Bio-Bibliography

Can one bypass the fact that Roee Rosen, through his writing, manufactures his art as a closed system? Can one approach his art from different perspectives? Alma Mikulinsky writes about Rosen's mid-career retrospective at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art

Critique / Alma Mikulinsky April 21, 2016

About 15 years ago, I was fortunate enough to be a student of Roee Rosen for one semester. His teaching was inspiring and inspirational. He was articulate, charismatic, smart, theoretically-informed, and sensational – offering a different way of teaching art history than most of my professors at the time. Perhaps my debt to him is greater than I have realized: I am after all a scholar of Surrealism. Given that Rosen was, and still is, such a prolific writer, most of the required reading in the syllabus was his own essays from the art magazine Studio, leading us to re-name the course's bibliography "bio-bibliography" (trust me, it sounds just as corny in Hebrew).

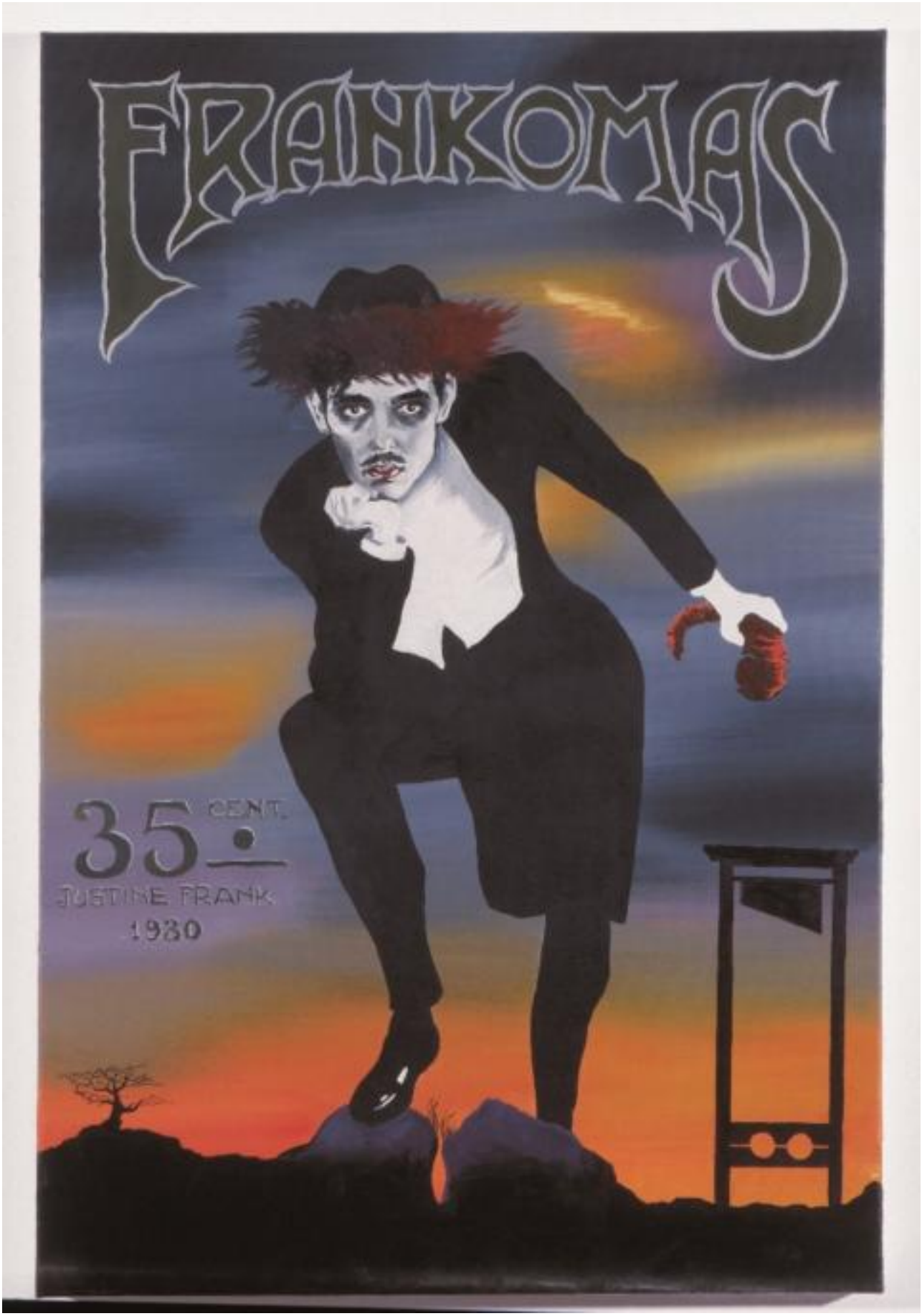
jpg.2004 ,גברים בתרבות ישראל, מזוקנים



[1]Roee Rosen. Men in Israeli Culture (Bearded). photo. 2004

I am mentioning this not because of sheer nostalgia, but because this trait of Rosen's activity also signals one of the difficulties I have always experienced in relation to his incredible body of work. I'm referring to the fact that Rosen, through his writing, manufactures his art as a closed system. Rosen is both an artist and a powerful commentator on his own work, producing some of the most influential interpretations of his art. Surprisingly, this issue stands even when he occupies a satirical position