# "Lyrical"? – Not Necessarily

Israeli Abstract Art in the Dubi Shiloah Collection

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF ISRAEL

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## The Dubi Shiloah Collection

The Dubi Shiloah Collection is the second in the series of four exhibitions held at The Open University Art Gallery. The exhibitions are dedicated to a display of various schools of Israeli art that, in general, are not well represented in Israel's main museums. The current display, comprised of exemplary works from the Shiloach collection, was selected in cooperation with the collector, in order to mirror his personal taste in art and his choice of artistic styles.

Dubi Shiloah's artworks hang on the walls of his Tel Aviv apartment. His subtle discernment in choosing works for his collection appeals to museum curators; he has loaned a few of his works to various museum exhibitions dedicated to Israeli art in Israel and abroad. As an El Al employee for many years, Shiloah has repeatedly visited art exhibits of modern and contemporary art, thus enriching his appreciation and knowledge of both the European and American contemporary art scenes.

In his youth Shiloach himself painted. Since art was not his profession, and given his acquaintance with various of its modern trends, he decided to start an art collection. Shiloah's first acquisition of an Israeli artwork was a signed lithograph by painter Nachum Guttman which he purchased "in payments", he reminisces. Thanks to his study of art history and his close acquaintance with various publications on Israeli art, he decided to build his collection according to the various historical periods and styles of Israeli art. He felt that every period and style had to be represented in his collection by a significant, exemplary work. This "chronological-normative" approach changed quickly, after he realized that he was not drawn to *all* periods and styles.

Shiloach was guided by yet another issue: a certain expression of historical justice – the purchasing of artworks that, even though highly valuable, were not accorded the respect they deserved in the local art field. As a former kibbutz member, he identified with artists who, like him, left the kibbutz and struggled to achieve an adequate status in the hierarchy of the Israeli art scene. For many years now Shiloach has been acquainted with other excluded

artists: Arab-Israeli. He finds parallels in their works with those Jewish-Israeli artists who began their artistic careers prior to immigrating to Israel. He followed the expressions of their consolidating national identity and their link to the principles of Western art. Shiloach met them at art exhibitions and bought their works. Some of them are his personal acquaintances and he is in constant touch with them.

He began purchasing works in which, thanks to his keen observation, he could discern certain unique qualities. In most cases he was right; the works in his collection are unique and at times they are an exceptional discovery of certain artists' pieces. Shiloah's first steps in acquiring his works were by visits to artists' studios. At the same time he became a regular participant in public auctions, the main venue in which collectors purchase works for their collections, especially those by artists from the past.

Most processes of art collecting are characterized by conscious, and at times by subconscious decisions. Most of them are based, after all, on the collector's personal taste. This is how a specific collection gradually acquires its unique characteristics. Accordingly, the Dubi Shiloah collection is comprised, among others, of two main groups of works:

- Israeli abstract art from the 1950s to the 1970s, including contemporary abstract artworks
- Paintings whose narratives deal with Israeli political and social issues.

This exhibition focuses on abstract works in Shiloah's collection. In a most concentrated and direct way, they expose us to the various components next to stylistic groupings of the history of Israeli abstraction.

**Abstraction and Abstract art** "Abstraction" and "Abstract art" are two closely related derivatives: Abstraction is the *process* whereas abstract art is the outcome of that process. The first steps in the history of modern abstraction show, in most cases, a process of reduction:

- Reduction of resemblance of reality; this is a gradual process in which shapes and forms of a realistic image, that attempt to express a faithful rendering of reality, are gradually

simplified and become schematic. A significant, well known example of this kind of formal reduction is a series of paintings by Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) in which the artist first painted a realistic, detailed depiction of a tree. Gradually, the paintings show a variety of curved arcs that remind one of the tree in general. In processes of reduction similar to that carried out by Mondrian, artists begin with detailed, complex realistic shapes that gradually metamorphose into geometric and schematic shapes that barely remind one of reality.

- A different process of reduction is implemented through a gradual disposal of the formal elements of painting: line, shape, color, texture and the illusion of depth. The extreme example of such a total reduction process was carried out about a hundred years ago by artist Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935). He gradually got rid of most of the above-mentioned components and towards the end of the process he painted *Black Square on White Background* (1915). However, in this stage of formal reduction, Malevich's painting still retained a shape (the square) and color (black). The next step produced *White on White* (1918): a canvas painted with white paint in which none of the elements were left or, more precisely, the only surviving element was the texture made by the brush strokes.

The history of art documents but few reduction processes similar to that conducted by Malevich. Most abstract artists began by still clinging to direct observation of nature as did Mondrian. Gradually they arrive at a form of abstraction that has no need for any connection with reality. In such abstract artworks one notices a metamorphosis in the classic role of line, shape, color, texture and the illusion of depth; they cease to function as representing reality and are expressions only of themselves.

