human products without paying attention to their existence, and if we do pay attention to it, it immediately sinks into oblivion. Furthermore, with other products, this "that it is" disappears in use. In the case of an art work, on the other hand, the fact "that it is" is precisely what is unusual about it. This is so because unlike other products, a work of art is preserved. Preserving the work, for Heidegger, means primarily that its viewers are witnesses of the truth that happens in the work of art; that is, that the work is, rather than is not.

From all the above one can understand why Parrhasios won the competition: by painting a veil he expressed the essence of painting, namely to conceal and reveal nothingness. The artwork is created out of nothing and it is, but it also makes us aware of the possibility of nothingness.

Abstract Art

Poetry, for Heidegger, is the essence of art, and has a privileged position among the arts. He writes:
Truth, as the clearing and concealing of beings, happens in being composed. All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of being, is as such, in essence, poetry. This seems precarious in light of the fact that the examples introduced by Heidegger in this essay refer to plastic art, painting and architecture. He uses Van Gogh’s Shoes painting to exemplify the way in which truth happens in an artwork. Heidegger himself writes what can be perceived as a perfect description of abstract painting:

The more solitarily the work, fixed in the figure, stands on its own and the more cleanly it seems to cut all ties to human beings, the more simply does the thrust come into the open that such a work is, and the more essentially is the extraordinary thrust to the surface and what is long familiar thrust down... To submit to this displacement means to transform our accustomed ties to the world and earth, and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to stay within the truth that is happening in the work.

At least in my opinion, there is no art that cuts all ties to human beings, to all that is familiar and ordinary, more than abstract art, and there is no art whose existence, just the fact that it is, bewilders us more than abstract painting. Heidegger explains his preference for poetry by claiming that it is the art of language, which "by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance." Such a distinction could make sense if we follow Heidegger’s thinking about the role of art as representing nothingness, and his concept of language. He writes: “where there is no language, as in the being of a stone, plant and animal, there is also no openness of beings, and consequently no openness of non-being and of the empty.” This phrase indicates that for Heidegger human beings are distinguished from other beings by their use of language and their awareness of nothingness, and that one is a consequence of the other. As such, nothing can better express nothingness than language.

Two objections could be made to the claim that because we have language we are aware of the possibility of non-being. First, it is also arguable that since no other entity creates art, our awareness of the possibility of non-being is caused by the fact that we have art, which makes us aware that there could be nothing instead, as is indicated by the story of Parrhasios. Second, we might also perceive our awareness of our mortality as prior to language, making it also arguable that since no other entity creates art, our awareness of our mortality could also be the cause of the desire to create art and our fascination with it. Indeed, both myths regarding art, that of the Corinthian girl and that of Zeuxis and Parrhasios, indicate that painting stems from our awareness of our impending nothingness as it is derived from our desire to conceal it.

Figurative painting, like the drawing of the Corinthian girl, presents the absence of something particular, and by so doing it partially conceals this absence and at the same time conjures it up. Abstract painting, on the other hand, does not represent anything and shows us nothing but itself. Heidegger’s phrase: “Building and plastic creation, on the other hand, always happen already, and happen only, in the open region of saying and naming” cannot therefore be applied to abstract painting. Without any references to the external world it is a new being that has never been before and will never be again, and which words cannot describe.
Veronique Fóti attempted to explain Heidegger’s repudiation of abstract painting arguing that the abstract art he had in mind was the Abstract Expressionist movement that was concerned with subjectivity, and therefore refers to something that already existed. She suggests that the paintings of Vassily Kandinsky, one of the pioneers of abstract painting, accord with Heidegger’s conception of art. She argues that his painting is more enigmatic than emblematic, that it “problematizes any univocal articulation of figure and ground”, and displays “an attention to blank or void space, as much as to color and form, and thematizing of the trace by working with ‘accidental’ marks, such as flung color, the stain, and the drip.”

However, Kandinsky’s paintings are still abstractions of objects in the world, though barely recognized; the horse and its rider are motifs recurring in his most abstract paintings, and can be deciphered by tracing their process of abstraction from one painting to another. They still “tell” a story and relate to this world, and therefore cannot be called pure abstract paintings, and consequently they do not cut all ties to human beings.

Indeed, represented subjectivity could be an impediment if we are to consider a painting as presenting us only with its own presence. If we insist on finding subjectivity, however, we could find it in any poem or art object, even in Kandinsky’s paintings and in ready-made art objects which could be perceived as reflecting an individual mind. To look for subjectivity in an abstract painting is just to replace one narrative with another, to “read” in a painting the artist’s psyche instead of his/her view of the world. In other words, in my opinion, it misses the whole point of abstract painting which is to present us with nothing. We can look in Jackson Pollock’s paintings, which are perceived as an example of the pure expression of subjectivity, for signs of his psyche, as he himself intended them to be, or we can see his paintings just as they are: a surface covered with paint which says nothing and means nothing.

