

Peripheral ARTeries

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Interview with Yotam Zohar by Dario Rutigliano
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1) Hello Yotam and a warm welcome to Peripheral ARTeries. To start this interview, would you like to tell us something about your background? You hold a BFA as well as a MA that you have received from Ohio State University and from and the Eastern Illinois University, where you studied drawing and painting: how have these experiences of formal training impacted on the way you currently produce your works?

Thanks very much! I'm grateful for the opportunity.

I come from an artistic family. My father is a figurative painter, my mother is a violinist, and all my siblings are involved in some way in a creative field—two of them are well-known musicians. In retrospect it seems inevitable that I became an artist as well, but when I started painting I was much more inspired by literature and film than I was by other painters. The more I paint, the more I realize I have to learn from my contemporaries.

In recent years the Ohio State University's art department has gained national recognition for its MFA program. Eastern Illinois University is more of a diamond-in-the-rough. I would describe both institutions as having brilliant faculty and programming, and although I was a terrible student I like to think that I benefitted immensely from my exposure to them. I try my best to remain in contact with any of my teachers who didn't grow too fed up with me.

Both institutions—OSU and EIU—are at their best in preparing students to think about their work and to craft a viable practice. To learn the Old Master techniques I traveled to Europe to study privately with my father, who is on closer personal terms with Vermeer and Rembrandt than anyone else I have ever known. So, when I came back to the American Midwest as an undergraduate with this newfound understanding of grisaille I felt a little bit like Moses on his first descent from Mount Sinai.

I'm very lucky, actually, because I was able to get both the classical training and the cutting-edge conceptual stuff. If I'd stayed in Ohio the whole time, or gone to some stuffy Parisian atelier, this wouldn't be the case. Inevitably, I think, I shall always strive for Rembrandt using the tools of Richter, or maybe the other way around.

I've also worked for nearly a decade in art galleries. Many young artists do this as a way to earn a living before their work starts to sell, and I think that although most gallery workers are severely underpaid it's an extremely valuable experience because they learn from very close range what their work needs to be able to do once it leaves their hands. They also learn how to be more professional in dealing with the art world, which, to the chagrin of many gallerists, is not something they usually teach in art school.

2) By the way, being a classically-trained figurative painter who explore Contemporary Art, I would ask you if you recognize still a dichotomy between Contemporary and Tradition... Moreover, what could be in your opinion the features that mark the contemporariness of an artwork?

I think the only meaningful difference between contemporary art and "traditional" art is the completion date. There is nothing about Vermeer's paintings, for example, that isn't conceptually focused or still relevant, just like there's nothing about Lisa Yuskavage's work that doesn't have to do with her ability to handle paint or carry on a dialogue with history. I also wonder whether romantic ideas about art being different in the past contribute to the inflation of secondary market prices and the difficulty many young artists face in finding open-minded collectors.

Artists today are asking questions and saying things for the same reasons as they did in centuries past, except now we have more materials and technology to help us realize our visions. The earliest visual art was made as a means of ultra-important communication and storytelling, and now a lot of that communication is probably as frivolous as most of Facebook. In terms of art's actual content I don't think much has changed, so I'm not sure there's any need to make a wide distinction.

3) Before starting to elaborate about your production, would you like to tell to our readers something about your process and set up for making your artworks? In particular,

**what technical aspects do you mainly focus on your work?
And how much preparation and time do you put in before and
during the process of creating a piece?**

I use a hybrid of Baroque and contemporary techniques, starting with grisaille: first the basic highlights and shadows are put down over a neutral background, and then color is added in translucent layers after each previous layer has been allowed to dry. This means that when the painting is viewed, the eye is seeing light that has been filtered through these layers of color and reflected off the highlights underneath. It gives the work a luminous, jewel-like quality that opaque paint cannot achieve.

The amount of time each phase takes can vary widely. I'm not sure I've ever spent fewer than three hours on a painting, and I don't think I've ever spent more than three months. But that's not a rule either.

I am trained to approach painting from the point of view of someone who works with the figure. This means that I permit myself the indulgence of rendering imperative the significance of the human being. This fundamental tuning-out-of everything except a human subject and myself—is the starting point for any figurative work.

