

A Disturbed Family

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The exhibition of paintings by Gideon Rubin at Alon Segev Gallery shows figurative images that have no details. The anonymity and vulnerability of the figures, originating in family photo albums from the beginning of the 20th century, are intensified due to the erasing of facial features and the lack of detailed narrative.

At long last, August has ended. The shows of the summer collections, some so boring, are over, and the galleries begin to show the repertoire of their exhibitions for the coming year. Just before the season starts with a lot of bravura, a biennale in Tel Aviv and an art fair on Rothschild Blvd., a little break.

This is the time to watch an exhibition that is just an exhibition, no unusual-outstanding-municipal-international-curatorial-art-cultural event...

In order to open the season of exhibitions, I chose Gideon Rubin's *Family Album*, a show with a cool melancholic European flavor. Rubin displays refined figurative painting based on family photo albums from the beginning of the 20th century with anonymous figures from between the two World Wars.

Two groups of paintings are on display: large oils and little ones on cardboard. Thematic and stylistic characteristics repeat themselves in all the works, creating an interesting show even if monotonous.

Stylistically, Rubin avoids details. His figurative painting lacks meticulousness and expresses an existential core rather than a detailed narrative scene. In each work there are one or two figures, mostly children, without facial features and in monochromatic colors.

Whether it is loyalty to the murky photographic source or whether it is deliberate, the brown, ochre and grey hues reflect a gloomy mood prevailing in the entire exhibition. The erased faces of the figures seem at times as a mask from which one ought to peel the layers of paint in order to penetrate to the features underneath. In spite, and perhaps because, he depicts children who are engaged in a game or with their pets, a gloominess seems to hang on. There are no characteristics of specific locations other than clothes with an outdated air to them, which clearly places them in the past. The same stylistic treatment is given to a child playing with a dog or a child wearing a gas mask, strolling about in the street, or even wearing the mask while playing with a doll in a pram in a sort of a trivial peculiarity in Rubin's schematic murky world.

The repetitiveness, the flattening of the image, the avoidance of details, the schematic brush strokes and the abrupt passages from light to shade are characteristic of Rubin's work, different from the dominant figurative-realistic painting of artists like Israel Hirshberg and his students, in this country. These stylistic characteristics coupled with

the lack of facial features, create a hermetically closed world that the viewer can not penetrate. The seemingly neutral subjects, images like the two seated sisters, a child climbing a tree, or a father strolling with his son, arouse anxiety and a certain discomfort, the figures looking almost like marionettes. The monotony, the overall approach lacking in details and the leaving of parts of the background bare, intensify the feeling of vulnerability of time gone by, life disintegrated and of a vanishing world.

The second group of works on display consists of small paintings on cardboard, left partially bare, torn and damaged. The images here repeat themselves: a child playing, a girl holding a doll, but there is no heavy feeling, not that same silence emanating from the large oils. The brush strokes are short and hasty, sometimes only hovering above ground, creating a sort of vital dynamic that is missing in the larger works.

Another interest in the show is the inner dialogue that the artist is conducting with the medium of photography. If in his previous show, also at Alon Segev, Rubin conducted a dialogue with the history of art, mainly with masters such as Goya or Velasquez, here he maintains a dialogue painting/photography. But here his choice is not that of masterpieces in photography or the work of well-known photographers, but rather family albums, anonymous family photos completely insignificant from the point of view of art history. This preoccupation emphasizes the simple human experience offered, intensifying the vulnerability of the figures whose eyes have been almost violently erased. They looked straight at the camera, posed for the photographer, but the painter chose to eliminate their individual features and leave ghost figures being observed.

It is interesting to view this exhibition in relation to the one of Yitzhak Livneh at the close-by Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Both display a similar figurative approach. In Livneh's portraits, women's faces acquire an expressive dramatic distortion, nevertheless leaving us with masked figures. Rubin gives up even this manipulation, excluding facial features altogether. A feeling of vulnerable evasiveness prevails, the ghost figures remain strange, soon to evaporate in this fragile schematic world in which they are placed.