Internal Interactions

Contemporary painting as the wreckage pile of Modernism or genuine Modernist painting? Focusing on composition or the subjects? Hagai Ulrich writes for Tohu on "Take Painting," showing at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art.

Critique / Hagai Ulrich January 12, 2017

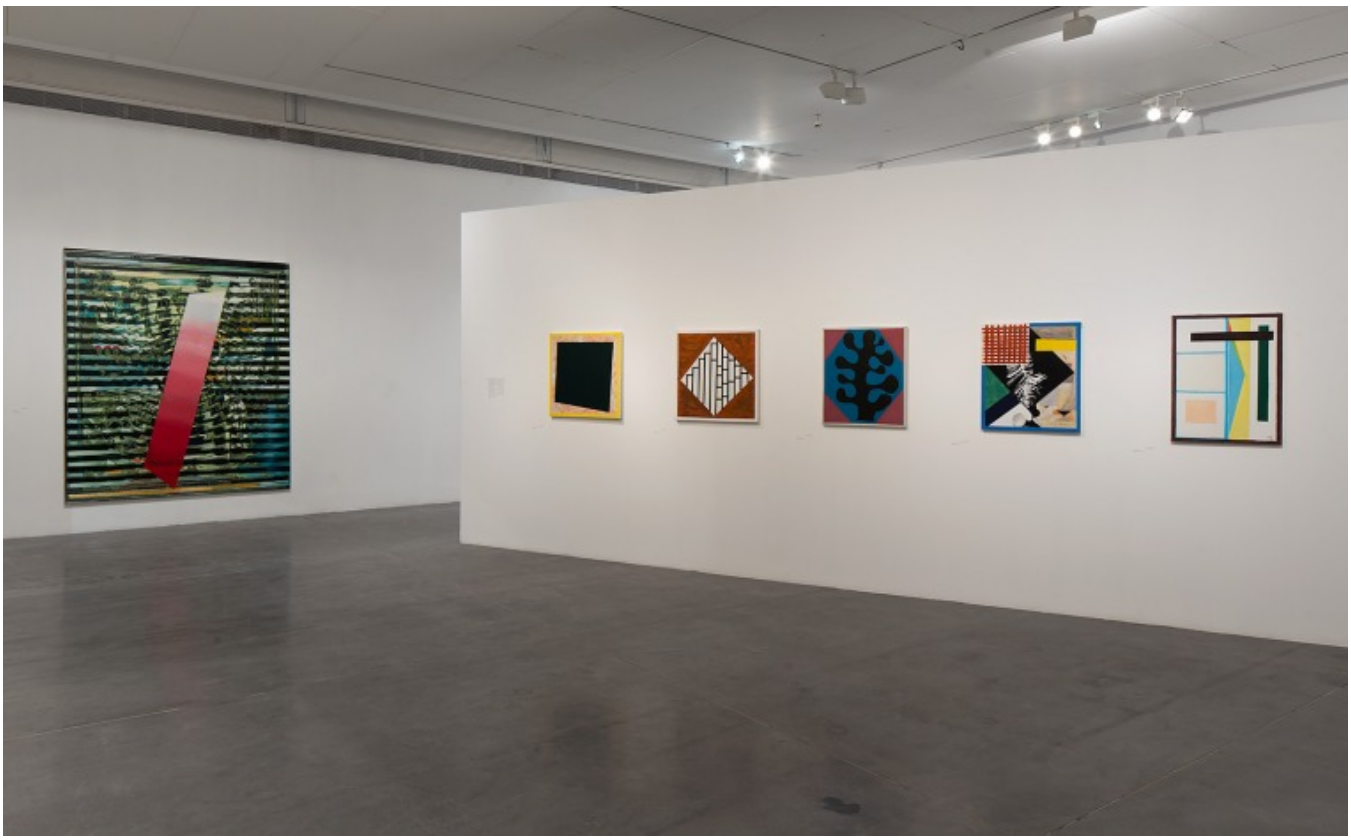
The remains of the various expressions of 20th-century abstract painting are ubiquitous in the "Take Painting" show, at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art, by its own declaration. Abstract painting is described by the curator, Larry Abramson, as the pile of ruins left by Modernist paradigms, to be rummaged by contemporary Israeli painters1. However, remains and piles notwithstanding, the show highlights some of the principles of Modernist Abstract painting, as defined by Paul Klee, one of its prominent figures, in the first half of the 20th century. Klee sought to unveil the universal and common elements shared by all people through the internal interactions of painting. He viewed compositional balance and pure forms as a way to reveal human practices of cognitive information processing.