At the end of World War II, abstract art was the main vehicle of artists in Paris and was manifested in various ways. *Geometric Abstraction* models were simple, primal shapes like squares, circles and triangles, as opposed to vital forms such as those reminiscent of the fields of botany or zoology. This style of abstraction was conceived as "cool", "rational" and "intellectual". In contrast, "warmer" expressions of abstraction were labeled by a variety of artistic terms: *Abstraction lyrique* (Lyrical abstraction), *Tachisme* ("tache" in French means patch, spot)*, Materisme* (from the French word "matter")*, Art informel* ("formless art" or art with

no forms) and more.[1] All forms of abstraction emphasized artists' individual treatment of the elements of painting, especially the specific way of laying the paint material onto the canvas. Abstract paintings by European artists that express their personal experiences of the atrocities of World War II were grouped under the general term *Materisme*. French artist Jean Fautrier (1894-1964) felt that abstract painting should convey experiences through opaque materials that he affixed to his canvases. The works of Italian artist Alberto Burri (1915-1995) relate to his personal experiences as a military physician during the war. His abstract paintings are made of materials that resemble bandages; dark patches of color in some areas of his paintings remind one of wounds.[2]

*Art informel* and *Tachisme* were two terms defining abstraction coined during the 1950s. They suggest artists' spontaneous creation process. *Art informel* aimed to describe artworks in which artists express images of the subconscious while *Tachisme* referred, generally, to a free scattering of color patches on the canvas, as signs or homages made by artists to express their inner feelings.[3]

All of these forms of abstraction took place in post-war Europe. Paralleling European abstraction, America exhibited a movement to abstraction that soon achieved the highest reputation and a predominant role within the Western art scene. By the late 1940s, American abstract painting was called *Abstract Expressionism;* more precisely, it was comprised of two main schools: *Action Painting* and *Color Field Painting.*

Significant representatives of Action Painting were Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) and Franz Kline (1910-1962). Pollock – the most extreme exponent of this style – implemented "action" by dripping liquid paint onto a large canvas which he laid on the floor of his studio. He would let his hand roam the surface of the canvas in movements that, seemingly, were free of any rational activity in pursuit of compositional organization. De Kooning and Kline's "action" was different; it was manifested in spontaneous brush strokes on

1 Anna Moszynska, *Abstract Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1990, 120.
2 Moszynska, *Abstract Art,* 124-125.
3 Ibid., 129.

the canvas. Both artists were guided during their painting process by rational considerations of an intended juxtaposition of color tones and a pre-figured treatment of their intended composition for the final painting.

Significant representatives of Color Field Painting were Mark Rotho (1903-1970), Barnett Newman (1905-1970), Hellen Frankenthaler (1928-2011) and Clifford Still (1904-1980). Color Field Painting surfaces are usually large areas of pure color, lacking contrast tonality and focus. Most paintings in this style are made through the use of diluted paint, in order to achieve transparency and an illusory feeling of floating.

Abstract Expressionism was conceived as an expansion of Surrealism and a sort of modern expression of 19th century Romanticism. Contemporary, updated interpretations of the style regard it as one of the United States' political-cultural vehicles in challenging Cold War period Communism. American cultural officials presented abstract art as a manifestation of civil freedom of expression, as individual art. This was in complete contrast with the Soviet *Social Realism* style, imposed by Soviet rule on artists in the USSR because it was considered a realist style, therefore understood by the masses – a style that expresses the spirit of the collective and shuns any individual, *bourgeois* aspects while serving the society for which it is created.

By the late 1950s, American artists felt that abstraction had exhausted itself; they created counter reactions to it that at times showed a mocking attitude. This is how Pop Art was born.

Thus far we have discussed artists' intentions and their abstract works. What about the public, confronted with these abstract works? Are our ways of observing abstract pieces different from the ways we experience artworks that are not abstract, works that contain a narrative that we follow? The answer is positive.

Since abstract artworks do not tell us a story, whether through human figures, objects or landscape views, we discover in them mere configurations of shapes and colors that completely lack any connection to reality; these satisfy our aesthetic sense. In other cases,

abstract artworks may cause us to experience them as conveyors of spiritual values. They expect us, spectators, to concentrate our observation on them for an extended period of time, a process that may invoke in us inner thoughts which, at times, may allude to sublime forces of the universe.

Abstract artworks of a different kind represent the inner feelings of artists. When we observe high ranking works of this sort, they make us experience and identify with feelings such as sadness, pain or anxiety on the one hand, joy, happiness and blissful tranquility on the other.