My work is mostly representational, which means that it contains depictions of real-world objects and organisms as they appear on a human scale. I employ a philosophy of "by any means necessary" in order to arrive at a finished composition. Most notably, perhaps, I use optical tools and imaging technology—namely a digital camera and Photoshop—in order to create source compositions. The source image becomes the basis of the painting. Since optical tools technically predate the planet Earth—remember that a camera is only light passing through an aperture—I don't think there is anything controversial about artists using them. And they have, for as long as we have a record of artwork being made.

4) Now let's focus on your artworks: I would like to start with your Underground series, that our readers have already started to admire in the introductory pages of this article and that I would suggest to view directly to your website at www.yotamzohar.com in order to get a wider idea: in the meanwhile, would you tell us something about the genesis of this interesting project? What was your initial inspiration?

I imagine that most people who come to major cities with widely used public transit systems experience the same thing that I did: such variety of life, and a much greater likelihood that a face will seem interesting, or that a gesture of body language will communicate something compelling. And people fascinate me anyway, even when they're not especially striking.

A year after I moved to New York, on my first date with the person who would later become my wife, this phenomenon came up in conversation and we agreed about the way this fascination would lend itself so readily to a body of paintings. Around that time I'd gotten my first mobile phone with an onboard camera, so it was simply a matter of pretending to use the device for something else while covertly snapping pictures.

I think the idea is obvious, but to my surprise there are very few people doing what I'm doing, if there are any others at all. My wife was supposed to start painting from her train snapshots too, as a sort of twin component of the project, but she's an architect and already gives all her time to her career and our family. Maybe one day she'll come out with an even better set of paintings!

5) As you have remarked in your artist's statement, you are a person without a "tribe", constantly between cultures; because of this the Underground paintings carry an additional powerful metaphor for permanent transition... I can recognize such a socio-political feature in this aspect of your Art... By the way, I'm sort of convinced that Art these days could play an effective role not only making aware public opinion, but I would go as far as to say that nowadays Art can steer people's behavior... what's your point about this?

First, I must say that I have no expectation whatsoever that art should or can play a role in shaping public behavior or opinion. To the contrary, I believe that artists are very much products of the societies from which they emerge, and at their best they manage to hold mirrors and prisms up to humanity. It's up to other people to identify this and respond. Of course there are exceptions, but as a rule I don't think artists deserve credit for "steering people's behavior." Parents, teachers, advertisers, and lawyers do that.

As for me, my personal story is a convoluted one but the point is that after a great deal of searching and moving around I realized I don't really, fully, identify with any abstract groups: religious, ethnic, national, cultural, whatever. There's no single geographical place I think of as home or feel an exclusive connection with. And it's not that I avoid connections on purpose: whenever I feel myself gravitating toward a group there always seems to be something that makes complete immersion impossible. If I need to label myself I'll use biology as a metric and beyond that I start to feel very uncomfortable indeed.

Maybe I'm projecting: what I see on the subway are just humans in perpetual transition. Down there, when the train is moving, we can only be divided according to who is sitting or standing, who is reading and who is listening to headphones, who has luggage and who has none, who is alone and who is traveling with a companion. These are characterizations that have nothing to do with inventions like nationality and race; they are much more universal and at the same time individualized, but they are at least concrete! And I like that.

The inside of a train car is, in this sense, a very egalitarian place, especially in the middle of a long tunnel when everyone becomes quiet for a moment, when the rhythm of local stops gets broken apart by an extended pause and everyone seems to simultaneously draw a breath and reflect there, beneath the riverbed. That's the narrative moment I envision for these paintings' settings. There is no season or day or night, just a relative closeness to the center of the planet and a 'journeying collective of permeable solitudes.'

At the same time, however, I'm not trying to make a personal statement with these works. I don't have a message about diversity or anything like that. It's really more of a question I'm asking: how are we all connected now?

6) Your work often shows the immediate nature of Photography mixed with the "contemplative attitude" - if you forgive me this word- of Pictorialism and it effectively establishes such a direct narrative of the stories that your works tell: so I would like to ask you if in your opinion personal experience is an absolutely indispensable part of a creative process... Do you think that a creative process could be disconnected from direct experience?

A creative process is by definition a direct experience.