According to Klee, the things we see in reality (objects, streets, rooms, people, etc.) cannot be described only by their physical attributes and their light reflectivity. Things do not exist only as themselves. While the human eye perceives something in reality, our consciousness discovers what we have in common with the thing (our ideas about it, the stimuli, the physical reactions, the psychological conditioning, the habits, and the pre-suppositions it evokes in us), synthesizes the information, and exports it as a mundane recognition of what we see. This structure not only reflects reality to us, but also creates what we imagine we are seeing and impacts the way we resolve and catalogue it.2

The things that affect us physically, which are perceived by the retina, and which nourish the synthesis that orders their comprehension, are not revealed through physical, mimetic depiction. They include hidden elements that a painter can mediate through lines, colors, shades, and pure, abstract forms in values that express measure, weight, and quality – painting's inherent values that may be weighed and measured in the composition. And so, it is not surprising that the internal, dynamic interactions in the composition were crucial to Klee, much more than the possibility of one’s ability to recognize the subject or the object - these were resolved at the end of the painting process.

In Klee's paintings, the viewer’s eye roams among the lines, the tones, and the structural balance that recalls music. They lead the eye to see some formatively incomprehensible thing, which changes as it is being observed. This is somewhat similar to the impact on consciousness when the effect of an optical illusion is revealed, changing the meaning of a painting. Klee has used pure shapes and a compositional system in his figurative-abstract paintings to create such an experience for the viewer, to open a window to the observed world and a different interpretation of it, to allow what we thought we saw to change and be different from the way we perceived it beforehand.

PTM_010.jpg



[1]Installation view, "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016
Photography: Elad Sarig

The works in "Take Painting" operate under principles into which this structure and all of its ramifications have been integrated. While the show views itself as constructed from the ruins of Modernism, in fact, it realizes the principles of Modernism according to Klee. For instance, Tal Yerushalmi presents paintings of objects reminiscent of pre-historic crafts – *Six Necklaces and a Bead (2016)*, *Five Necklaces, Rope, Spool of Thread, Jewel (2016)*, *Placemat I and Placemat II* (both from 2016). She paints beads, braids, and knives with colors and with scratchings in the paint, emphasizing the craft underlying the original objects: braiding, carving, filing. The objects are arranged in the foreground, creating compositions of measure, tone, and internal, music-like equilibrium. The viewer's eye follows the brushwork – simply drawn lines – and moves on to blots of paint, discovering that those objects do not resemble real, practical objects after all. It seems that the internal meter and the color balance are more important than the subject of the painting. The two Placemat paintings, two circles positioned side-by-side opposite the entrance to the show, look like color wheels but also a pair of irises, pointing to the show's association with vision, perception, abstract forms, and fields of pure color.

טל ירושלמי, פלייסמט 1, 2016, אקריליק ושמן על בד.jpg **[2]**



[3]Tal Yerushalmi, Placemat 1, 2016.
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 180x135. "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016