in relation to art historical discourse, for example in his comical rendition of Joanna Führer-Ha'sfari - the art historian who 'discovered' Justine Frank. Both of course are fictional characters he has invented, and in the case of the latter he also wrote *Sweet Sweat* - the pornographic novel she composed. These texts offer such a strong reading of the artwork that they dictate the terms for its interpretation, as well as the methodology critics often utilize. Thus, in the introductory text for the catalogue of *Roee Rosen: A Group Exhibition* - currently on view at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art - one of the two curators, Gilad Melzer, uses the same iconographical, genealogical, internal art-historical discourse Rosen's texts promote. These readings showcase the extensive art research the artist conducted for each one of his creations, and highlight his incredible depth, unrivalled knowledge of art-historical sources, visual ingenuity, and wit. The second curator, Joshua Simon, frames the theory behind Rosen's artistic methods in the catalogue, focusing on the invincible meta-discourse which the artist constructs and celebrating it for its ability to simultaneously define the work and unravel it completely. Simon does not employ the iconographic discourse but he does utilize the same metaphoric reasoning which Rosen uses in *Sweet Sweat* (and Bataille in *Story of an Eye*, as Barthes famously recognized)1, where ideas and objects are always in constant state of flux. Needless to say, both approaches produce a viewer/interpreter that is always in a position of inferiority, unless he or she is Roee Rosen himself.