The special way in which we experience an abstract painting was beautifully summed up by Jonathan Hirschfeld:

> …I suggest we stop for a minute to think of abstract painting. Of its relation to the Sublime. About its main expectation for the viewers' sensitivity to nuances and delicacies, about its reluctance to be textual, [its rejection of] advertisement, pornography. Abstract painting in America of the 1950s constituted a pure modernistic moment. It was before Andy Warhol brought the language of advertisement and pornography into art. A moment before it [painting] expressed its belief in the spectator. A belief that viewers are capable of a spiritual experience in front of a work of art.[4]

In light of this concise historical background one may wonder how Israeli artists related to the universal trend of abstraction and which ways of abstract expression they have adopted. The Dubi Shiloah Collection gives us a multitude of answers.

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**Israeli Abstraction** The ideological contrast between American Abstract Expressionism and Soviet Social Realism was shared too by the Israeli art field. The universal-individual qualities of abstract art clashed in Israel with the socialist concepts so typical of Israeli politics

4 Jonathan Hirschfeld, "Lalechet al hamayim" (Walking on Water), *Haaretz,* 10.1.2014

and culture of the 1950s and 1960s. Israeli newspapers and journals published descriptions of socialist utopias advocating the creation of an ideal "national" art that would serve society, an art that would reflect its socialist ideals. In complete contrast, the Israeli art establishment placed at the peak of its hierarchy artists who devoted themselves to individual, abstract art. They were consistent in their will to create *bourgeois*, individual art that does not aspire to serve socialist ideals in any way.

The centers of art in the 1950s, as already mentioned, were Paris and New York. Israeli artists could acquaint themselves with contemporary artistic experiments that took place in these centers through black and white reproductions, published in Israeli journals dedicated to art and culture. However, the most direct way for them to be exposed was to spend time at the sites themselves. In their unending attempts to become inspired, Israeli artists could not but join the enthralling current of abstraction that ruled the European and American art scenes. Abstraction arrived in Israel somewhat late – at the beginning of the 1950s – and became the leading, most valued trend in the local art field. Historians of Israeli art tried to establish unique characteristics for Israeli abstraction. In most cases they chose to use a most general term for it: *mofshat liri* – Lyrical Abstraction – in spite of the fact that this term is not applicable to all Israeli artists who dealt with abstraction.

One of the early functionaries of the Israeli art field, who assigned the term "Lyrical Abstraction" to Israeli abstraction trends was Yona Fisher (b. 1932). In 1965 he was the chief curator of universal and Israeli art at the newly inaugurated Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Two major exhibitions marked the opening of the museum. The first was *The Bible and Art* through which the Israeli public was exposed to major artworks loaned by museums throughout the world as homages to the newly opened museum. The exhibition focused on Israel's Jewishness, a country in which "The people of the Bible" live. The second exhibition, *Trends in Israeli Art*, curated by Fisher, presented the public with exemplary works, comprising the history of art created in British Mandatory Palestine through the art created in the sovereign State of Israel. "The immediate result of the Second World War…", wrote Fisher "…was the temporary break

of [Israeli artists'] contacts with the Jewish *School of Paris* [5] that by then had lost most of its appeal. Painters and sculptors, who instinctively felt, already in the late 1930s, the need to free their works from anecdotal elements[6] found in the late discoveries of European and American abstraction – "lyrical" and expressionistic abstraction – a base for new, quick developments towards the various ways of abstraction.[7]

From Tachisme to Abstract Expressionism, most modes of abstraction were expressed by Israeli abstract artists. However, not all of them fitted the general characteristics of the all-encompassing label of "Lyrical Abstraction". The general term was imposed by a small, belligerent group of artists onto the entire contemporary Israeli abstraction movement by every possible means thanks to their social and business connections with art gallery owners, museum curators and managers and the robust influence they exerted on the Association of Israeli Painters and Sculptors, the official representative of most contemporary Israeli artists. Art critic Adam Baruch best describes the phenomenon:

> By the end of the 1940s Israeli Lyrical Abstraction was headed by painters Yosef Zaritzky (1891-1985), Yechezkel Streichman (1906-1993), Avigdor Stematzky (1906-1989) and other teachers-artists. At its inception, the movement lacked a manifesto; it was replaced by intuitions, artistic mumbling and products (mainly paintings). It was only natural that at the beginning this was a multi-participant movement, of many wordings as well, artists who differed in styles and authority, who assembled under [the term] "Lyrical Abstraction".[8]

5 The "School of Paris" is a term that groups painters and sculptors from all over the world who lived and worked in Paris after 1900. Artists came to Paris because the city offered them ideal conditions of living and creativity and almost unlimited opportunities for artistic discussions, exhibiting their works and selling them. A narrower meaning of this term refers to the *Peintres maudits* ("cursed artists")' realist-expressionist artists, most of them Jewish, who were not French by birth. They formed the nucleus of French Expressionist painting: Soutine, Modigliani, Chagall, Pasquin, Kissling and others.

