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Gideon Rubin "Tender"
Alon Segev Gallery

It is interesting to examine Gideon Rubin's tasteful, reserved, yet moving new exhibition "Tender" in the broad context of the flourishing of figurative painting in Israel. Rubin, who studied in New York and London, has a style that recalls leading European artists like Luc Tuymans (Belgium) and the middle generation of Israeli artists, like Yitzhak Livneh. This is a very different kind of figurative painting to that of Israel Hershberg's Jerusalem Studio School, whose students – like Eldar Farber, Aram Gershuni and Shira Avidor – have become an important presence on the Israeli art scene.

The subjects of Rubin's relatively small works are the classical ones of people, especially women, animals (cats and birds), one of a building and another of a chair (also with a cat). The paintings are not confined to a place or time: Rubin's dialogue is less with the world, more with the history of art. Two portraits, one of a woman, the other (apparently) a man, are titled "After Goya" and "After Velazquez," respectively. Rubin directs the viewer to Spanish painting of the 17th and 18th centuries, with its sharp, critical and very human examination of reality, so different to the controlled style of the Lowlands (now Holland and Belgium) of the same period.

Goya and Velazquez, like most of their contemporaries, painted portraits from models. One of the finest walls of the exhibition contains more than fifty tiny portraits of celebrities, such as Bill Clinton, rapper Puff Daddy and Paris Hilton. The portraits are at once true and not-so-true to life, raising the issue of the sometimes-surprising gap between how public figures appear in photographs and what they look like in real life.

The title of the

("Boy"; "After Goya"; "Silia Holding a Bird"), they are slightly blurred, the look introspective, detached from the surroundings. The vulnerability of the figures is clear with every brushstroke – and Rubin's brushstrokes are very deliberate.

The works on display are fine, and Rubin has come a long way since his last one-man show in the same gallery in 2003. Nevertheless, one senses that he is overly aware of being a painter at a time

influence of its images on generations of viewers. He moves between the more distant past (Goya, Velazquez) and modern classics, like French artist Balthus' paintings of pubescent girls, with their suggested eroticism, which Rubin echoes in works like "Silia" and "Rebecca." "Silia Holding a Bird" is a kind of undeclared tribute to Picasso's early work, "Child with a Dove" (1901).

"Wansee House," the only architectural painting, is unusual. It shows

much-admired beauty and absolute evil. With Rubin's treatment of the subject, the painting fascinates as much as it repels.

There is a sense of fragility about "Red Shorts," a painting of a boy seen from behind. A blood-red liquid seems to ooze from beneath his shorts, like a thread that has unraveled. In "Two," two ghostly child-figures seem about to fade away. In "Red Chair," the edge of the chair is obscured by a large piece of furniture, and the cat sitting on it looks



LOOKING TO THE CLASSICS: Rubin's dialogue is less with the world, more with the history of art. Above: "Rebecca."

exhibition hits the mark (though, as usual, there is something irritatingly provincial about an English name only). The name "Tender" softens the melancholy that infuses the collection, but several paintings are actually disquieting. Where Rubin has given his figures eyes

when there are many other, equally valid ways of creating an image. Painting is not seen as superior to other media, like photography, video or print.

Rubin looks at the painting of earlier eras, at what is regarded as the foundation of art, in an effort to understand the enormous

the house on Berlin's beautiful Wansee Lake in which the Nazis worked out the details of the Final Solution. The magnificent paintings of Wansee Lake by Jewish artist Max Lieberman, and its use as the venue for the Wansee Conference, sum up the perverse juxtaposition of

as if it is about to blend into the gray solid wall behind at any moment. Characteristic of all the paintings is irresolution, apprehension and an attempt to pay attention to the different nuances of reality. This imbues them with significance, despite their modest size and gloomy colors.