

Perpetual perspective

In the studio with Gilad Efrat

• By MICHAL LANDO

Wearing jeans and a black T-shirt, painter Gilad Efrat begins to nervously tidy up as I step into his studio on Rehov Shvil Hamifal in South Tel Aviv, camera in hand. These days the studio serves as both his work space and his home, which he shares with his wife, the artist Rotem Balva.

He throws some rumpled clothes into the hamper, straightens the bed cover and takes a quick peek in the mirror. "I wasn't prepared for a camera," he says with a slightly embarrassed smile, and crosses the room to the small kitchenette to prepare coffee. Though a temporary arrangement, the porous separation between his domestic life and his studio is suggestive of Efrat's approach to art – unpretentious, but all-consuming.

The 39-year-old Beersheba native returned to the country in August from four years in the US to join the faculty of a new interdisciplinary art program at the Shenkar School of Engineering and Design. While in the US, he spent two years as an artist-in-residence at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts and later moved to Brooklyn, where he continues to maintain a studio.

Efrat has just completed the finishing touches on a series of paintings for "Common Place," a solo exhibition at the Oredaria Gallery in Rome which runs through February 21. This is his second at the gallery and the latest sign of Efrat's rising star. Since finishing his

MFA at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in 1998, he has exhibited widely both inside Israel and abroad.

He made a name for himself in the 1990s with aerial landscapes of familiar archeological sites that many interpreted as symbols of the quest to decipher the past. These images are political but understated, a description that applies to much of his work. In 2002, Efrat presented a series of European cities destroyed by bombs – foreboding images that seem to straddle the world of life and death. Are these "places to escape from, or places from which someone has already escaped?" asked Alfredo Pirri in an essay about Efrat's landscapes.

With titles such as *Sand and Stones* and *City II*, these landscapes are timeless, seasonless places. "They feel like 'no place,' or 'every place,'" Efrat suggests. They belong to us, but don't. They are distant, but incredibly close.

Such dichotomies are characteristic of Efrat's work as a whole. His paintings are at once abstract and representational, cold, but emotive; they are clearly paintings, but draw heavily on photography, and though contemporary in their outlook, they are traditional in their technique.

Efrat's paintings reveal through a process of "successive unveiling," as the critic Idit Porat suggested, a phrase that captures not only his technique but also his subject matter. He begins with a dark canvas, and rubs away at the paint layer by layer in a manner that has been compared to "rummaging in an open wound." Such imagery also speaks to the paintings themselves – deserted and raw.

Lately Efrat has moved even farther away from the human sphere, with paintings that explore the moon's surface and portraits of monkeys. "Sometimes we have to look very far in order to say something about what's closest to us," says Efrat.

He is sitting on a



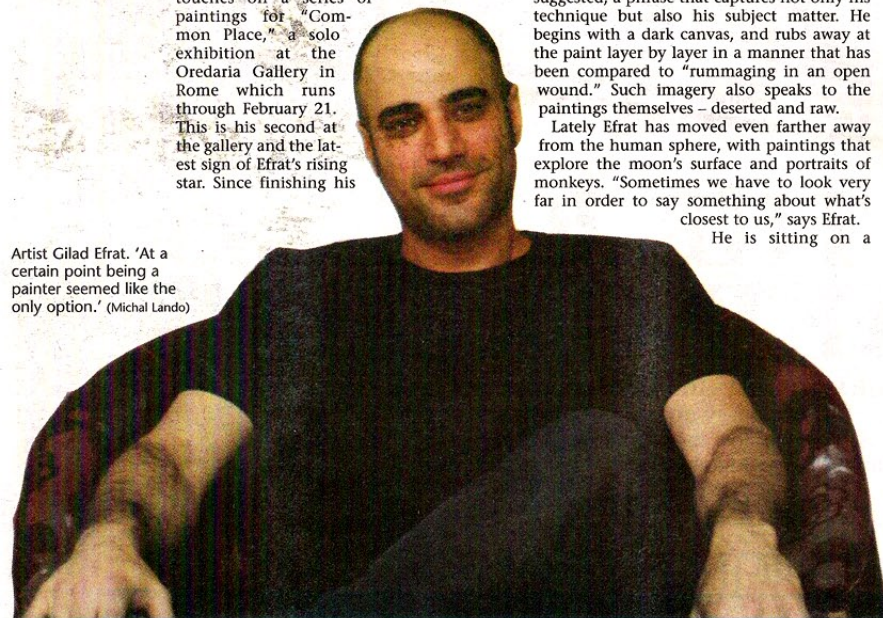
From the 'Looking' series, 2008, oil on canvas

plush red chair, with his back to a large aerial landscape painting titled simply *Landscape I*. Behind him is a partial wall that barely separates the couple's bedroom from Efrat's studio. From the corner of my eye I notice the book by his bed (which he reads on breaks from painting), *A Violent Life*, a novel by Italian director and writer Piero Pasolini who, inspired by the beauty of his childhood home, began writing poems at seven. "I love his movies," says Efrat, who turned to art at a similarly young age.