6 By "anecdotal elements" Fisher referred, apparently, to paintings that contain certain narratives depicted in a figurative (and not abstract) ways.

7 Yona Fischer, *Megamot be'Omanut Israel* (Trends in Israeli Art) (cat. exh.), Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1965 (unpaged).

8 Adam Baruch, "Shmuel Bak, George Shemesh and Michael Druks" in Adi Ofir (editor), *Hamishim le-arba'eem veshmoneh, Momentim Bikorti'im beToldot Medinat Israel Te'ud Eru'eem / Massot. Ma'amarim* (Fifty Years to 1948, Critical Moments in the History of the State of Israel, Documentation of Events, Articles and Papers), Jerusalem: Van Lear Institute, Hakibutz haMeuchad Publication, 1998, 189.

Dalia Manor gives more details about how artists of the Lyrical Abstraction group pushed aside any other possible way of abstraction:

> Conceiving the act of painting as reflecting inner personal feelings has stood (and still stands) at the basis of Israeli aesthetics for many years. This concept crystalized around what is called "lyrical" in Israeli abstraction, rejected all other possibilities, not only that of figurative painting but mainly of precise drawing, the clean line and color areas.[9]

Another reason for the almost exclusive rule of Lyrical Abstraction was the revulsion felt for Surrealist principles by most functionaries of contemporary Israeli art because of its supposed connection with European Fascism. The hegemonic Lyrical Abstraction totally disregarded and had no respect for the abstract components in the art of renowned Israeli artist Mordechai Ardon (Max Bronstein, 1896-1992). In spite of their abstract traits, Ardon's images did not fit the "lyrical" concept of the ruling group. In this connection one should also note the fact that abstract artists such as Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko – both Jewish – did not leave any impression on Israeli artists in spite of their well-acknowledged reputation. They were even referred to in a Hebrew publication as early as 1958: Olga Schatz's *Art of our Generation, Modern Art and its Movements.*[10] The last chapter of her book deals with, among others, the works of Archile Gorky, Stuart Davies, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell.

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**Israeli abstract paintings in the Dubi Shiloah Collection** Dubi Shiloah's collection offers exemplary models of the various expressions of Israeli abstraction. It contains not only works by renowned painters of the Lyrical Abstraction group; it is also unique for the possession of works by other artists who are infrequently mentioned in the historiography of Israeli art, artists whose artistic qualities are no less than those of the Lyrical Abstraction

9 Dalia Manor, *Michael Argov,* Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1993 ,6.

10 Schatz's book was translated into Hebrew by poet Avraham Shlonsky (from the original in Russian). Jerusalem: Reuven Mass Publication, 1958. Nine years beforehand, Schatz published her book in English as *Juval Sings, Into the Spirit of Art,* Berkeley: Circle Edition, 1949.

mainstream. The collection boasts significant and interesting works by artists who are best known for working in genres that are not abstract but who, at the beginning of their artistic careers adhered to an abstract style. These works are less known and therefore their exposure in this exhibit has added value.

A drawing by Arieh Lubin (1897-1980) (in page 23 the Hebrew section) is a fine example of an abstraction process. With a sure hand, through decisive lines, Lubin must have begun his drawing by a depiction of the palm tree, next to which he placed a cabin or a hut. Nervous, yet sure of itself, crosshatching closes in on the center of the drawing; the lines give an illusion of vectors whose direction is from the edges towards the center of the composition. This system of lines may suggest a stormy sky and sloping hills in spite of the fact that they are merely lines, doodled schematically.

A watercolor drawing by Avigdor Stematzky, a leading artist of Israeli Lyrical Abstraction (plate 24 in the color section), shows a total mastery of the medium: fluid patches of color create a flickering surface of what looks like flashes of light, transparent, magical – "lyrical".

Eliahu Gat (1918-1987) was known as an Expressionist painter; however, the style of a watercolor in the collection is close to a Lyrical Abstraction work (plate 8 in the color section). Transparencies achieved by the liquid appearance of the surface, executed in thick brush strokes, show that the drawing was done outdoors. The many layers of liquid paint that the artist lays on the paper block some of the landscape details, thus creating an abstract image, subtle and quivering.

Hana Levi (Weiler, 1914-2006) mastered the watercolor medium in a most expressive way. *Untitled* (plate 10 in the color section) shows fluid patches of color, laid on the paper by gentle, subtle brush strokes that seem to have been "walking mincingly" on the surface. They fill almost the entire area of the drawing with a blast of colors. On the right, through exact, sure pencil lines, the artist created a perfect, full-of-tension balance for the whole composition. Levi is hardly mentioned in the history of Israeli art in spite of the fact that she was a superb artist who seemed to have had very little power for social "pushing".