[2] ז'וסטין פראנק, פראנקומס, תערוכה קבוצתית רועי רוזן.jpg



[3]Justine Frank. Frankomas. Oil on canvas. 90*60 cm. 1930

Justine Frank, Frank's Guild, oil on canvas, 1936.jpg **[4]**

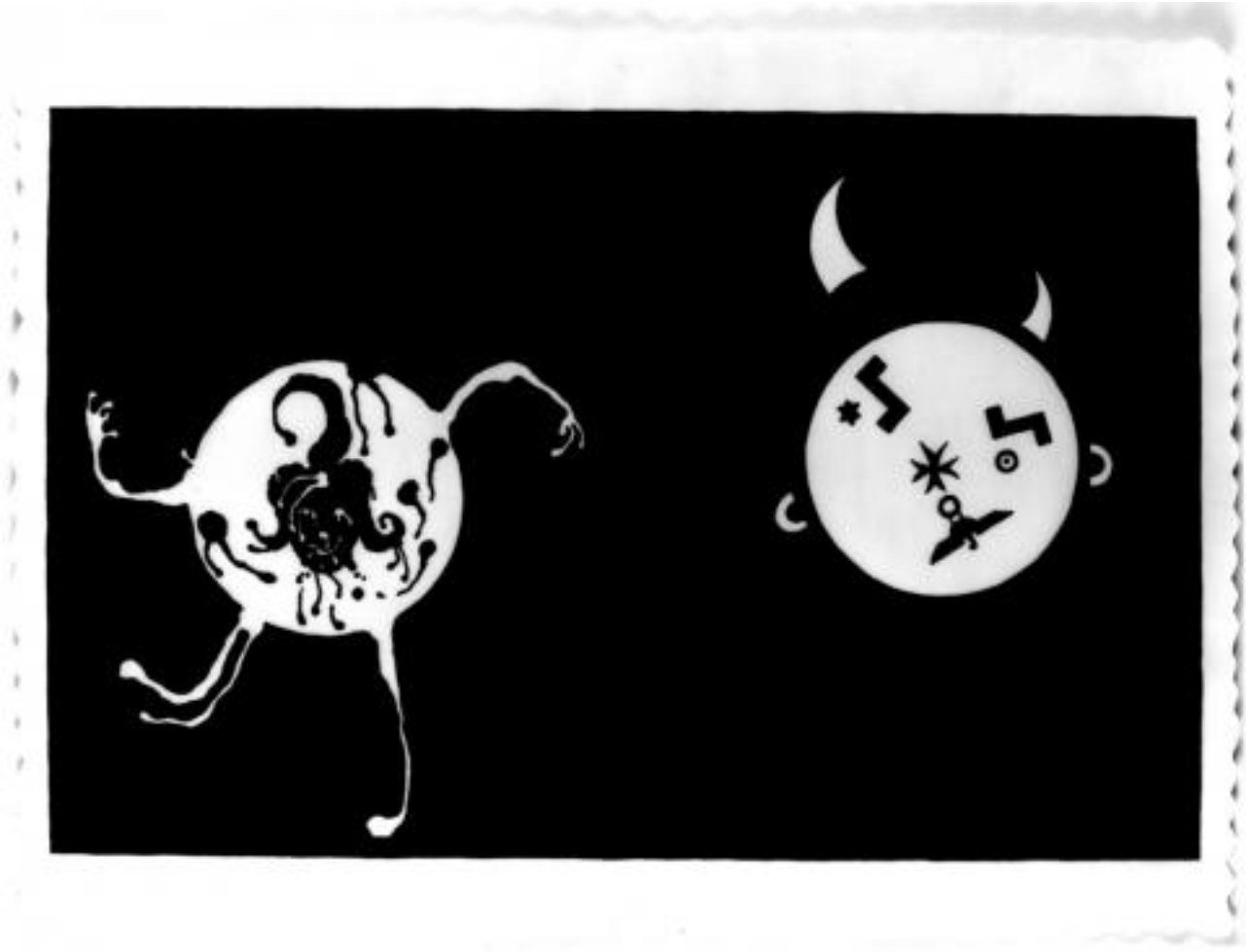


[5]Justine Frank. Frank's Guild. oil on canvas. 1936

In my view, this tour-de-force of a show allows one to bypass this challenge and approach Rosen's art from different perspectives, for better or for worse. This mid-career retrospective positions Rosen as one of the leading artists of his generation, probably one of the greatest artists to have worked in Israel. It brings together a wide selection of the artist's work, including complete series that have not been exhibited in Israel for years – most notably his project *Live and Die as Eva Braun* from 1997. At the same time, due to the simultaneous presentation of different invented personae, one can go

beyond the dominating model Rosen puts forward, with its emphasis on sexual perversions whose explosiveness is heightened through the mining of high and low visual cultures. While his individual projects were mesmerising, due to the construction of full oeuvres under the guise of different characters, each with its own elaborate mythology and history, when placed together in the retrospective his methods become clear and reveal themselves as redundant. The title “a Group Exhibition,” which argues for the forked nature of Rosen’s oeuvre, appears as a unified one-man-show, revolving around the same themes, utilizing the same artistic strategies, and done in a surprisingly identical style.