He barely remembers a time when he wasn't an artist. Growing up dyslexic when little was known about dyslexia, Efrat turned to drawing as an alternative to words. At six years old his father bought him his first oil paints, and he has painted ever since. "I believed it was my place in life," says Efrat. "At a certain point being a painter seemed like the only option."

Efrat remembers looking at paintings by Picasso at 10, and trying to "figure them out." While his classmates laughed at the Cubist drawings, he felt a responsibility to explain why they were important, even if he wasn't yet sure himself. Then one day when he was around 11, his brother, who was highly gifted in all things academic, happened upon an article in the newspaper describing the symptoms of dyslexia. It was a moment of revelation for the whole family, but especially for Efrat. He was sent to specialists, and received private tutoring and for the

Artist Gilad Efrat. 'At a certain point being a painter seemed like the only option.' (Michal Lando)





a contemporary still-life painter, his eyes move back and forth between the two images – photograph and painting – “translating” one section at a time. “That way I never start from a white canvas,” says Efrat. “I paint from observation, I don’t create something from nothing.” The result is paintings that serve as a kind of commentary on, or interpretation of the photographs.

The last work to be finished for the current exhibition in Rome, a painting called *Sand and Stones*, took him a month and a half to complete, working roughly 12-hour days. It hangs on the southern wall of his studio.

While I look it over, Efrat pulls out the source for this painting, a small black-and-white close-up of the surface of Mars covered in horizontal and vertical lines – the grid he uses to translate onto the canvas.

The painted image bears an obvious resemblance to its source. But the differences are striking. The transformation is precisely what occupies Efrat and his critics. Colorless photographs are transformed into living, mutable landscapes that have the color of flesh. Hard lines are softened and given texture.

“When you paint, the body is involved in every motion,” says Efrat.

For the last few weeks he has been listening to Bach’s *The Art of the Fugue* while he paints. He regularly listens to music when he works, and moves through composers in a systematic fashion. The fugues are an interesting choice. They are Bach’s attempt to explore all the possibilities using a single musical subject.

A similar observation could easily be said of Efrat’s artistic trajectory. In his latest work, he seems to be literally homing in on his subject. Having recently returned from abroad, distance has allowed him to move closer. He has abandoned his aerial shots for a series of close-ups.

Like his landscapes, his recent monkey portraits hover between death and life, past and present, distance and intimacy. The monkeys are symbols of our past, and we are intended to see in them our own history. They are the closest thing to us, but at the same time unreachable, inhuman.

Artists have taken an interest in monkeys for a long time, often using them in their art as a metaphor for themselves, Efrat explains. “I thought first to make a monkey portrait for the studio as a memento mori [reminder that we are mortal],” he says. The portrait hovered in his studio for two years until he finally decided to explore the image further.

“I’m not a figurative artist. I’m always involved with fragments,” says Efrat. “But monkeys are another way not to deal with the human portrait. These are self-portraits, without actually being self-portraits.”

He motions me to take a few steps toward the painting. With each step the image dissolves into further abstraction, and begins to resemble the landscape that hangs next to it.

“The face of destruction is the face of the monkey, human but with a twist,” Efrat says.

Then, as a final thought, a last attempt at explanation, Efrat returns to his most persistent theme. “I am looking at something very far in order to see what’s closest to me. I am talking about my own body, processing the same destruction I find in the other.” ■

‘I take an image everyone knows and develop it, put it in a different dimension’



‘Stones and Sand III,’ 2008, oil on canvas

first time found himself excelling at school.

“Suddenly the world was open to me,” he explains “but I was already an artist.”

TODAY EFRAT hesitates to call himself an “Israeli artist,” though he is actively engaged with his homeland. “I am a painter above all else,” he says, at a time when Israeli video art and photography are gaining international attention. Using a complicated technique that dates back hundreds of years, Efrat manages to stretch the genre in new and exciting ways.

He begins by covering the canvas in a dark layer of paint. Using his hands or a cotton cloth, he rubs away the color to expose the light below the surface. Like the Renaissance fresco painters, a day’s work is determined by the time it takes for the paint to dry. When it does his work is complete.

“The image is a kind of negative that exposes light,” Efrat explains, using photography as a metaphor for his own process. This is no coincidence. Many of his paintings begin with a photograph which he culls from archives or history books.

“It interests me to start with photographs that don’t belong to me, but already belong to everyone,” says Efrat. “I take an image everyone knows and develop it, put it in a different dimension.” A photograph freezes one fraction of a moment, but the process of painting “gives you time for observation,” he explains.

In the corner of the room is the rusty music stand he uses to position his photograph. Like