Photography: Elad Sarig

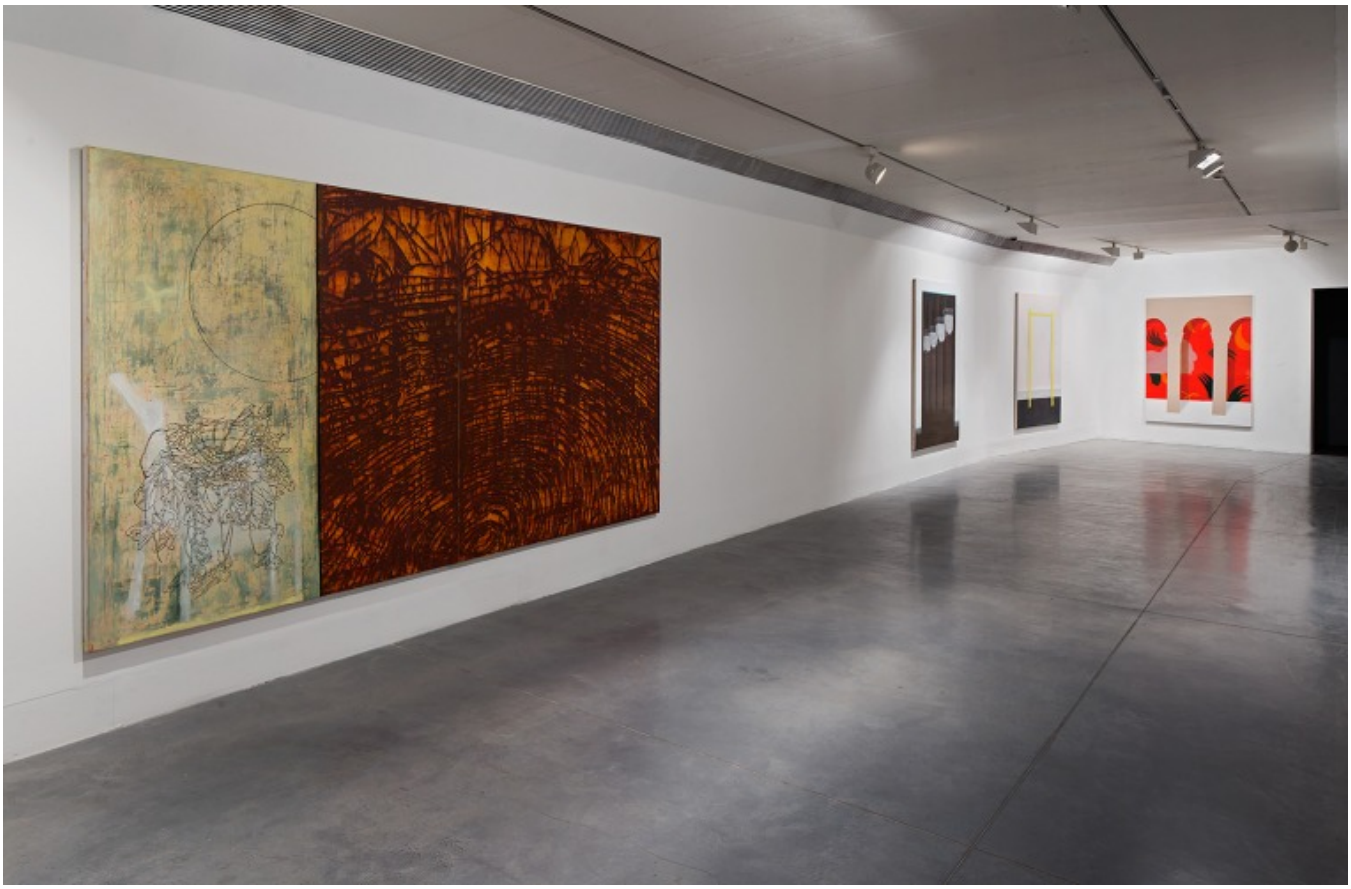
PTM_001.jpg **[4]**



[5]Installation view, "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016
Photography: Elad Sarig