Of course, some abstract paintings present nothingness better than others. The fact that we can still relate Pollock’s paintings to subjectivity indicates that his paintings are not the best example of such art. The paintings of Mark Rothko, another New York School artist, are a better example of an art that corresponds to Heidegger’s notion of art’s origin. He himself intended his paintings to represent what he called “the human drama,” which for him consisted of the fact that we are born to die. He did not want his paintings to tell us any particular story, but rather to “intimate mortality”. He made a deliberate attempt to subvert our reading of color and space in his paintings, resulting in a sensation that the rectangular forms float on the surface, whose quantity we cannot know for certain. His rectangular forms are not entirely submerged by the background but also not entirely distinct from it, so that we cannot be sure if they are coming to be or ceasing to be. His paintings neatly cut our ties to the world and create an eerie experience which resembles one of looking into a precipice, something that makes us anxious, yet we cannot resist the temptation of looking, an experience that cannot be expressed in words.

2. Ibid., pp. 309-311
3. Ibid., p. 373
Ruti Direktor

Untitled Stories

Who Tells a Story? Whom To?

Safed. The 1950s. Yosl Bergner is captivated by painted wooden toys. Legend has it that the local milkman led him to the old watchmaker, Shalom Moskovitz. Bergner asked him to paint, and the horologist started painting the only stories he knew: Bible stories. **Shalom of Safed**, as he was later named, was an orthodox man. He truly believed in painting’s ability to tell a story. He is the true storyteller, the one who in Jeff Wall’s photograph is embodied by the Native American woman. The naïveté in his paintings is an integral part of the archaism and anachronism implied, as aforesaid, by the very act of storytelling.

If the act of storytelling is associated with childhood, naïveté, the tribal campfire, with the time when communities shared myths and legends, then from where do contemporary storytellers tell a story?

Of all the painters participating in the two exhibitions (perhaps of all the painters currently active in Israel), **Nurit David**’s painting seems to be the most verbal. Meticulously, in a figurative style – one she was not born into as a painter and therefore is not principally natural to her – she depicts herself and her family members after family album photographs. She puts the figures into imaginary settings and landscapes. One of the paintings is entitled **To Enter Out**: a girl is combing her mother’s hair in a stairwell. A female figure from another period...
descends the stairs. "To Enter out" is an oxymoron; a combination of interior and exterior. The painting is narrative and inviting, but once you enter, you encounter an obstruction. The viewer (along with the depicted heroines) remains in the stairwell. Curtain has a similar quality of inviting in-out: The painted curtain rises, but the play is incomprehensible. David invites the viewer to observe an occurrence, clearly depicting every detail, every flower and every pattern on the dress, but her painting remains silent. The story is prevented. One may surmise that this is an attribute of painting, but video artists, those who employ the technology of the cinematic medium, the medium of the contemporary storytellers – likewise invite you in and gently push you out. Their story falters.

The works by Boaz Arad, Michael Blum, Guy Ben-Ner, Lia Shnaider & Liron Levi represent different modes of narrativity. They rely on literary and cinematic models (silent films, nature films, documentary films, "artistic" films, adventure books, etc.), disrupting and dissolving these models by diverse means.

Boaz Arad creates a gallery of conflicted relationships between the narrator’s voice (his mother’s, for example, or singer Zohar Argov’s, or even – Hitler’s) and the figure ostensibly uttering the voice – the artist himself or a puppet in his image. Arad’s videos, like those of all video artists, are presented in an endless loop which cancels the linearity at the core of the cinematic medium: a story based on beginning, middle, and end. In the movie theater the lights come up and the movie ends. In the case of video art, the screening is in an endless sequence. The viewer enters the screening hall and can leave whenever he likes.

In Yossi Breger’s video pieces, for example, the words “beginning” and “end” appear at the beginning and end of each short film. The “end,” however, is immediately followed by a “beginning” once again. This is also the case in Nadav Weissman’s animated film: the protagonist plays the piano. His nails grow at a scary rate, and he is forced to clip them, but they grow again, interfering with his playing. He leaves the house, takes a pistol, mounts a horse and rides until he reaches the house, enters, sits by the piano, and starts playing, and so on and so forth. The story unfolds in the course of a minute and a half, but it is an endless minute-and-a-half. It is unclear what came first – the riding or the piano playing. The more you watch the video, the stronger the sense of dizziness becomes, and with it the sense of distress. A story? A self-tangled loop of narrative appearance.