Live and Die as Eva Braun, mixed media on paper, 1995-1997.jpg **[6]**

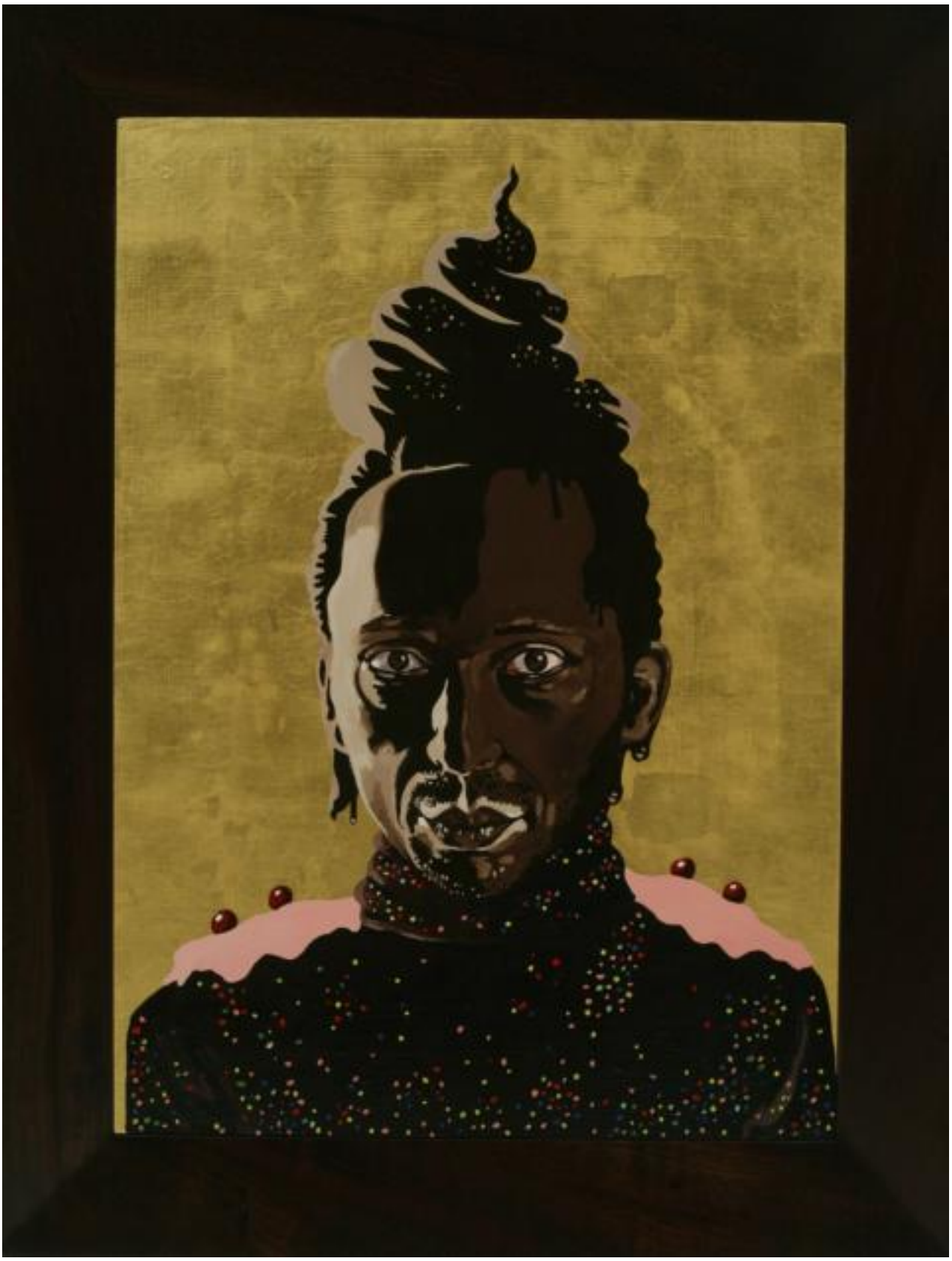


[7]Roee Rosen. Live and Die as Eva Braun. mixed media on paper. 1995-1997

Roee Rosen’s works operate in the realm of the scandal. The theme of base materialism, following the writing of Georges Bataille and continuing the tradition of the decedent surrealists in the journal DOCUMENTS, is reiterated throughout the various works and exemplified through Rosen’s fascination with bodily fluids and perverse sexuality. Furthermore, his use of the scandal as an artistic strategy also nods to the historical avant-garde as evident in the violent responses to *Live and Die as Eva Braun* when it has first been exhibited at the Israel Museum, or the sensational juxtaposition of sex and Judaism in Justine Frank’s oeuvre. Much of the excitement leading up to the retrospective was

directed towards the potential explosive nature of the works and Rosen’s scandalous reputation: he said he would never exhibit in Tel Aviv Museum! Will *Live and Die with Eva Braun* again generate an uproar? How will the audience react to this never-ending blasphemy and perversion?

דיוקן עצמי מצופה, רועי רוזן , 2007.jpg **[8]**



[9]Roee Rosen. Frosted Self Portrait #2 (aka Saint Chocolate). Oil and Goldleaf on wood. 50*70 cm. 2006

The scandals, however, never materialized. Perhaps we have changed as a society and painted sexual perversion no longer shocks us in the age of the Internet. But beyond sociological or technological explanations, I believe that the retrospective format is at the root of things: the simultaneous presence of distinct oeuvres highlights the fact that Rosen's art is not pornographic or genuinely perverse but rather an intellectual discussion on the legacy of Bataille and Surrealism. Similarly, Rosen's jokes are not really funny but seem more like musing about the nature of humor, and his critique of political power - be it through questioning the role of the Holocaust in contemporary Israeli culture or by ridiculing the macho persona of Vladimir Putin in Vladimir's Night - remains within the sterile space of the museum. What is a painted orgy between the Russian leader and animated objects to Natali Cohen Vaxberg's defecation on the Israeli flag?2