Somewhat similarly, Sagie Azoulay represents in his work small fragments of the physical world surrounding him, isolating them, like a photographer, in the frame. The fragments, identified as everyday objects, are represented in the paintings as amusing moments of insight that are projected on the objects. The items, identified at first by their function (a door frame or a column), are drained of their meaning. This happens with a door frame that radiates yellow rays in *Yellow Crossbar (Combina), 2016*, or in *Smiling Columns, 2016*, where penciled smileys have replaced erased column capitals. The paintings comprise pure forms, specific colors, and internal compositional relationships. The meaning of the details of the painted structure changes as our eye shifts from one color field to the next, from a shape that is familiar to its unravelling by ornamental embellishments. And this also goes for Sharon Poliakine: in *A Shadow over Jerusalem, 2016*. The viewer is looks at a drawing of withered leaves that engages most of his attention, and also at a drawing of a woman's back, reminiscent of other works from the history of painting. The viewer's eye follows the lines and ascribes meanings to the drawn images. He then discovers the small red circle to the left of the center of the painting that reopens the discussion regarding the meaning of the image. From there the eye travels to planes done in earth colors and grays, like clumps of soil surrounding the drawing. The meaning thus created by the act of the viewer’s body – the movement of the eye as it scans the simple lines, shapes, and color masses on the canvas. Here too the painting contains a moment of synthesis in the immediate and momentary processing of information by the viewer before things are projected on the observed subject and become clear and familiar to him. The formal structure, and the relationships within the painting create an instant sense of earthly physicality, like a slash through geological strata covered and enclosed by a white, fabric-like stain. Although the participants in the show do not actualize and interpret cognitive processes in their paintings, as Klee has done, they do stress, consciously or unconsciously, some of his principles and his ideas that tie human perception to formak abstraction.

PTM_012.jpg **[6]**



[7]Installation view, "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016
Photography: Elad Sarig

שגיא אזולאי.jpg **[8]**



[9]Sagie Azoulay, Flying Camel, 2016
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 180x135. "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016

Photography: Elad Sarig

The foreground areas of Alon Kedem's paintings contain lines, smears, and blots that result in colorful and amusing figurative images. They are proportionate and balanced against the changing pastel shades in the background that confuse the eye and resemble a screen saver. This painting is a parable of cognitive information processing, when the mind attempts, in a split second, to connect what the eye perceives in reality to the meaning created within the brain. For Kedem, this moment is frozen in a shuffling, floating limbo, which is evident from the title of one of the works – *Deep Floating, 2016.* The titles of other works – *Hold (2015)* and *Touch Screen (2016)* - emphasize that this is about associations of "perception," in both its senses of comprehending and seeing. The colors and the composition define the painting and depict the topic of information processing as structural and integral to the system, like Klee's idea of the role of painting and its significance to human consciousness.

אלון קדם.jpg **[10]**



[11]Alon Kedem, Deep Floating, 2016
Oil on canvas, 200x160. "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016

Photography: Elad Sarig

Oren Eliav shows three paintings. In *Untitled (2014)*, a red diagonal line creates an optical illusion consisting of a whirlpool and straight lines. *Transfiguration*, from 2014, looks like a grid of vertical and horizontal lines. Various shapes are painted on the grid – flat blots that create an illusion of three-

dimensionality. The image evokes remnants of space devoid of depth, which has no meaning as a place. The shapes create a moment in which information processing is taking place, where things are scrambled before clearer information emerges. The third painting, also titled *Transfiguration*, from 2014 as well, follows Eliav's previous works, in which he has combined photographs showing the triple point-of-view of Christian triptychs that he had taken in museums. The triptychs have become the foundation of his paintings, although only traces of them remain. These remains are the visual expression of a rich, ornamental architecture. In *Transfiguration*, he also placed a long rectangle in shades of blue in the center of the canvas, pulling the eye down and providing the remains of the three-dimensional objects with a conceptual, abstract, two-dimensional anchor. As in his earlier works, looking at the painting involves a historical adjustment of faith in the visible world. The works associate vision with belief; the triptychs in the churches were meant to make the viewers believe and to infuse in them the Christian view of reality in the ethical, cosmic, and religious sense, through visual illusions, the size of the paintings, and the attributes of the space and the figures. However, in Eliav's current work, the traces of the Christian view of reality can no longer be detected, even though the painterly values that we have perceived as connecting vision to faith are still present. The significance lies in the structure of the painting, its internal relationships, and the expression of the optical illusion. The insertion of abstract shapes, like the diagonal red rectangle or the perpendicular blue one, help to set the meaning.