As opposed to Lyrical Abstraction, Geometric Abstraction did not direct itself to emotion; as already mentioned, it was conceived as "cool", "rational" and "intellectual". It was adopted as an artistic style by some Israeli artists but was placed on the margins of the Israeli art field due to the hegemonic rule of the Lyrical Abstraction camp. Abstract geometric works by Avigdor (Renzo) Luisada (1905-1987) and Michael Argov (1920-1982) in the Shiloach collection make clear to us these artists' adherence to the notion that a work of art is independent and the choice taken by them to deal with simple geometric shapes in an attempt to express formal harmony that excites our aesthetic sense.

Luisada, an excellent draftsman, is known for the hundreds of figurative illustrations he contributed to books and journals. The skills he acquired as an art student in Florence, prior to his arrival in British Mandatory Palestine are very well expressed in his abstract paintings of the 1960s. Luisada was well acquainted with the contemporary Italian art field; he was probably familiar with the artistic *oeuvre* of post-war artist Alberto Magnelli (1888-1971), whose works were mainly done in a geometric abstraction style. In general, most of Luisada's paintings – in particular those in the Dubi Shiloah Collection – reveal the tools he used in their execution: a ruler, a drafting triangle and a ruler for outlining curves. *Untitled* (plate 2 in the color section) shows that in addition to outlining the geometric shapes in the painting, Luisada implemented his deep knowledge of Cubist principles and blurred the contours of his shapes thus allowing a free flow of background into the shapes and vice-versa, through identical tonal areas.

Two abstract works by Michael Argov tell us of the changes in his creative process. A work from 1962 (plate 15 in the color section) is a Tachist work: vigorous brushstrokes create ambivalent, open shapes on a background that penetrates through them. *Op 93,* a later work (on the English cover of the catalog), shows Argov's reduction process and his use of primary geometric shapes, an industrial approach, characteristic of his reliefs through which he attempted to convey social messages.[11]

11 Dalia Manor, *Michael Argov,* Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1993, 61.

Israeli abstract artists who have come as close as possible to Action Painting seem to have fitted the principle of 'action' to their personal needs. Mostly they adopted the way in which paint is spread on the surface of the canvas in oil paintings and the almost automatic doodling made by pencil and charcoal for drawings. Most of these artists did not adhere to the principle of automatism, which, consequently, annuls, or blurs the artist's involvement in the painting or drawing processes. One notices that, in general, the models of American Action Painting close to the hearts of Israeli artists were Willem de Kooning's works, rather than Jackson Pollock's.

Accordingly, the abstract paintings of Avigdor Aricha (b. 1929), [Rita] Alima (1932-2013), Avshalom Okashi (1916-1980) and Aharon Messeg (b. 1942) – all in the collection – are characterized by a visual simulation of the artist's hand during the process of painting, a movement, that, as opposed to Pollock's totally spontaneous painting process, is both spontaneous and well-calculated at the same time.

Aricha's early period was almost entirely abstract; rare paintings from this period in the collection (plate 16 in the color section) show dark shapes, made of intense brushstrokes of semi-dry paint that jostle each other, juxtaposed on a light-toned background, that reveals itself in between slits that appear to be cut in them. Aricha amazes us with the illusory depth of his composition: achieved thanks to the bright areas that we perceive as rays of light, breaking through the slits in-between the dark shapes.

Avshalom Okashi narrowed his palette to blacks with touches of white and red, sometimes accompanied by miniscule additions of yellows and blues.[12] In the framework of Lyrical Abstraction he regarded himself as an outsider:

> …I expressed doubts with the Parisian concept of softness and lyricism. I felt that it did not fit me [my style]…my evolutionary process was such that the whole time I felt like I was throwing away things thus arriving at a black picture. I felt then that I was completely disconnected. It was then that Lyrical Abstraction celebrated its victory and I, myself, appeared as a Franciscan monk, walking around with barely his black cape and rope.[13]

12 Mordechai Omer, *Avshalom Okashi 1916-1980* (exh. cat.), Akko, Okashi Museum, 1994, 20.
13 Avshalom Okashi in a conversation with Gila Balas, as quoted in Omer, *Avshalom Okashi 1916-1980,* 21.