Direct experience is a tool, not unlike research. I could have done the Underground paintings based on anecdotes my friends tell me, or from photos that get sent to me from anonymous email addresses or something. I could have just done it all from imagination. They might end up looking similar. I decided to go out and mine the source images myself, with a smartphone—the same tool that has started revolutions in recent years.

There's a reason for that: it is ultimately vital that I take the pictures myself, in order to link the subject (the person or people being depicted) to the viewer. I want the viewer to be aware of the single degree of separation between them and the person they are looking at, the way it is with Mona Lisa, of the artist-as-conduit. If I were to come up with the source images some other way, the work would lose this meaning; the connection would break down. I might as well sit at home and collect images from Google, which would make me a very sophisticated kind of inkjet printer, not an artist.

When computer programs generate advertisements we don't call them Mad Men, we call them spam bots. If I generated these images without being present the viewer would lose that personal interaction. It would be like looking at an algorithmic vector printout. Visually compelling, perhaps, but meaningless. "You can throw it in the garbage," as one of my teachers used to say.

7) A recurrent feature of your pieces that has mostly impacted on me is the effective mix of few dark tones which are capable of creating such a prelude to light... I also noticed that several nuances of red are very recurrent tone in your works. By the way, any comments on your choice of your palette and how it has changed over time?

When I first picked up Classical technique I was shown how to work with six or seven colors, maybe more. Within a year or two I was using only five. What I've come to learn is that this is an important deviation from the way many other traditional painters work. In fact I'm not using a traditional palette, but some kind of minimalist iteration. Some painters will mix what is called a dead palette, which includes as a starting point many different tones and

shades of each of more than seven or eight colors. I don't. I'm not a revivalist. I want to do things differently.

The color red has historically served the purpose of pulling the viewer into a painting. Who am I to deny its power? I hope it works.

8) Besides producing your stimulating artworks, you also teach: have you ever happened to draw inspiration from your students... By the way, I sometimes wonder if a certain kind of formal training could even stifle a young artist's creativity... what's your point? I can remember that you once stated that our culture trains people to be visually illiterate...

I can consistently count on my students' enthusiasm and ambition to inspire me to bring energy into the studio. Most teachers will tell you that they learn far more from their students than their students do from them, and I think it's true. Having students creates that many more sets of eyes to see through, to study the problem-solving processes they use. It's better than reading chess manuals.

Formal training, especially if it's gained in a heavily dogmatic setting like an atelier, can be absolutely stifling. But creativity is not what's being stifled. If anything, creativity flourishes most under constraint. If formal training stifles anything it is perhaps the off chance that the alternative might have been better, or that the breadth of understanding might have been wider. Some of the artists who became mediocre realist painters might have been more gifted at abstract expressionism, for example. Or they might have been amazing machinists (with a union behind them to ensure they never starve)!

So, why do so many people claim they're not artistic, why do so many artists seem to be so bad at their jobs, and why do we keep hearing about people who have no interest in art at all? I have a theory:

Our culture teaches us to be visually illiterate. We just haven't taught our children to learn how to see in an active way. By "seeing actively" I mean that when you look at something you consciously notice relationships in forms and light, and you gain an understanding of why it looks the way it does. Representational drawing or realism is really as simple as recording this observation, but it's an immense first step.

A friend of mine was studying to work with autistic children. She told me a story about a teacher who asked a class of autistic kids to draw their houses. The idea was to teach them how to behave like "normal" children in order to blend more easily into society. They were supposed to replicate the archetype of a child's drawing of a house: a square with a triangle on top, the rectangular chimney with the helical squiggle coming out to represent smoke, a smiling sun with rays, and so on. Sure enough, one of the autistic children started rendering his home with the precision of an architect, in all its real detail. The teacher came and corrected him, told him to do the square with the triangle on top. Because that's what normal kids do.

When I first heard this story I was incredulous. How dare she stop this child from drawing what his eyes have seen? This is an extreme example, though, because the children were autistic; maybe it is important for them to be taught to engender the flaws that the rest of us take for granted so that they don't get negative attention. I don't know very much about what's best for autistic children so I reserve judgment. What is more interesting—or disturbing—is that in the meantime, the rest of us draw the house as a square and a triangle without a teacher telling us to.