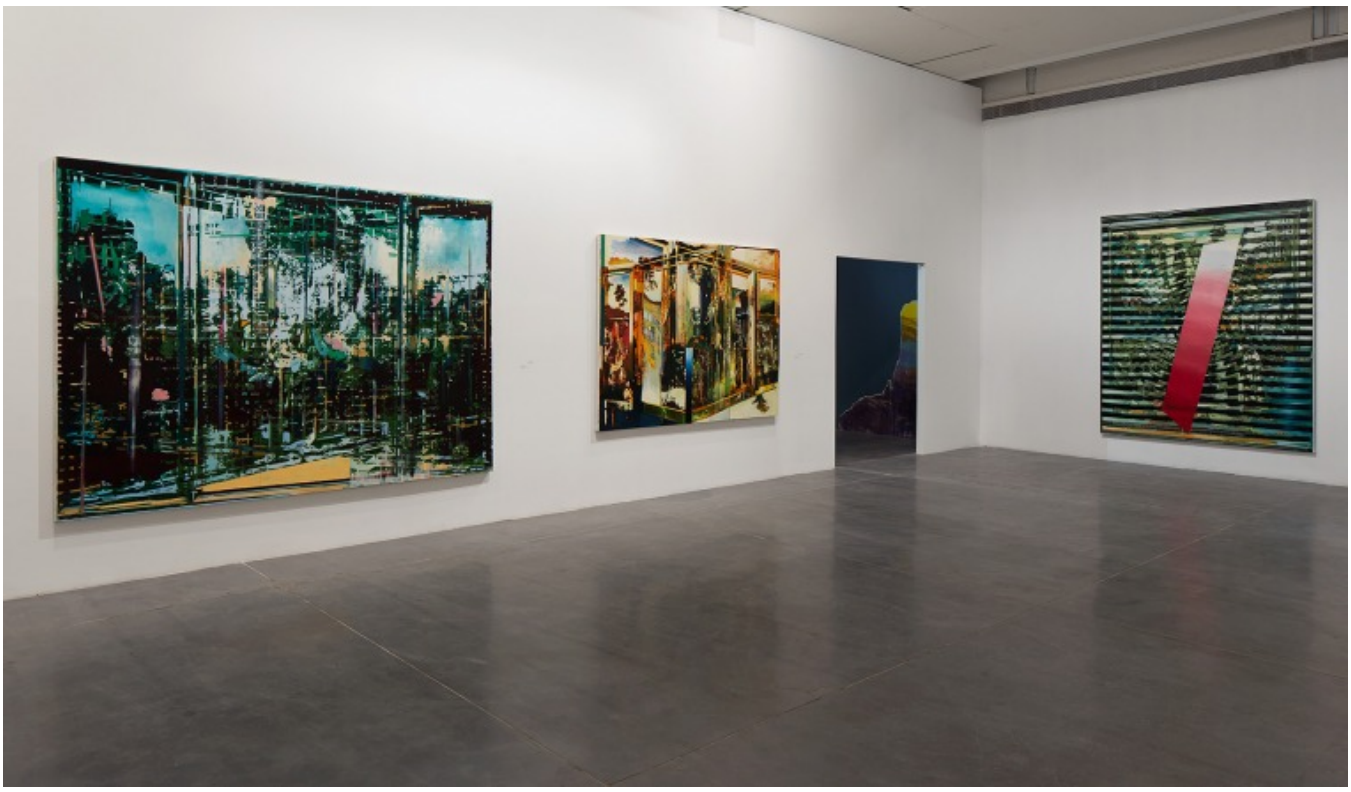
אורן אליאב, Transfiguration , 2014, שמן על בד.jpg **[12]**



[13]Oren Eliav, Transfiguration, 2014
Oil on canvas. "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016

Photography: Elad Sarig

PTM_009.jpg **[14]**



[15]Installation view, "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016
Photography: Elad Sarig

The focus on internal structure, on shapes and blots, and the abandoning of context are also evident in Gilad Eftrat's two paintings from 2016, both called "Untitled." The paintings are constructed of separate colorful shapes. In the past, Efrat used to paint from photographs, but over time the images slowly broke down and here, in this show, the final image is no longer based on an original. Still, the painting looks like a former image, deconstructed by an algorithm. These paintings, made by Efrat all at once, consider the physicality, the form, and the composition as a point where the viewer meets reality and as a place for conversation. They affect the body and the eye that wanders in the opaque formal space.

