

“The only place where I don’t feel foreign is my studio”

Galia Bar Or

The exhibition of Jacques (Yaakov) Grinberg’s paintings at the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod (Summer 2015) exposes challenging works by an Israeli artist who lived and worked in France, maintained close connections with artists and authors in Israel, yet his oeuvre has remained unseen and almost completely unknown by art lovers in Israel. The exhibition and the catalogue that accompanies it offer a contemplation of a select cross-section of his work whose messages and power of expression seem to be more relevant today than ever.

Jacques (Yaakov) Grinberg was born in 1941, in Bulgaria, and lived in Sofia during the war years. His father, Natan Grinberg, a member of the Communist Party in his youth, held a high position in the leadership of Communist Bulgaria after the war. In 1954 the family moved to Israel and settled in Bat Yam. On his arrival Jacques went to school in a kibbutz, and at a young age began studying art at the Avni school in Tel Aviv. He probably was not exposed directly to the horrors of the Holocaust, but the subject was not repressed, certainly not by his father, who already in 1945 published a book that collated revealing documents he had found in the Bulgarian Interior Ministry after the war. The book contains evidence of the attempts of the Bulgarian fascist government to eliminate Bulgarian Jewry and of the involvement of the army and the police in the expulsion and extermination of the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia.¹ After the book disappeared from the bookshops in Bulgaria he published it again in Israel (in Bulgarian). In 1961 Natan Grinberg published another book in Israel, this time with a painting by his son on its cover. A critical Marxist world view was part of the habitus Jacques grew up in, and his acute and uncompromising sensitivity reverberates through all the various phases of his work.

Already in 1959, when Jacques was only 18, his work was shown at Dizengoff House in Tel Aviv, in an exhibition of Avni graduates, which was

¹ Natan Grinberg, *Documenti*, Sofia (1945) (in Bulgarian). My thanks to Dr. Shlomo Shealtiel and Dr. Moshe Mosek.

later displayed again at the Katz Gallery. Two years after this he held his first solo exhibition at the Chemerinsky Gallery in Tel Aviv.

In 1962 he left for Paris, and from then on was known as Jacques. He joined the pioneers of the “New Figuration” orientation, most of whom were immigrant artists who created innovative, vibrant contemporary painting that struck out against the abstract which had taken over everywhere. The playwright and critic Yosef Mundi, who devoted a number of articles to Jacques Grinberg, noted that “In contrast to the previous generation, the generation of the Second World War, who wished, rightly, to distance themselves from the horrors of the war through a quest for a spiritual world free of blood and violence, Jacques Grinberg’s generation did not fear direct confrontation with violence, and decided to analyze the motives of violence and to express an outcry, through art, against the bestiality that leads men to deeds of war and cruelty”.²

Like artists who worked a little later in Israel (Uri Lifshitz, Michael Druks, Yair Garbuz), the New Figuration artists did not join together into an institutionalized group, and worked independently as individuals. They were not marked as a phase in the history of art, even though they definitely caused a turnabout – in Paris early in the decade, and even in Israel, towards the end of the decade.

In Israel the turnabout in plastic art was preceded by a turnabout in literature. The herald of the new spirit was the poet and critic Natan Zach, who identified faults in the poetry of [the then, if unofficial, laureate (Tr.)] Natan Alterman – repetitive, high, generalizing and abstract language – and formulated a kind of manifesto of departing from this to a different, spoken language, a language that confronts the body and the nerves of the time.³ Thirty year later, looking backwards, Meir Wieseltier noted a connection between Alterman’s abstraction and Zaritsky’s abstraction in painting.⁴ This parallelism that Wieseltier hinted at, between the systems of literature and plastic art, illuminates a deep movement in the spirit of the time – of revolt against the messages and the conventions of taste of the “generation of the fathers”. In the mid-’60s, Igael Tumarkin struck out against the identity conventions of “Israeli art” by proposing a “new

2 Yosef Mundi, “On the Painter Jacques Grinberg”, *BaMahaneh* (1 August, 1984) (in Hebrew).

3 Natan Zach, “Reflections on Alterman’s Poetry”, *Achshav* 3–4 (1959) (in Hebrew).

4 Meir Wieseltier, “Length-Section in Natan Zach’s Poetry”, *Siman Kriah* 10 (1980), 405–429 (in Hebrew).

figuration” of his own that he formulated in sculpture – a total negation of the “New Horizons” aesthetics of expression that had been dominant in the local art scene for decades. Tumarkin’s sculpture confronted the body, which had been absent from Israeli art until then, and grappled frontally with deformation, with the grotesque, and with the horrors of war (several years later, after the “Six Day War”). “We were a new generation that wanted to express sharply, without qualms, about wounds – on the contrary, the declared aim was to touch the wounds with all our might, and even with deliberate cruelty”, wrote Mundi.⁵