Okashi used to lay his paint onto his canvases with a spatula. His hand movements are apparent in *Untitled* (plate 17 in the color section). He would use the painting tool to smear the paint layers by moving it from right to left, from the top of the canvas to its lower part. Consequently, in between the dark areas, slits were torn through which one can spot the exposed areas of the raw, light-toned canvas, forming a calculated, flickering composition.[14]

'Calculated spontaneity' also characterizes the abstract, nervous drawings of Aviva Uri (1922-1989). Uri is the most significant representative of Israeli abstract drawing. She once talked about the function of line in drawing, an element that plays a significant role in all of her works:

> …Contemporary line is one that finds it difficult to be 'lucid', 'beautiful'' 'clean'. It is a line that experienced Auschwitz and Hiroshima; its future is that of missiles and destruction. A line that is a bunch of blood wounds that destroys itself in a drive to unload from within itself its coerced burden, the equilibrium of atomic terror, intergalactic, industrial contamination, the robotic, the violent… the line of today is thickened, [it is] quick and aspires to be free.
>
> Should we be enthused by the beauty of mountains and the lucidity of space? Space is not lucid anymore! Art cannot estrange itself to its mere existence and our line today is a line that lives simultaneously both death and life, it is an open line, yet locked, a line written by hand, a streamed line with a blast of consolation.[15]

Indeed, Uri's flickering, nervous lines, express her protest, making spectators identify with feelings of deep sorrow, pain, cessation and impotence (plate 18 in the color section). Her personal, unique 'handwriting' doodles and erases, adds and then deletes. Her drawings sketch an array of simplified images that look like uncertain scratches that lead our eyes in a

14 Omer quotes Okashi and claims that the artist sees in the darkness of his paintings something that fits a Jewish artist since they may express "nights of darkness and the many atrocities Jews have undergone. This has led Okashi to tear these tears and bring forth from them the bright chords, the lights that have guided and encouraged Jews in those dark nights. One is not concerned with a regular night; rather with an eternal night and with an eternal light that has guarded Jews throughout their history". Omer, Ibid.

15 Aviva Uri, "*Kav*" (Line), in Dorit Leviteh, *Aviva Uri,* Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Hakibutz haMeuhad Publishing, 1986, 119-120.

journey of search. The journey is exhausting and confusing; it forces us to try to unravel the entanglement of the romping lines, at the end of which, perhaps, to discover how in between these lines we may decipher objects, most of which allude to death, torture, destruction and a great fire that consumes everything.

Logical formal calculation, an approach to painting that constitutes the polar opposite of the spontaneity so typical of Action Painting was expressed in what may be labeled as a single person "school" of abstraction: artist Haim Kiewe (1912-1983). His compositions are superbly calculated; they excel in contrasts of tones and shapes that convey great formal tension (plates 6, 7 in the color section). The artist was in constant contact with Paris; he first worked there in 1951, and from 1959 to 1969 lived and worked in both Paris and Bat Yam in Israel.

In the late 1950s, Kiewe was aware of the artists' rebellion against abstraction; while in Paris he was presumably acquainted with works by European Pop artists such as the British Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005), and probably those by Scotsman Richard Hamilton (1922-2011) and [Ronald Brooks] Kitaj (1932-2007). These artists are known for juxtaposing ready-made images of everyday objects onto their canvases as well as for collages that lack any compositional arrangement. Kiewe's approach involves the use of images that have close affinity with reality and therefore possess "anecdotal", "narrative" elements. As mentioned above, Yona Fischer, the advocate of Israeli abstraction, referred to such formal traits in a derogatory way by claiming that most Israeli abstract painters try to free themselves from them.

Indeed, as Gideon Ofrat explains:

> More and more Pop elements penetrated [Kiewe's] minimal abstraction; torn pieces of paper from billboards, advertisements, signs, stamped envelopes, cards, packages, letters, words. [His painting] constructs abstract flatness through signs that went through a process of becoming flat. These paintings are never finished as long as the painter is bound to return to them at any minute and integrate additional flattened objects onto them. [Kiewe] expresses an anti-historical attitude in his works – he does not mark them with dates.[16]

16 Ofrat, *Haim Kiewe*, Jerusalem: Koren Publishing, 1989, 44.

Kiewe's works may be seen as the last exponents of the Israeli abstract generation; Israeli abstraction slowly expired and disappeared for many years. "When '[Israeli] Lyrical Abstraction was twenty years old…", wrote Adam Baruch,

> …what was left of it, as a matter of fact, was its police. What is the Lyrical Abstraction police? it is the politics and publications that always exist after a certain phenomenon has terminated its natural, true life and still prevails, due to inertia or the need to choke new forces.[17]

We must now pose a question: is abstraction totally abandoned by artists of the 21st century? The answer is negative. Artists, both European and American, Israeli included, continue to produce abstract art. Dalia Manor dwells on the status of abstraction in contemporary art and on that of artists who produce abstract works:

> Providing that a significant aspect of abstraction entails its historical status within Modernism, how can we perceive contemporary abstract painting, when abstraction has already become part of tradition? …The validity of abstract painting today, and the fact that it continues to be practiced in spite of the fact that it has presumably lost its 'relevancy', reminds one in a certain way of the status of 'descriptive-figurative' painting of the 1940s and 1950s since the latter was conceived as not belonging to the 'here and now'. Indeed, [contemporary] abstract painting…exists …as one of the options in a post-historic art. However, contrary to 'figurative-naturalistic' painting, that is greatly appreciated today, the option of abstraction is a trend that only a few [artists] dare to pursue.[18]

A few works by such artists who 'dare' are in the Dubi Shiloah Collection.