Like Efrat, Zohdy Qadry, in paintings such as *Non-Subject, 2015,* completely abandoned the mimetics that have characterized his past work and the recognizable subjects and moved towards an interpretation of form, color, and weight. As we gaze at the painting, our eyes are drawn first to the painted wave shapes, and continues from blot to shape to line - the very elements Klee has used for those expressions, invisible in reality but which affect our perception and can be realized by the painter.

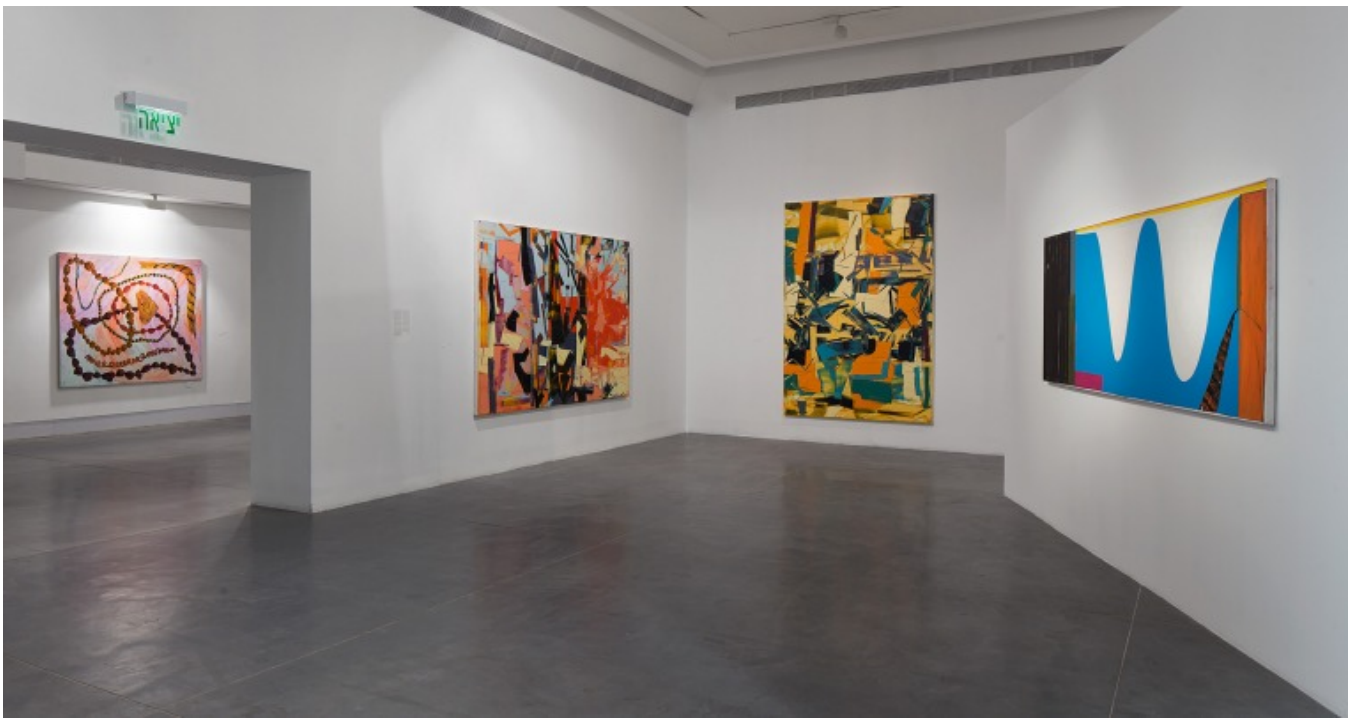
גלעד אפרת, ללא כותרת, 2016, שמן על בד.jpg **[16]**



