

The Art of Aharon April

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This exhibition may be seen as a culmination of almost two decades of effort, the main tenet of which has been the realization of memory in painting. This effort has shifted A. April's concern with problems of representation (mimesis) to dealing with creativity - of self, of community, of spectator.

A. April's early work in the Soviet Union was in the milieu of the greatest social experiment aiming at ultimate unity and stability between man and his social and economic environment. In the wake of a governing policy, which stressed technique (production modes) as facts of history that bring forth social, artistic and personality modes, he used subtle irony to realize a subjective mode, which is other than these "facts". (For example in his early Siberian landscapes and paintings: "After Work" 1958-60; "In the Tomsk region", 1959; "Here we shall live" 1961, etc.).

This tendency to see an other side of human experience subsequently led to a shift in April's work towards a post-impressionist metaphysical attitude, which saw human motivation and creativity as emanating from soul or spirit, and stressed poetic evocation as the way of suggesting this realm. This belief manifested itself in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the important movement called Symbolism. In Matisse's work this effort was redirected towards making the emotional response of the painter to the observed scene the object of the painting. In April's work, these tendencies existed beside a more disinterested or objective concern with observation and with the relation of light, space, and form to color. These problems, already apparent in his work in the Soviet Union and following a visit to India, had their roots in Cézanne's late work.

April attempted the synthesis of these trends in his later work in the Soviet Union and after coming to Israel. April also developed the work of Mikhail Vrubel. Vrubel treated the environment and part of the figures as faceted touches, which created a sparkling surface that enveloped the forms in a mysterious, other-worldly light, while part of the figures were more plastically presented. So light

and space were used both to separate and to unify and hint at the metaphysical entity. Already in the work in the Soviet Union and in his early work in Israel April reinterprets this mystic tendency in a more mundane way. This is evident even more so in his later work in Israel, illustrated in the present catalogue. While Vrubel retained his accountability to text and object - his mimetic mode of symbolizing, which takes into account that the material form is only symbolic of a "higher" metaphysical "eidos" or a mystic entity, April strives to achieve meaning only through the interplay of signifiers - the symbol is always here and always unattainable.

This interpretation of the symbolist dilemma (the need to achieve a universality together with the doubt its accessibility) presents just a lack - a constant striving, which is embedded in the techne and whose effect is consciousness. Consciousness is achieved as a result of the realization of the unbridgeable split with reality or with an "original" object. This is done in several ways, which I would now like to expound.

In the paintings light ceases to be actual sunlight and instead is used as the opening gambit. It is what hits the spectator and causes him to open his eyes. The intensity of the light is perhaps due to April's earlier experiments in rendering the intense sunlight in Israel, but this light has ceased to be mimetic and is now understood as symbolic - it is the effect of the play of the signifiers - the material aspect of the pictorial sign. Thus light takes on new functions. It may serve as the first impression that "hits" the spectator and forces him to utilize and strain his vision, sometimes forcing him to partly shut his eyes and search the painting for clues. But in other instances, when it is not so strong, it may serve as a metaphor for the constant search - the Eros, which is a theme of many of the paintings, because it is never actually there - it is between the colors and forms. It is only after the first closing of the eyes or after the long search, that the spectator is able to "open his eyes", to be aware.

The brush stroke has turned into a stain. This is evident in the watercolors and late oils. In this

respect April has stressed his fascination with the late work of El-Greco. Instead of the mimetic aspect of the color patch, the stain creates an enclosure - a self contained vessel of light and space, which sometimes interacts or interpenetrates those around it, and sometimes works independently of them.

The stain puts the emphasis not on the painter's means or on language's independent working as they create an analogue to reality (Cézanne), nor on a "subjective" approach to viewing reality (Munch or Matisse), nor does it emphasize an "other" metaphysical essence (Vrubel). Instead it points to the necessary accumulation of deficiencies and gaps, which is the condition of the ability to use a language. These deficiencies are stored as memory images. So the paintings don't recreate or produce a reality. Instead they allow an accumulation of components that trigger the memory images because they are structured in a similar way, as deficiencies or as lacks.

April builds up memory as separate units - as stains, which are linked and suffused in each other and are simultaneously separate. This process is analogous to the dual aspect of memory - its unconscious, random aspect, and its conscious, desiring aspect, which remembers a particular thing. The unconscious aspect operates inside and with matter. It is not separate or prior to the materiality of the paint - it manifests itself only in the specific touch of the painter and his immersion in the paint. In this respect memory is "unconscious", it "operates by itself" - randomly. It is as if the images are remembered by the "chain of signifiers" (the interdependence of the memory-stains) or by the dependency of technique and culture, without the interference of the artist, and thus achieve a unity. On the other hand, as this immersion occurs - it takes on a specific conscious form because memory is aroused as an attribute of emotion or desire. For the spectator, Consciousness is achieved because of the effort to remember, in which the memory stains play both an independent and a directed role.