Guy Ben-Ner directs videos which are a structuring and a distortion of cinematic films. Lia Shnaider & Liron Levi’s film pays homage to the silent film, inspired by Charlie Chaplin and especially by his Modern Times. The protagonists of The Hole Land are an unemployed couple fired from their jobs in a company for romantic flights. They experience a series of Chaplin-like failures and humiliations, and finally march hand in hand toward the horizon, into a future which is not necessarily better, but certainly calls to mind many cinematic and photographic clichés. The masquerading of The Hole Land (or Guy Ben-Ner’s Moby Dick’s) as a standard film of the silent film genre is but a means to talk about the story, about the ability to tell a story. Their films are but an attempt to deconstruct the film into its components in order to reconstruct it differently.
Michael Blum’s 57-minute film follows the documentary mode, unfolding the story of a condominium in Cape Town, South Africa. Blum interviews present and former tenants in the building, neighbors, and an architect, and through their fragmented stories compiles a comprehensive picture of the house. Due to Blum’s reputation as a professional creator of stories (in the recent Istanbul Biennale he invented a fascinating figure of a Turkish-Jewish-feminist-Marxist woman named Safiye Behar, the doubt occasionally arises as to the house on 17 Aandbloem Street: Is it real or fictive? Documentary or pseudo-documentary? Jean Meeran is a young Muslim of Indian origin. Lyn, fourth generation South African, complains about the noisy parties he organizes. A couple from the adjacent building admits that they don’t know their neighbors, and the woman speaks with distaste about the man in the wheelchair and the flower vendor on the corner, who is, apparently, a drug dealer. Zaria is a real-estate agent. Only her voice is heard, but her figure remains unseen. The film ends with a picnic on the grass, next to the black flower vendor, with the black man in the wheelchair. All the film’s characters sit there, eating and drinking, dancing to the sounds of music. If Jeff Wall’s *The Storyteller* is a displacement of Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* from 1863 to the socio-cultural reality of late 20th-century North America, then Blum creates yet another variation on *Déjeuner*. The two Parisian men in black suits sitting on the grass next to a naked woman are replaced by storytellers who form a blend of cultures, colors, accents, and lifestyles.

Tracey Moffatt’s photographed figures also tell silenced, repressed stories. One of her series is entitled *Scarred for Life*. Each photograph portrays a young boy or girl, and each photograph appears like a frame from a film about adolescence in the suburbs, about youthful traumas, hidden domestic violence, etc. The caption at the bottom of each photograph helps to characterize the scene as an image extracted from a photojournalistic press story, or a frozen cinematic frame. The series *Up in the Sky* consists of twenty-five photographs taken in rural Australia. They convey an atmosphere of old historical photographs, perhaps of scenes from epic films unfolding an extensive plot. Moffatt’s photographs recount a story, albeit one whose true nature remains obscure: Personal? Historical? Cinematic? The grainy printing places the photographs in realms of memories and archives, possibly autobiographical, possibly general.

Barry Frydlender’s photographs generate a different narrative atmosphere. The large panoramic prints construct the photograph as a narrative landscape. The viewer is invited to plunge into the photographic sphere and move along the plots introduced by the landscape and figures. The large panoramas are elusive: Frydlender combines dozens of photographs into a single, large-scale, fictive image comprised of various viewpoints.

The story embodied by art is always distorted and tangled. The narrative is neither linear nor unequivocal. By virtue of its being a part of the contemporary language of art, the story contains an inkling of the obscurity of the *Untitled*. The following paragraphs will attempt to explore the place of the title in the process of reading/deciphering/extracting the story from the work of art.
About Title and about Negation

One of the major moves of 20th century art was, as aforesaid, the constitution of an independent art language addressing artistic values. One of the ways to constitute art as an independent language was the canceling of any relation between art and a text external to it on which it is founded and from which it draws its contents. From the mid-19th century a gradual dissociation from mythological, religious and historical sources of inspiration occurred. The transition from art that relies on a traditional, authoritative text to art whose contents are personal and private, is also discernible through the changes undergone by the work titles, as indicated by John C. Welchman in his book *Invisible Colors* about the history of titles.1

Welchman distinguishes between three types of titles: denotative, connotative, and untitled. The denotative title is the traditional title, which corresponds with the painting’s content: a portrait, still life, Napoleon entering Jaffa, etc. The connotative title is characteristic of Symbolist, Dada and Surrealist art works. The untitled is, of course, characteristic of abstract artists, from Mondrian and Kandinsky in the early 20th century, through Pollock and the New York School in the mid-century, to conceptual women artists, such as Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Sherrie Levine, at its end.

Welchman indicates the titles given by American Impressionist Whistler as a significant turning point in the transition from the denotative title to the new title type. Whistler called his paintings: *Arrangement in Gray and Black: Portrait of the Artist’s Mother* (1872) or *Symphony in White No. 3: The Two White Girls* (1865). For the first time, a portrait was called “arrangement.” In fact, for the first time a gap was created between the depicted entity (a woman’s portrait) and what the title indicated as the real content of the painting: arrangement of colors in various combinations on the canvas.