[17]Gilad Efrat, Untitled, 2016
Oil on canvas. "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016

Photography: Elad Sarig

PTM_002.jpg **[18]**



[19]Installation view, "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016
Photography: Elad Sarig

Qadry's works are the only small-scale ones in the show, but their positioning - on either side of a massive wall cutting diagonally through the main gallery of the museum - fuses the works into a single unit, like a separation wall. The diagonal echoes the one from Eliav's painting. In the history of painting this form is related to ideas of disruption of the prevailing order, but here the diagonal partition is constructive rather than disruptive. The paintings occupy large parts of the walls so that their side-by-side hanging creates a physical experience of crowding and weightiness in which large, opaque rectangles, two-dimensional in their saccharine color scheme, fill our view wherever we look, at any moment. Conversely, the closeness interferes with the viewing of the tall, wide paintings.

Zohdy Qadry, Formation, 2015, Oil on canvas,130-90, photo Elad Sarig.jpg **[20]**



[21]Zohdy Qadry, Formation, 2015
Oil on canvas. "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016

Photography: Elad Sarig

The partition holds another conceptual aspect: the curator, Larry Abramson, has also entered two paintings in the show. They comprise a plain background with varying colors with abstract forms in the foreground. *Price Tag III (How Beautiful the Nights),* from 2016, displays pale Stars-of-David that allegedly have been taken from photographs documenting graffiti by Israeli right-wing nationalist activists (*Tag Mehir*). In *Composition* (*after Avraham Naton*), from 2016, there is an inscription in Arabic that spells 'Gaza' next to colorful geometric shapes, taken from a painting by Naton – an abstract painter who, between the 1930s and the 1950s, had sought to bring Israel into the international arena through the universalism of the abstract, Modernist forms he has been using. For Abramson, too, the main interest is the internal relations that construct the painting. Both the Arabic inscription and the nationalistic graffiti that are sprayed on a wall refer to barriers and sieges. These relate to political content but also to a lack of visibility and blocked vision, and so – in their perhaps-negative association with perception and vision – contain characteristics of the absence of vision. Both paintings function as the exception that proves the rule, since they provide an experience that is related to a collective and political reality, thus dictating the nature of the show and supplying a link between the universally abstract and physical experiences of vision and perception. The flat two-dimensionality emphasizes the physicality of the wall. In this context, Efrat's large-scale paintings are like a wall of stone and cement – the paintings affect the eye and the body's sense of space, same as the dense positioning of all the works in the show.

