

Buying art by the meter

In a new exhibition, Miriam Cabessa offers clients the option of buying her work. The pleasure of the show derives from the artist's trust in her audience - and vice versa.

By Galia Yahav | Sep. 23, 2014 | 11:15 AM, Haaretz newspaper



From Miriam Cabessa's show. A landscape without beginning or end.

Miriam Cabessa's painting style doesn't begin from a sentence or from a word. It begins from a more basic element: a syllable. Or even earlier – from a stutter so heavy that the first syllable of what is trying to find expression doesn't succeed in making its way out, in being uttered. For many years, the first and central gesture by Cabessa – an artist who paints by means of action and body – has been the externalization of difficulties of pronunciation. Grunt work. It's not only what's trying to be expressed by means of this language, it's the very notion of being "slow of tongue." Aaaaaart.

In the course of nearly 20 years, Cabessa developed this condition into a particularly rich painterly language, using it to create impressive pyrotechnics of abstract works in oils on nonabsorbent Masonite, with a recognizable image emerging only at the extremities. Marks of an iron. Skulls. Fingers. Signs of wiping. As products created by the usage of anything that is not a paintbrush, by a repetitive trembling movement across the surface and the imprint of their paint-dipped remnants on it, these became the signature mark of her work. That work is a source of constant astonishment in its diversified inventiveness, in the physicality that informs the artistic act, in the disciplined choreology that constructs crescendos of compositions. This way of creating reached its peak in Cabessa's performance works in recent years.

In her new show, Cabessa has abandoned the Masonite platform and replaced it with rolls of sticky plastic of the kind that can be bought in art and hardware stores for use in covering and wrapping surfaces. The painted strips have been glued to the walls of the Julie M. Gallery in Tel Aviv from end to end. It's a landscape without a beginning and without an end, a continuing line. What emerges is a kind of uniform lung volume – for her painting and for the gallery – and the duration of the breath needed for the protracted stutter is identical to the metrical space. Effectively, her storyboard or painterly ECG measures the gallery.

“In the past few years I have often tried to do action painting, with the intention of not moving,” Cabessa told Avital Burg in an interview in Haaretz in 2010, adding, “I use my breathing to create a certain rhythm, the breathing creates the rhythms of the smearing [of paint]. What happened is that I went from large body movements to contraction, almost to the point of desiring not to move and only to allow the breath to dictate the movement.” In fact, at moments it seems that this time, Cabessa's hand barely moved, that the roll of plastic material ran under her like a record under a phonograph needle.

Black stains are painted at the beginning on the right, being two portraits in profile. This evokes the well-known visual paradox of the portraits and the goblet (do we see two black profiles facing each other, or a white goblet against a black background?), according to which our gaze can take in only one image at a time – it's impossible to see both and to apprehend the totality. We are prisoners of our perception. This is also an exposition of a painting story that begins with Raffi Lavie, who used such profiles consistently, though with him they are curls of cigarette smoke: the vase was painted separately.

From the left silhouette, a black-blue, blinking broken line stretches in a slow smear, shimmering like a print whose color is leaching from it. Small events are added and subtracted along the line – yellow-orange-red hues, layers, spirals, powerful scratches whose momentum emanates from the shoulder become five musical notes on the narrow roll, peaks of hills, black roads crossed by grayish dividing lines, lava, Rorschach, eyes with dilated pupils, X-ray prints, messy smears in the Janine Antoni style (“Loving Care,” 1992). Antoni dipped her hair in a bucket of paint and, kneeling, smeared it across a surface. After all, both she and Cabessa, as contemporary women, and with the use of very similar means (body massage), are responding to the masculine ethic of the great masters Yves Klein and Jackson Pollock, the precedent-setting action painters.

Still, what is of prime interest in the exhibition – which this time lacks the artist's most impressive work – is not visible in the gallery space itself. The interest lies in the switch from painting format to textile logic: the linear meter. In addition to the sticker-paintings that will be scraped off the wall and thrown out at the conclusion of the exhibition, the gallery has many more painted – and unaffixed – rolls in its storerooms, which can be purchased in any size. The client will decide for himself how many linear meters he wants, and thereby will also decide where the painting ends (and, by the same token, where the painting of the next client begins). The buy-what-you-please option starts with a minimum length of a meter, extending to a panorama and all the way to a wall painting.

You can also install the piece you buy lengthwise, if you fancy a portrait painting. There's much potential here, both commercially and as a wicked joke on the world of commerce.

What looks like a fledgling marketing trick or a tactical variation on previous actions, can also be examined in terms of the enhancement of the concept of randomness in Cabessa's work. As another element in the intra-artistic struggle involving arbitrariness, automatism, blind bodily decisions. As another stage in Cabessa's very candid conversation with her viewers over the pronunciation of the forms by means of their erasure. This time it's the arbitrariness of the composition, which is sliced off at points not decided beforehand. It's not only she, the artist, who is making gestures – the collectors, too, are required to enter the universe of tough calls: how to begin, where to end. Like her, they are called on to set pace / price.

Cabessa is one of the very few artists of her generation (she was born in 1966) who remained loyal to the manner of painting they developed at the outset. She didn't discard it in favor of various trends, and she continually deepened the language she invented – whenever it seemed that her technique had exhausted itself, an additional subform was articulated.

Cabessa's current exhibition doesn't reflect a large step in her work. It is more a minor examination of another particular possibility within an artistic structure of operation whose foundations are already known. Now she is experimenting with an unpretentious offshoot of a familiar principle.

The particular pleasure in this exhibition lies in accompanying the artist along this impressive road, out of curiosity and receptivity to different vocal attempts within the language, even if these do not show a shift or a distinctive turn in the totality of her work. It's a matter of loyalty; of relations of trust between artist and audience; and of a response to the question of what type of audience there should be. What type of audience an artist like this – who, like Moshe Kupferman, perseveres in a life project of almost-the-same – deserves to have. For artists of this special breed, who do not force-feed the audience with amazing new thrills in every new season, and whose

numbers are diminishing in these frenetic times, we need patience of the marathon kind with which they themselves create. To that end, we must also be ready to say that the permission an artist grants himself to take things slowly, to spend years developing nuances, is a matter of inner freedom.