The title of Welchman’s book was borrowed from Marcel Duchamp, who said that the modern title is an “invisible color.” It was Duchamp, of course, who made the title an integral part of the art work. For what is his porcelain urinal without the title *Fountain*? And what is a little French window in green and black without the punned title *Fresh Widow*?

One possible example for the meaning of the title as an “invisible color” is provided in two paintings by *Smadar Eliasaf* presented in the exhibition “Untitled,” both of them abstract paintings. One is called *Untitled*; the other, which is very similar in terms of painterly means, is entitled *Father*. The viewer finds himself facing a painting devoid of story, whereas in the next instance he may feel relief: he seeks facial features within the abstract and anchors the painting in familiar psychological concepts. The title *Father* has furnished the painting with an added color, invisible yet concrete. The juxtaposition of these paintings generates inevitable reflexivity with regard to the viewing experience; the relief felt in view of the ostensible addition of a story (father) may indicate to what extent the abstract still convenes a challenging viewing experience.

The tradition of christening a work with a name a la Duchamp is also discernible in *Dror Daum*’s works (when he doesn’t name them *Untitled*). The title *Habit*, for example, is attached to a gray photograph which appears entirely abstract at first sight. A gray surface, light-colored
hatched lines, a glowing patch of light on the left, a lyrical abstract. The title is not translated into Hebrew, but even if it were, it would not have provided a comforting dimension of explanation or elucidation. A habit? What habit? It takes a whole behind-the-scenes story in order to extract the relationship between the gray abstract and its title: the photographed surface is his mother’s car door. Daum depicted the scratches on the metal door created whenever his mother tried to reverse park it next to the house. Now we can discern the obscure reflection of a car on the gray surface, and if we like – we can add in our imagination a road, a street, a line of parked cars. We can also admire once again (not without self-irony) the sensibilities of the line, the grayscale, the beauty of the surface. It almost begs us to borrow from Whistler’s title: *Arrangement in Gray: Portrait of the Artist’s Mother*. The gray photograph acquires a narrative reading dimension alongside a rationalized response to the way in which the abstract has evolved from a radical artistic manifestation to emptied aesthetics and a bourgeois commodity. The beauty of the photograph is almost a reason for suspicion.

The suspicion increases when we encounter the photograph of a burial mound with the inscription “Anonymous Infant.” In this case the *Untitled* accompanying the photograph acquires the status of a truly incriminating title. The inscription appears on the grave of an infant deserted in the stairwell of a residential building, who died and was buried. Her mother was never found. Her short and gloomy life story was the focus of media attention for several days. Daum photographed the image from a newspaper. When an anonymous baby becomes a work of art called *Untitled* (featured on the exhibition invitation), it generates an unsettling sequence of concepts from a new direction: an unknown baby, an unnamed infant, untitled art, photographer unknown. The appropriation of the press photograph into art reinforces a possible facet of violence inherent in this entire move. Violence, desertion, insensitivity. The art work indicates a human tragedy, yet risks its identification with the absent, lifeless, dubious, and suspicious.

* * *

Welchman lingers on the title given by Gauguin to his 1897 painting: *D’où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* ['Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?'] It is a horizontal painting depicting Tahitian women in a landscape: sitting, standing, eating. The title is inscribed in Gauguin’s handwriting (in French) in the upper left corner of the painting, while his signature appears in the upper right corner. Welchman maintains that the title in this case becomes a signature. It is a whole personal title which does not rely on an external text, and like a signature it is added after the completion of the painting; not before and not during the painting process.

Inspired by Welchman’s analysis of Gauguin’s title-signature, one may also read the approach presented by Raffi Lavie or Henry Shlesnyak to the title or, in fact, the lack thereof. Lavie and Shlesnyak avoid naming their works. When the need arises to identify and itemize them (for an exhibition or a catalogue), the technical details appear on the caption: date, dimensions, and technique.

A small painting by Lavie from 1968, about a decade after he started painting, bears the name “Refael” in large red letters in gouache, in a clumsy combination of written and printed Hebrew letters. The artist’s name is the main image on the small paper. Lavie’s name also appears
in later works – on a sticker, next to his wife’s name, at times with the addition of their home address. Even in the most scribbled and obscure paintings, which are devoid of any image, a neat small signature appears in the corner: Raffi, with the date. The signature is the title or a title substitute, implying: the content is me. The signature as a title declares a subjective thematic origin, not necessarily narrative and certainly not psychological.

Shlesnyak’s works reject a story by their very essence, avoiding wordiness. His avoidance, like Lavie’s, of any title (including Untitled) exemplifies the radicalism that characterized their artistic move. They endeavored to shuffle the cards not only in terms of image or material, but also in terms of display procedures involving naming and cataloguing.

The disillusioned gaze implied in Dror Daum’s gray photograph with regard to the metamorphosis of a title-free abstract into a decorative art object, may make us forget the extent to which the processes associated with the birth of Untitled were in fact provocative, daring, and rebellious.