Ido Barel's (b. 1959) grounds and objects are comprised of nostalgic waste that was "cleansed", transforming, at the end of an artistic process, into elements that are totally neutralized of their former functions. Parts of tables allude to their original function; drawers become reliefs yet maintain their "drawer-like" traits; the way Barel hangs shelves on the wall turns them into "pictures". In an age of computer velocity, colors, flickering lights and flashing texts, within the

17 Baruch, "Shmuel Bak, George Shemesh and Michael Druks", 190.
18 Dalia Manor, "On contemporary abstraction following Smadar Eliasaf Paintings", 2010.

context of a contemporary environment that is flooded with video screens and huge electronic printouts, the artist's works convey anachronism.

Barel imbues his works with his cynical sense of humor; his profound knowledge of the history of Western art enables him to allude to its established icons. *Untitled* (plate 1 in the color section) is made of hardened paper whose folds remind one of a decorated screen. The artist's associative "subject matter" of this abstract work begins with the way we identify shapes that at first look amorphous, until we observe them more closely and consequently realize that the dark shape on the right is actually a map of one of Japan's islands.

Ibrahim Nubani (b. 1961), a contemporary artist who is also 'daring' in that his art is abstract, is consciously influenced by the philosophy of two great master craftsmen of the 20th century: Mondrian and Malevich. Geometric abstraction in their works was ideologically linked with utopian and mystical concepts. Both masters related to the status of abstract art as a universal, crossing borders and cultures; they believed that art possesses an inner logic of its own.[19] At the early stages of his work, Nubani chose geometric abstraction and later on incorporated into his abstract paintings an array of images that bear reference to reality.

Efrat Livni mentions two symbolic images in Nubani's art: house and plants. She claims that through an abstraction process of plant motifs he refers to *arabesques*, a typical ornament of Islamic art. Through them, she maintains, the artist expresses his inner struggle between two realms: local, as an Israeli Arab, and universal. The mixing of two different worlds of colors and shapes, contrasting two formal lexicons, is parallel to a divided mental condition or to a mental state of belonging to two different worlds.[20]

Paintings by Nubani in the Dubi Shiloah Collection include collages. In this respect one should note that contemporary analyses by art historians focus on *reading* the texts that appear on

19 Efrat Livni, "A red Tree with a Black Cross: Three Chapters in the Life and Work of Ibrahim Nubani", in *Ibtahim Nubani, In Between* (cat. exh.), Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2004.
20 Livni, Ibid.

newspaper clippings and such-like materials used by artists in their collages. In such a way scholars diligently revealed the political and social messages, until then hidden in Picasso's collages. Nubani constructs his collages in a way that reminds one of those by American Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) and, in the Israeli context, the works by Henry Schlezniak (1938-1980) In *Untitled* (plate 22 in the color section) Nubani glued to the surface of the canvas newspaper clippings and pages from brochures whose texts refer to Israeli artists.[21] This is how, apparently, he confronts those who are and who are not worthy of entering the official pantheon of Israeli art.

Nubani's abstract paintings definitely would not have ever been permitted to enter into the Lyrical Abstraction group "club", simply because his abstract paintings dare to convey certain messages. His works are a prime example of negating Yona Fischer's claim that Israeli abstract painters aspire to annul any signs of anecdotal aspects to their works.

Nubani, like other contemporary Israeli artists who chose abstraction as their main mode, cannot but relate to their predecessors; though they do not pay direct homage to them, something in their works allows those of us, who are aware of artistic subtleties to notice that they are acquainted with the works of their predecessors and that they feel they do follow in their footsteps while adding new, post-modern shades to their works, elements that endow them with added value.

The works in this exhibition are only a small part of the Dubi Shiloah Collection, yet they provide us with an insight into the level of significance which Israeli abstraction held for the collector. Moreover, the works of art are a feast for the eyes, and their exhibition at the Open University Gallery is a golden opportunity to experience the various Israeli approaches to abstraction, some of which are being displayed publicly for the very first time.