In the late '60s Michael Druks painted grotesque nudes that exposed bestial lasciviousness, and collaborated with the playwright Hanoch Levin in forthright anti-war messages: Levin in writing and Grinberg in painting gave expression to the absurd, grotesque duplicity in which the defeated, crippled body still primps itself in blind, zealous, puffed-up pugnacity. Looking at Grinberg’s generals with amputated limbs from 1964 brings to mind the final scene of Levin’s 1974 play *Schitz*: “In the middle of this wearying life, the state came to my home, reached out a rough hand, and took my husband. Now it also wants me bless it for this death and welcome it: Welcome, death; welcome, grave; welcome, coffin; welcome, burned flesh and blood and wounds: welcome!”⁶ A contemporary operatic interpretation of *Schitz*, performed in Tel Aviv in the framework of the Israel Festival during the opening week of the Grinberg exhibition, attests like a thousand witnesses to the topicality of Levin’s and Grinberg’s oeuvres, which make use of the aesthetics of shock and its accompanying effect of estrangement as an avant-garde tactic that knows no red lines. In comparison to the “New Figuration” artists in Israel in the late '60s (who also, like Grinberg, were influenced by the works of Francis Bacon, de Kooning, and Samuel Beckett) the forthright expressive directness of the venomous image in Grinberg’s paintings stands out as distinctive, as does the acerbic critical dimension that charges his work with power.

In the early '60s the critical avant-garde was well received in Paris, a city identified with a universal and international image that was welcoming to foreign artists. But all this changed radically in 1968, with the Students’ Revolt. The French bourgeoisie, Yosef Mundi wrote, “was greatly alarmed”

5 Yosef Mundi, typewritten text, undated (in Hebrew), estate of Jacques Grinberg, Paris.

6 Hanoch Levin, *Schitz*, first performed at the Haifa Municipal Theater in 1975, directed by Hanoch Levin.

by the revolt of the students and by the artists who collaborated with them: “The government and especially the French bourgeoisie came out strongly against modern art, and viewed it as an enemy that endangered the ruling class. The French establishment suddenly awoke and forcibly braked all artistic opposition. This harmfully affected not only the painting but also the theater and especially the cinema”. The atmosphere changed, and with the blocking of resources to artists and to art, free expression was no longer possible. “Paris sank into a harsh and despair-inducing slumber”. In an interview with Mundi, Grinberg said that the failure of the revolt was “a shock that tore my universe apart”. He characterized the painting done in Paris after the failure of the revolt as a return to landscape and still life, while “the bricks of the barricades were sold to the bourgeois”. He viewed the graffiti that were created in New York after 1968 as a direct continuation of the Paris protests in which he had taken an active part.⁷

During his early days in Paris Grinberg was represented by a leading gallery (André Schoeller) and his works were shown in important group exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris and in galleries in Belgium and Switzerland. But after the failure of the Students’ Revolt and the collapse of the gallery that represented him (incurring the sale of his paintings at a loss, which broke the market for his works) he had to grapple with a new reality from which he found it difficult to recover.

His two attempts to return to Israel and become part of the local art scene, in the early '70s and in the mid-'80s, were unsuccessful. It seems that Grinberg, who was close to circles of poets and theater people in Israel, was less (if at all) connected with circles of plastic artists in Israel. His literary colleagues considered him a charismatic cultural figure, gifted with an analytical talent capable of the finest distinctions. Testimony of this is his inclusion in the first published edition of the literary periodical *Siman Kriah* – a work of his was published on the cover, and a selection of his drawings was printed as part of the edition. Another of his paintings appeared on the cover of the literary periodical *Proza 21* (1978), and the poet Meir Wieseltier chose to use two of Grinberg’s paintings on covers of his books.

When Jacques Grinberg arrived in Israel with his family in the early '70s, his work did not connect in any dialogue with local art, whose inner

⁷ Yosef Mundi, “Jacques Grinberg”, *Tel Aviv* (17 August, 1984) (in Hebrew); “On the Painter Jacques Grinberg” (n. 2 above); and typewritten text (n. 5 above).

circles at that time were focusing on conceptual orientations, developing sensibilities such as “The Meagerness of Material” [*“Dalut hahomer”*, often (mis)translated as “The Want of Matter” (Tr.)] and inclining to reductive minimalist abstraction. At this time Grinberg began a personal journey to slumbering regions of identity and Jewishness that Israeli art was not yet mature enough to deal with.

In the '80s Grinberg made another attempt to return and acclimatize himself to Israel. He even got his work shown, and exhibited at the Dvir Gallery in Tel Aviv (1984, 1985), but his exhibitions received little response and no local horizon opened up for his works.

Even though he longed to belong, Jacques Grinberg was a migrant artist in his soul.

Mundi: What language do you think in? / Grinberg: French. / Mundi: Not in Bulgarian? / Grinberg: I cry in Bulgarian / Mundi: And in Hebrew / Grinberg: I've tried to love.⁸

Jacques Grinberg died in 2011, in Paris, and there seems to be both power and truth in the sentence Mundi quotes at the end of his article about him:

“I don't have a homeland and I'll never have one. A painter doesn't need a homeland. I'm a foreigner everywhere, the only place where I don't feel foreign is my studio”.⁹

Jacques (Yaakov) Grinberg, a foreigner everywhere, sought to love here, but it seems that his painting, in its inverted way, is the absent present in Israeli art.

8 Yosef Mundi, “Society is the Artist's Enemy”, *Yediot Aharonot* (20 April 1973) (in Hebrew).

9 Mundi, “Jacques Grinberg” (n. 7 above).