Hila Laviv’s work, for example, in its quiet, near-invisible manner, preserves the subversive facet of the Untitled. Her art tries to be titleless and art-less. It is thus not surprising that when Laviv is asked to describe her works, she feels comfortable defining them in terms of what they are not: not virtuosic, non-impressive, inconspicuous. The word of negation accompanying the adjectives ostensibly reduces and humbles the work of art, but in fact it demonstrates the fundamental (heroic) negation arising from the Untitled attached to them. Laviv’s works – scotch tape and paper ribbons suspended from the ceiling or attached to the wall – say “no” so gracefully, that one almost misses the drama of that “no.” something is missing, something is prevented. The works position themselves in realms of negation, subtraction, absence. The little that still exists transpires on a thin seam-line between being and void. The minor, delicate works are akin to an attempt to examine how far one can take the removal of art’s features – a material quality, a seductive visual presence, manual dexterity – and still remain with art.

In view of Hila Laviv’s and Dror Daum’s works, and vis-à-vis those of Amnon Ben-Ami, Angela Klein, Smadar Levy, and Efrat Klipshtein, one may understand that Untitled is not only a title, but also an artistic quality. The works of these artists differ in every possible aspect – in terms of technique, visual appearance, and intention – yet they share the Untitled quality. These works often draw on a ready-made (tires in Klipshtein’s case; a shoe, a squeegee, rubber gloves, and other objects in Ben-Ami’s case), others do not look like art at all (Laviv’s scotch tape and paper ribbons would not have been identified as art had they not been presented in a gallery), and they convey a great hermetic quality of the art work.

The Untitled Quality (Hot-Cold, Near-Far)

The Untitled works are often characterized by a cold and distant appearance. Their beauty is restrained. At times, a physical or emotional rustling oozes from below, but it takes great effort to notice. The works are often gracefully touched by a poetic spirit. To this group of Smadar Levy, Amnon Ben-Ami, Yossi Breger, Efrat Klipshtein, and Angela
Klein – one may also add Henry Shlesnyak as a distant forefather; ascetic and austere, yet touching upon the most intimate and fragile.

The *Untitled* envelope allows two modes of observation: what you see (which is often very little) is what there is, or what you see is but a cover for invisible layers waiting to be unearthed. The aforementioned group of artists certainly allows both references simultaneously. The thing itself, as well as the thing and the yarn unraveled from the ball.

For instance: three tanning beds (possibly stretchers), with orange mattresses. The atmosphere arising from Smadar Levy’s work oscillates between recreation and illness. The beds are luring in their vivid orange color, but they are also boring as a ready-made. These are furniture from the world of design, but they have the shape of a lying body. They are totally alienated, but the traces of absent bodies engulf them with a disconcerting restlessness. The title is *Beds*. Ostensibly, the type of title which Welchman dubs “denotative,” but since it is attached to meaningless objects in the context of art, it functions more as *Untitled* than as one with an explicatory or implicative effect.

Smadar Levy gives her series of photographs titles of a different, more “connotative” type. She depicts hospital beddings, focusing on the fabrics’ decorative patterns. Each of the photographs in the series has a two-part title: *Meir*, from the series *Abstract Geometric* or *Shiba*, from the series *Abstract Geometric*. The titles [containing the names of hospitals] are jolting, funny, sending associations in all directions. They help the viewer read the photographs and identify the tension inherent in the *Beds* as well: an ironic dialogue with the heroism of abstract alongside a clash with the body in its feeble moments. Levy thus addresses a duality – an abstract language of art and physicality in the sick, needy sense; abstract at its prime, on the one hand, the ailing body, on the other.

Angela Klein usually calls her works *Untitled*. They are executed in a unique technique all her own: she applies strokes of acrylic onto a nylon surface and lets the paint dry, subsequently peeling it off and using it as raw material. From these paint strips she constructs spectacular objects, distinctive *Untitled* works: the material from which they are made is paint; the tension motivating them ranges between sculpture and painting; they address the language of art and surrender neither story nor emotion. These are shiny, elegant objects that demand a generous display space, as customary with minimalist-abstract works of art of the meticulous type. At the same time, a spaced hanging or installation generate a configuration to which the viewer responds almost physically – the sensuality of the objects bursts forth, the temperature around them warms up, it is tempting to touch them.

Klein entitled one of her new works *Melodica*, a title that sounds like a tribute to titles prevalent in the early 20th century among the first abstract artists: Kandinsky and Mondrian entitled their works *Composition*, *Symphony*, or *Nocturne*, inspired by the world of music. The musical association makes it possible to read Klein’s works in terms of rhythm, harmony and sounds, and imagine the objects joining to form a line of musical notes. Even if we are concerned with hieroglyphics or some sign script, it is nevertheless unintelligible.