Iconographically, we can see memory stains of a collective and of a personal nature. The collective are more obvious as they are those that institute collective Hebrew and western memories. These may be pastoral or erotic scenes, but lately they focus on strife as a universal factor of change and

of becoming. Perhaps this strife is seen as the embodiment of erotic force because the constant striving (Eros) only manifests itself openly in the clash at the borders.

Perhaps it is the emotional immersion that creates the sense of strife in the paintings because of the resistance of the materials to the conscious act of creation - they are, so to speak, creating by themselves. This is seen in the story of Lot and his daughters, (#23 in the catalogue) in which all those involved transgress the ancient taboo on incest. The emotional appeal of this story is turned into a memory as the act is remembered in and by the watercolor. The daughter-stain and the Lot-stain are formed as the suggestion of corporeal presence in the colors, in their treatment, and in their points of contact. Because of the mixture of random and conscious in the stains, the reality of the occurrence is replaced by the memory of its possibility.

Memories take on a more personal and primal nature in the form of diverse animals. These animals, owls, horses, sheep, dogs, birds, an ape in sculpture, are the stuff of childhood memories. They infiltrate the paintings and sometimes seem to take them over completely (#11 in the catalogue). The animals don't enter completely but in parts: eyes, a wing, a battle. They seem to take on a double meaning - a pastoral and an ominous one. Perhaps this is only fitting as pastoral scenes are infused directly or by implication with the overtones of strife.

The spatial implications of the techne described above are the pulsating or throbbing nature of the paintings. This is an effect of the simultaneity of surface, touch and the interaction of separate spatial entities. What is created is sameness - a unity of stains, which dissolves into separateness but resists the desire for the depiction of uniqueness that is based on social hierarchy.

The stains tend to become a tapestry, rather than a narrative, and thus frustrate an attempt at identification (both to name and to be named). This fits in with the animals and humans we see, which take on an impersonal nature - they don't seem to have a unique self or consciousness. This may be compared to humans and animals in ancient Israeli mosaics, which include the living beings within a tendril in a tapestry-like composition. Yet as apposed to this type of mosaic, in A. April's

paintings it is the spatial network and the contradictory process of its buildup that somehow does build up a consciousness.

This consciousness is also an effect of the element of time in the paintings - the laborious time consuming process of the building up of memory, together with the a-temporal narrativity. The scenes are not depicted in the pregnant moment of classical art, which hints at the before and after of the narrative and connects them in a logical and material sequence. It is more akin to the Egyptian tendency to abstract time as if the moment were taken out of the "realistic" time sequence and put in an eternal present. Yet this present is not actualized, as in Egyptian art, by means of tradition and thus creates a static and immovable depiction, rather the memory is in the present while the event is left in the "may have happened" state.

This effect is due to the interaction of the distinct and dissolving "capsules" of space-time, which produce a dual effect: they mingle the Egyptian-like negation of distance between observer and observed with the western perspective - the objectification of the scene. So while the recognizable elements evoke an emotion and a memory and are objectified as "seen", they are at the same moment immersed in the viewer because the scene does not form a continuum with other known events, and may very well dissolve into something else, or remain in its isolation in the time-space capsule. The overall effect is therefore of the possibility of having seen, the awakening of consciousness.

Recently, April has introduced another type of memory stain into his paintings in the form of photographs or parts of them. These photographs, themselves indexical marks of a reality no longer present, add to the duplicity of impersonal and personal in the paintings. They fit in well with the overall identity of the pictorial-memory stain. It is precisely the fact that they are out of context, which fits in with being just another memory stain. Yet their contemporaneity allows for an easier penetration into the paintings. They are of our time and bring us closer to the painting, and they participate in the narrative we make up as we construct the painting from its diverse and discrete elements. They are "just another brush stroke" and in this they fit in with the unity, which negates

consciousness, yet their involvement in our times allows an even more personal and conscious buildup of memory that constitutes the painting. Thus Symbolism is given a new definition. Rather than hinting at metaphysical entities, which exist separately and prior to the painterly act, the material signifier is used to gain memory, and memory buildup is used to obtain consciousness. Consciousness is not conceived of as an "eidos" but as an effect that exists only as it is created fusing an unconscious (already determined) "language", a conscious emotional immersion in the situation and memory buildup.

In the painting of Job (#14 catalogue), we can perhaps see one of the masterpieces of this two-decade effort. We are confronted by the light that is the opening "hit", which forces us to partly shut our eyes and search the memory-stains of animals above, and the human figure under the impact of the catastrophe below. As we continue our search we become aware of the space and time capsules interacting and creating the sense of pressure. In painterly terms the catastrophe is the effect of the compositional pressure and the buildup of the memory-stain pressure (both his and ours), on this small man. Yet despite these catastrophes, perhaps this is not the last strophe, perhaps this is just the final effect of the painting - the effect of awakening or the opening of the eyes, the effect of consciousness?

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