In Solomon Asch's conformity experiments of the 1950s, he and his colleagues used a fake visual test to determine the effects of peer pressure on the way participants answered questions about the relative proportions of lines. If the rest of the group answered incorrectly—saying that two lines were of equal length when in fact they clearly were not—the test subject was more likely to conform and also answer incorrectly. The conclusion was that it is more important for us to comply with the behavior of a group than to react honestly to our own observations.

This makes sense when we're talking about life and death: if you're in a crowd and everyone starts screaming and running frantically in one direction you'd most likely be stupid or suicidal not to run the same way. The square with a triangle on top works as an efficient symbol for a house, as a way of quickly and easily communicating an idea that a house exists as a concept, but it is not a drawing of a house. The problem is that in our society it is rare for someone to say, wait a minute, show me what a house actually looks like. People only see the activity on the

surface—drawing a picture—and for most of them this is all art needs to be. That is, until it's time to criticize the art world.

In the meantime, we're routinely failing to equip our children and ourselves with the tools to describe, and without that ability there can be no meaningful inference, no analysis, no reflection, no metaphor.

9) It goes without saying that feedbacks and especially awards are capable of supporting an artist, I was just wondering if an award -or better, the expectation of an award- could even influence the process of an artist... By the way, how much important is for you the feedback of your audience? Do you ever think to whom will enjoy your Art when you conceive your pieces? I sometimes wonder if it could ever exist a genuine relationship between business and Art...

In a way, when an artist sells a work, it is like winning an award: some person chose that work over all the others because they liked it the best, just like a juror or curator, and there is a cash prize. I think most artists just hope their work is being enjoyed with as much energy as it was made with, but we rarely get a glimpse into what happens to our work once it leaves our hands forever. For me, it's a little bit like ex-lovers who go to live out their lives on another continent, but as though it's in the old days before Skype. And although the breakup was amicable—to extend the metaphor—they are bitter about all those incorrect brush strokes that only you know about, so they never write or call. Every once in a while, you miss them, but for the most part you're just happy to know they're out there being themselves.

During the conception phase of a piece or a body of work its origin has absolutely nothing to do with the intended audience. That would be like getting pregnant, seeing the fetus in the ultrasound, and deciding whom it should marry when it's 30. It's beyond irrelevant, although I can understand why we entertain such thoughts. A better question is: "Is this artwork relevant, and to whom?" But it doesn't necessarily accompany the question of why or how to make a body of work. It's better suited to the issue of when to make it.

Art and business do have a genuine relationship, and they have had one for a very long time. Art has probably been

bought and sold almost as far back in history as sex. And art comprises the largest unregulated luxury goods market in the history of the world. This is the very definition of a business relationship: supply and demand. Depending on whom you talk to, the lack of regulation is either a very good thing or a very bad thing.

We [artists] do what we do because we're supposedly good at it and it gives us pleasure, yes, but more importantly we do it to earn a living. Anyone who says otherwise is hurting our chances of being compensated fairly for our time and skills. To the amateur it seems cathartic or fun to work with paint and abstract ideas, but we do it for countless hours a day, every day, under pressure to convince someone to pay us for it or we'll die. We have to keep coming up with reasons why people need our art. That's the only standard, actually: if you're an artist, your work has to be so good, or so something, that people who see it will feel the need to possess it, or to ensure its continued existence.

10) Thank you for your time and for sharing with us your thoughts, Yotam. My last question deals with your future plans: anything coming up for you professionally that you would like readers to be aware of?

As far as exhibitions go, at the moment I know the following: I'll have a trio of Underground paintings in NordArt 2014 at Kunstwerk Carlshütte in Büdelsdorf, Germany, from 14 June to 12 October. Israel House in San Diego, California, USA, will be displaying some of my work starting 8 June. In May 2015 I'm planning to show six paintings in an exhibition called "Attribute" at Buckham Gallery in Flint, Michigan, USA. In the meantime I'm hoping to exhibit at the Governor's Island Art Fair in New York City this coming September, but we'll see what happens.

The next body of work is already in the planning phase and I don't want to divulge too much about it in case things change, but I'm really excited about the future.

It's been a pleasure.