Amnon Ben-Ami’s works likewise convey the sense of a secret code. He collects and processes various objects: a carton of long-life milk, rolls of cellophane, a chair’s back rest, a dog’s leash, a sandal. Alongside
the treatment of existing objects he also paints; at times, tiny paintings akin to sketches, at others – large-scale paintings on canvas with the momentum of a painter.

The means are simple. Miraculously the works are charged with a poetic quality. For example, a shoe cut in four. Each part of the shoe is hung on a different wall of a rectangular room. The work is entitled Shoe and its parts are named (in parenthesis): Circle, Right, Left, Kick. The story can be described in formal terms: a shoe divided into four; the surprising beauty of the black tears. Or a different story: the momentum and intensity (perhaps violence as well) of the kick. The eye connects the four parts. Consciousness links the shoe to a foot. Imagination composes the story of a kick.

Ben-Ami has been active since the 1980s. Throughout his artistic career he has preserved an aesthetic and intentionality originating in the 1970s: conceptualism and poeticism, an intuitive approach to ready-made, a draftsman’s hand and a rejection of a smooth, finished appearance. A similar formal asceticism and genetic similarities with the 1970s are also discernible in Efrat Klipshtein’s work, an artist who started operating in the 2000s. Unlike Ben-Ami, her works are large and scanty in images. The images’ clarity does not facilitate the reading of the works which are devoid of titles by essence. Recently she has been working with tires – big black truck tires. At times she colors their edges black, at other times she fills the grooves with colorful plasticine – melting the tires with softness and irony, transforming the monumental masses of matter into lacework with manual assiduousness. The aggressive presence of the tires elicits associations to the world of monumental-minimalist art (Serra, Andre), and concurrently – to demonstrations of tire-burners. A refinement of a gallery and the smell of burnt rubber. Their unexpected beauty – the perfection of the black circle, accompanied by the azure or purple lines – are an utter surprise. Their story is contained within the hermetic quality of the circle: a self-containing perfect form.

Caption in the body of the Painting: Writing Artists

In “Storytellers” Yossi Breger’s video pieces were presented on monitors placed on the floor. In “Untitled” he exhibits text-based paintings. Could the works be interchanged between the exhibitions?

Breger’s early works were based on texts by Samuel Beckett, and some of his video pieces bear the name “Felice,” Kafka’s lover. Words are an integral part of his painterly, photographic or cinematic body of work. The video format, as presented by Breger, generates an ostensibly narrative situation. A headset is connected to each monitor for the sake of a single, singular viewer. The viewer passes between the monitors as between narrative stations, each akin to one story in Scheherazade’s Thousand and One Nights. The stories, however, as has often been said here, far from produce a standard linear sequence. Even the discrete words inscribed on the paintings hardly connect into a story of sorts, and they only do so through acquaintance with the literary background from which they were extracted. The words appear more like flickering, flashes of meaning within a monochromatic field of formless color.

Alongside Yossi Breger, several artists were featured in “Storytellers” whose sole, or major, image is words. Jenifer Bar Lev, Assi Meshulam, Michal Spektor, and David Ginton presented various versions of painting in words, words as objects, a visual story. The words in their works are
not captions for a missing visual image; the words are the image itself, they are the content and the metaphor.

When Assi (Assaf) Meshulam arranges a sentence from bones on the floor: “The sick bitch dumped me,” the text is the image. Unlike Tracey Moffatt’s photographs, where the written sentence functions as a caption underneath the photographed image, Meshulam leaves us with the caption only. The textual caption is the artistic object itself, and this object has dramatic visual presence resulting from two concurrent channels of communication: bones on the floor, and the blunt directness of the sentence. Dense (although partial) narrative worlds arise from the bones: love, separation, pain, anger, etc., as well as an art-story about minimalist floor sculpture and conceptual art.

Jenifer Bar Lev writes texts which are, in fact, short stories usually based on dreams. The texts are written in English, in capital letters and straight lines. A dream text is elusive and obscure by nature, but the way in which the letters blend within the pattern on the canvas renders the text illegible. The text is swallowed in the textile, becoming a decorative pattern. It is hard to read and easier to observe.

Michal Spektor’s text is a different type of word-painting. It can be read, but, in effect, there is no reason to read it. For several months Spektor copied, with compulsive scrupulousness, four weekly television guides from April-May 2002. With great precision, from observation, she copied the guide’s pages onto larger A4 sheets, while preserving the page division according to days, hours and channels. The result is 225 dense and overflowing pages, four weeks of countless television programs, series, reruns, films, news. Stories. The futile industrious work acquires monstrous dimensions. Why copy? In this respect Spektor calls to mind Bouvard and Pécuchet, the protagonists of Flaubert’s book by that name, who spent most of their lives copying texts. Copying seemed to them like the safest and most reliable occupation.