Alec Mishory
Tel Aviv, February 2014

21 One such clipping shows a photograph next to which the text talks about Israeli photographer Tiranit Barzilai.

## Works exhibited

All measurements in centimeters, height preceding width

Shimon Avni, *Abstraction,* oil on canvas, 100x75 (plate 5 in the color section)
Shimon Avni, Untitled, *gouache on paper*, 50x35
Pinchas Abramovitz, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 70x50 (plate 13 in the color section)
Rita Alima, *Abstraction*, 1959, oil on canvas, 38x61.5
Rita Alima, *Abstraction*, 1965, oil on canvas, 61x88 (plate 14 in the color section)
Michael Argov, *Abstraction*, 1962-1964, oil on canvas, 72x72 (plate 15 in the color section)
Michael Arghov, *Op 93*, 1968, oil, corrugated cardboard glued to canvas, 100x100
Mordechai Arieli, *Untitled*, gouache on cardboard, 17.5x25
Mordechai Arieli, *Abstraction*, gouache on paper, 22x28 (plate 23 in the color section)
Avigdor Aricha, *Petite programme*, oil on canvas, 89x59 (plate 16 in the color section)
Avigdor Aricha, *Abstraction*, oil on canvas, 38x46
Arieh Azene, *Untitled*, 1975, oil on canvas, 45x55
Arieh Azene, *Untitled*, 1975, oil on canvas, 50x62
Ido Barel, *Abstraction*, 1980, oil on a wooden door, 100x80
Ido Barel, *Untitled*, oil on wooden drawer, 48x62 (plate 12 in the color section)
Ido Barel, *Untitled*, oil on paper, 43x73 (plate 1 in the color section)
Michael Druks, *Untitled*, 1999, gouache on cardboard, 39x31 (plate 21 in the color section)
Eliahu Gat, *Abstraction*, watercolor on paper, 70x100 (plate 8 in the color section)
Michael Gross, *After the Six Day War*, oily pencil, pen and red ink on paper, 43x73 (plate 20 in the color section)
Elhanan Halperin, *Landscape*, watercolor on paper, 31x40 (plate 11 in the color section)
Haim Kiewe, *Composition*, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 101x101 (plate 6 in the color section)
Haim Kiewe, *Composition*, 1972, oil on canvas, 99x98
Haim Kiewe, *Collage – Paris*, 1964, oil on wooden board, 50x72
Haim Kiewe, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 73x92
Haim Kiewe, *Untitled*, 1975, oil on canvas, 72x60 (plate 7 in the color section)
Haim Kiewe, *Untitled*, 1960s, oil on canvas, 46x55

Haim Kiewe, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 74x60
Hana Levi, *Untitled*, watercolor on paper, 50x70 (plate 10 in the color section)
Hana Levi, *Untitled*, watercolor on paper, 50x70
Arieh Lubin, *Landscape*, pencil on paper, 20x27
Avigdor (Renzo) Luisada, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 72x54
Avigdor (Renzo) Luisada, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 50x70 (plate 2 in the color section)
Avigdor (Renzo) Luisada, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 50x60 (plate 3 in the color section)
Avigdor (Renzo) Luisada, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 41x55
Aharon Messeg, *Abstration*, 1979, mixed media on cardboard, 70x90 (plate 19 in the color section)
Ibrahim Nubani, *Abstraction*, 2000, acrylic on wooden board, 40x40 (plate 4 in the color section)
Ibrahim Nubani, *Abstraction*, oil on canvas and collage, 121x200
Ibrahim Nubani, *Abstraction*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 70x90 (plate 22 in the color section)
Avshalom Okashi, *Abstraction*, 1960, oil and bitumen on canvas, 50x60 (plate 17 in the color section)
Avshalom Okashi, *Untitled*, 1964, oil on cardboard, 35x50
Avigdor Stematzky, *Autumn Landscape*, watercolor on paper, 67x100 (plate 24 in the color section)
Yochanan Simon, *Untitled*, 1957, wash on cardboard, 27x34
Yochanan Simon, *Abstraction*, gouache on cardboard, 20x30
Yechezkel Streichman, *Landscape*, 1966, watercolor on paper, 46x66 (plate 9 in the color section)
Yechiel Shemi, *Abstraction*, 1964, gouache on black and white photograph, 28x21
Aviva Uri, *Untitled,* gouache and bitumen on paper, 48x36 (plate 18 in the color section)
Aviva Uri, *Untitled*, felt tip pen on cardboard, 27x13
Aviva Uri, *Untitled*, felt tip pen on cardboard, 13.5x12

יוחנן סימון, **ללא כותרת**, 1957, דיו ודיו מדולל במים על קרטון, 27x34 ס"מ

Yochanan Simon, *Untitled*, 1957, ink and wash on cardboard, 34x27 cm