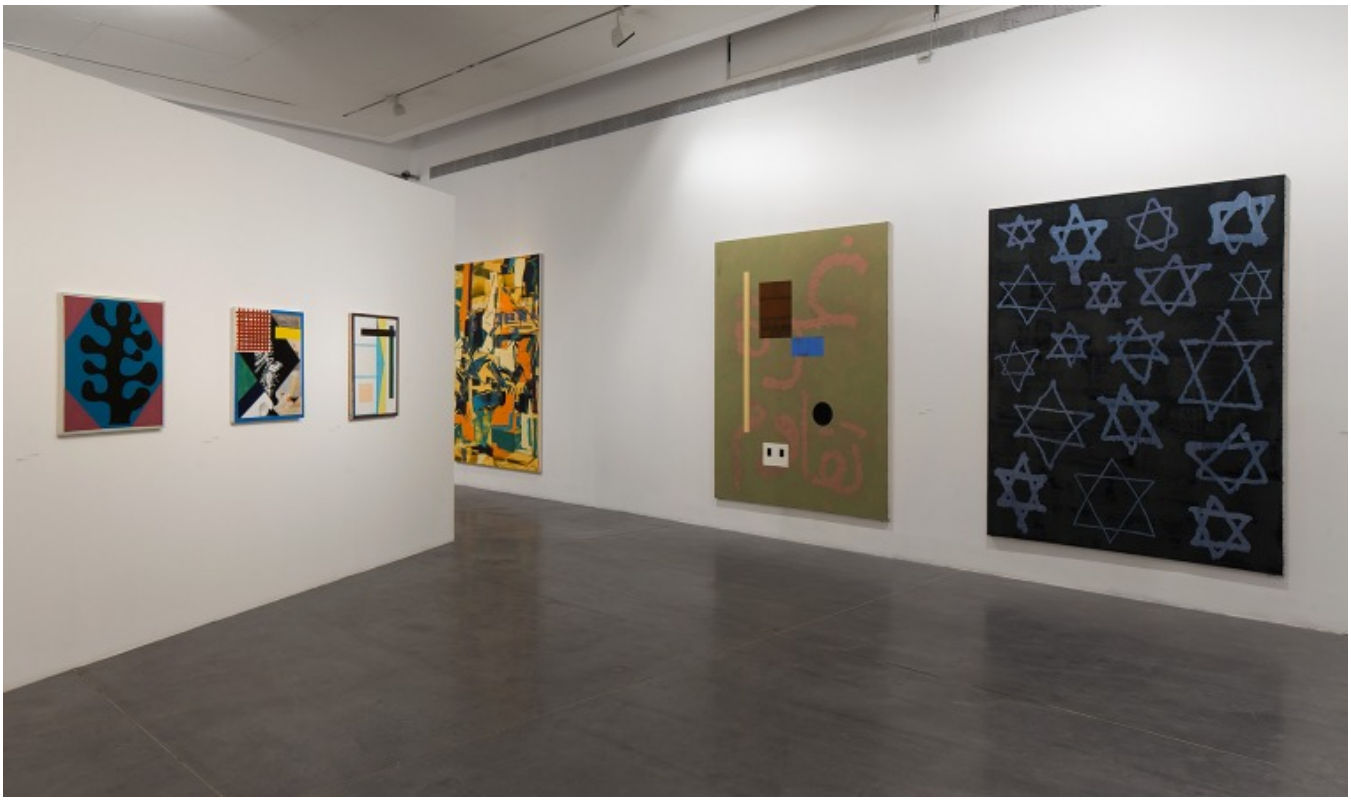
[22] לארי אברמסון, תג מחיר 3 (מה יפים הלילות) , 2016, שמן ואקריליק על בד.jpg



[23]Larry Abramson, Price Tag III (How Beautiful the Nights), from 2016
Oil and acrylic on canvas. "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016

Photography: Elad Sarig

PTM_011.jpg **[24]**



[25]Installation view, "Take Painting," Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016
Photography: Elad Sarig

The participants in the show have created eloquent works that operate according to specific internal rules they decided upon, which are more important to them than the subject or any recognizable meaning. Other than in Sharon Poliakine's titles and Abramson's graffiti, the obvious subject matter is not local and the content is essentially global. More than being a parable for the remains of Modernist methods, the show presents universal topics, neither local nor peripheral, which show up on the walls in similar media and techniques – large-scale paintings in oil or acrylic, related to Western history and to a specific formativeness that operates by certain familiar structural logic, recognizable as the Western Abstract, which has aspired to the mutual and to the breaking accepted boundaries. According to Klee, the mutual and the breaking of boundaries go along hand-in-hand with human perception and the painters' ability to conceptualize it.

“Take Painting,” [26] at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art, was on view between September 15 through December 24, 2016. Curator: Larry Abramson

- 1. Larry Abramson, "The Parable of the Pile," from *Take Painting* (exhibition catalog, Petach Tikva Museum of Art, September-December 2016. Curator: Larry Abramson) Petach Tikva Museum of Art, 2016, p9.
- 2. See, Mark Wrathall, “The Phenomenological Relevance of Art” (pp. 9-30), from Art and Phenomenology, edited by Joseph D. Parry. Routledge (New York, 2011), p23-24.

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