Michal Spektor copies the most banal of texts – a TV guide; nearly as banal as a telephone directory. Some of the programs are marked in yellow, which can make one think of the person behind the markings and choices. The leafing format produces a conditioning of a book: a far-fetched book which is a capsule of stories, legends, fantasies, talks, jokes, speeches, an endless potential of interest and boredom. The title – TV Guide, spells the obvious, and therefore says nothing. Her TV book is ready to be read, but at the same time it rejects reading.

Assi Meshulam’s work, Ro’achem, is embodied in a perfect book format. Hard black cover, white pages, black letters, Biblical font. The story Ro’achem (‘Your Evil’) unfolds a fictive, uncanny plot about men and dogs, a type of post-human version of Sodom and Gomorrah. While Spektor’s TV guide makes it a-priori clear that there is no reason to read all its 225 pages (even though they are all hand drawn, pencil on paper), Meshulam’s book lures one to read it. Not only in terms of its physical presence, but also in terms of the story told in it – a plot and protagonists, action and suspense.

But when an artistic object such as Ro’achem is presented in an exhibition, with its dozens of pages rife with heroes, plots, sub-plots, descriptions and prophetic orations, the experience of viewing is reminiscent of a prolonged video piece. Like it, the long works are bound not to be read in full. The story is there, but the artistic context cancels it, disallows it.
Could any of the participating artists be exhibited only in one of the exhibitions?

Smadar Eliasaf’s abstract paintings are quintessential abstractions, with all the reading difficulties introduced by abstract. They may be discussed in literary, historical, and psychological terms, but these seem to be attempts to tame the “shrews”. The shrew is an abstract painting that convenes a viewing experience that strives to redundify words.

David Ginton’s paintings, also exhibited in both exhibitions, generate a contemplative frame for the tension between image and word. They depict, with masterful deception, the back side of paintings – the hidden, uninteresting side which is usually disregarded. Ginton sets out to lend voice to the verso, the silenced other side. On the painted back side he inscribes texts that allude, in one way or another, as it were, to the front side of the painting, the one which we will never see. The recto now becomes hidden and invisible. One of the paintings in “Storytellers” is entitled *Ekphrasis* and attributed to the fictive persona of “The English Painter.”Ekphrasis is the professional term denoting a verbal description of a visual work. The painting itself contains the following text: “The English Painter argues against the assumption that images can be adequately described in words. In his view, words always fail, because pictures possess a residue of ‘meaningless’ marks that can not be apprehended as signs.”

In “Untitled” Ginton presented a drawing of a back side bearing the word “Untitled.” Another painting was the verso of a painting, entirely empty. Its title was *Back Side of Painting: from The Empty Series*. Is the English Painter’s painting radically different from the *Untitled* painting? If we adopt the words which Ginton puts in the mouth of the English Painter, then words are doomed to fail when they come to describe a painting. Or, in the terms of the exhibition – stories are bound to go awry when they become art.

Thus, the last chord is dedicated to the illustrations of Itzik Rennert and Mira Friedmann, who observe all the works presented here from a different place, preserving an ancient desire (and drawing ability) to tell a story via painting. Literally. Their paintings are accompanied by text, or maybe it is the texts that are accompanied by illustrations. In any event, the text and the image are mutually-complementary and coexist in harmony – even if the content of the story is far-fetched, impossible, and wholly imaginary. In view of all the distortions, deceptions, silences, and suspensions generated by the artists when they come to the story, illustration appears to be a fifth column within the art world. A fifth column of clarity.

---


2 Ibid., pp. 96–99

3 Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, trans. TW Earp and GW Stonier (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1954)
1. Boaz Arad, Gefilte Fish, 2005
   Video, 11:30 min, courtesy of the artist

2. Boaz Arad, “Until When?”, 2004
   Video, 5:30 min, courtesy of the artist

3. Michael Blum, 17 Aandbloem Street
   2005, video, 00:57 min
   Courtesy of the artist

   Video, 22:30 min
   Courtesy of the artist

5. Guy Ben-Ner, Moby Dick, 2000
   Video, 12:35 min, courtesy of the artist

   Industrial paint, acrylic, and pencil on canvas, 130x160
   Collection of the artist