jpg.הלילה של ולדימיר, עמוד שער **[10]**


НОЧЬ ВЛАДИМИРА
МАКСИМ КОМАР-МЫШКИН

[11]Roee Rosen. Vladimir's Night. cover. 2013

The Tel Aviv retrospective reveals that underneath Rosen's scandalous tone and perverse subject matter lies a traditional body of work both discursively and visually. As mentioned before, the works encourage a search for art historical references as well as iconographic readings - the tracing of origins of the numerous details which appear excessively in every images - both considered old-fashioned practices even in my discipline, which often lags behind more up-to-date academic discourses. Similarly, Rosen's painting style appears more than before as deeply pegged in the history of figurative painting, with precedents verging from the Baroque painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo to the surrealist Salvador Dalĺ. Of course, the artist himself was the first to point out these examples. Beating Rosen at his own game is impossible, but now we can approach the art behind the smoke screen he has installed.

The Exhibition Roee Rosen: A Group Exhibition at Tel Aviv Museum of Art [12] is on view until April 30th, 2016 (curators: Gilad Melzer and Joshua Simon)

- 1. Roland Barthes, "The Metaphor of the Eye" in Roland Barthes: 'Critical Essays', Trans. by Richard Howard, Northwestern University Press
- 2. Natali Cohen Vaxberg is a contemporary Israeli artist who also occupies the realm of the scandal, whose repeated offences to Israeli nationalism and other sacred cows led to her repeated arrests by local police and faces charges at the court of law.

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[12] http://www.tamuseum.org.il/he/about-the-exhibition/roee-rosen-a-group-exhibition