   Mixed media on canvas, 177x135
   Collection of the artist

   Mixed media on canvas, 170x147
   Collection of the artist

9. Jenifer Bar Lev, I put a spell on you
   2005, installation, glazed ceramics, 240x450x170, collection of the artist

    Video, 1:00 min, courtesy of the artist

11. Yossi Breger, Letters to Felice, 2004
    Video, 4:00 min, courtesy of the artist

12. Yossi Breger, Thomas Speaks about Ronen, 2004, video, 4:00 min
    Courtesy of the artist

13. David Ginton
    The English Painter, Ekphrasis, 1997
    Oil on canvas, 160x115
    Collection of the artist

    Courtesy of Gixon Gallery, Tel Aviv

15. Nuri David, To Enter Out, 1997
    Oil on canvas, 130x95
    Courtesy of Gixon Gallery, Tel Aviv

    Oil on canvas, 130x95
    Courtesy of Gixon Gallery, Tel Aviv

17. Nuri David, Curtain (from ‘A Season in Hell’), 1999, oil on canvas, 120x130
    Courtesy of Gixon Gallery, Tel Aviv

18. Nadav Weissman, Riding Lesson, 2004
    Animated film, 1:30 min
    Collection of the artist

    Photolithograph on paper, 80x58
    Doron Sebbag Art Collection

    72x102 each, Doron Sebbag Art Collection, ORS Ltd., Tel Aviv

    Collection of the artist

22. Assi Meshulam, The Sick Bitch Dumped Me from the exhibition “Leprosy”, 2005
    Installation; bones, 400x47
    Collection of the artist

    Pencil on paper, 225 A4 sheets
    Collection of the artist

    Photograph, 80x200
    Collection of the artist

25. Barry Frydlender, Birth of a Nation: Palestinians Making Cinema
    1988-1998, photograph, 50x200x30
    Collection of the artist

    Photograph, 70x250
    Collection of the artist

    Collection of the artist

    16.5x12 each, courtesy of the artist

29. Itzik Rennert, Why Me Why, from “Happy End”, 2002, pencil on paper and digital processing, 38 pages
    16.5x12 each, courtesy of the artist

30. Shalom from Safed (Shalom Moskovitz)
    Daughters of Man and Sons of God 1976, acrylic on paper, 73x58
    Collection of Sussan and Daniel Doron

31. Shalom from Safed (Shalom Moskovitz)
    Haman, 1960s
    Gouache on paper 34x49.5
    Courtesy of Engel Gallery, Tel Aviv

32. Shalom from Safed (Shalom Moskovitz)
    Jacob, 1950s
    Gouache on paper, 50x34.5
    Courtesy of Engel Gallery, Tel Aviv

33. Lia Shnider & Liron Levi
    The Hole Land, 2004, video, 15:25 min
    Collection of the artist
1. Smadar Eliasaf, Father, 2001
   Acrylic on canvas, 190x150
   Courtesy of Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv

2. Smadar Eliasaf, Untitled, 2004
   Acrylic on canvas, 190x150
   Courtesy of Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv

3. Boaz Arad & Miki Kratsman
   Untitled, 2003
   Video, 40 min

4. Amnon Ben-Ami, Shoe (Circle, Right, Left, Kick), 2004, installation; Leather and rubber

5. Amnon Ben-Ami
   Fruit of Thought, 2003
   Mixed media, 23x37x15

6. Amnon Ben-Ami, Lungs, 2002
   Oil on paper, 100x70

7. Amnon Ben-Ami, Lungs, 2003
   Oil on paper, 100x70

8. Amnon Ben-Ami, Back Rest, 1998
   Plaster and wood, 39x37x7

   Cloth, wood, and plastic, 2x25

10. Yossi Breger, Etude pour un Premier amour (no. 23), 1995
    Oil on canvas, 130x90

11. Yossi Breger, Untitled, 1997
    Oil on canvas, 41x41
    From a 62-part series

12. David Ginton, The Other Side of Untitled Painting, 2004
    Drawing, charcoal on paper, 108x70

13. David Ginton
   The Other Side of Painting from "The Empty Series no. 2," 2005
   Oil on canvas, 110x88

    Photograph, color print on metal paper, 120x210, courtesy of Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv

15. Dror Daum, Untitled, 2006
    Photograph, inkjet print on paper 29.7x42

16. Dror Daum, Untitled, 2005
    Stainless steel, loudspeaker, and sound, 94x150x66

17. Rafi Lavie, 2002
    Acrylic on plywood, 122x122
    Courtesy of Givon Gallery, Tel Aviv

18. Rafi Lavie, 1968
    Gouache and pen on paper, 16x24
    Courtesy of Givon Gallery, Tel Aviv

19. Rafi Lavie, 1974
    Acrylic and collage on plywood, 60x40
    Courtesy of Givon Gallery, Tel Aviv

20. Hila Laviv, Untitled, 2005
    Installation, nails, thread, and paper

21. Hila Laviv
    Swinging Legs and Feeling Happy 2006, Installation; scotch tape

22. Smadar Levy, Beds, 2004
    Installation, 91x195x61


27. Angela Klein, Untitled, 2006
    Acrylic and kohl, 9.5x19.5x9

28. Angela Klein, Untitled, 2006
    Acrylic and shell, 11x21x9

29. Efrat Klipshtein, Untitled, 2004
    Installation; tires and plasticine

30. Henry Shlesnyak, Composition, 1968
    Mixed media on canvas, 129x195

31. Henry Shlesnyak, 1978
    Mixed media on canvas, 46x55