

Seeing Realism in a Fantasy World: Israeli Artist Revels in His Evolving Style

by Max J. Dickstein, AM New York
January 18-20, 2008



"Untitled, Priscilla in Ecstasy" 2007, oil on paper, 16 1/2 x 24 3/8 inches

Yigal Ozeri says he adores those moments of his career when he can travel the world to bask in the glow of adulation for a completed cycle of his work.

"I love to interact with clients. I love the stage. I love to promote," said the Israeli painter, whose latest cycle of intricate, lifelike works, "Genesis," opened in Chelsea last weekend.

Ozeri, 49, has come a long way since his arrival in the United States in 1992, when the abstract painter from Tel Aviv, obscure outside of Israel, was turned away by uninterested New York gallery owners and forced to cook hamburgers in the kitchen of the Terra Blues jazz club to make ends meet.

A decade and a half later, Ozeri, a forthright and earnest man topped with a smoggy cloud of curly hair, has combined his vigorous self-belief with a self-guided evolution, from Rothko-like abstraction to photographic realism, and earned international recognition and a following of dedicated collectors.

Each of the 18 paintings from "Genesis" hanging at the Mike Weiss Gallery through Feb. 23 was sold for an average of \$50,000 before Ozeri and his workshop of seven young, art-school-educated assistants had even completed them.

Each work is based on video and photo shoots conducted with Ozeri's model and muse for "Genesis": Priscilla, a dreadlocked, 24-year-old flower child from Maine who seems to exist in each natural environment, as Ozeri said, "like a tree" - whether amid hanging vines in Central Park or a jungle lagoon in Monteverde, Costa Rica.

"He saw my spirit," Priscilla said of the painter.

As with any photorealistic work, Ozeri's canvasses offer at least two levels of experience.

First, there is the totality of a lifelike image seen from a distance; next, there is the opportunity to marvel at how delicately Ozeri achieved the totality by moving closer to the painting and observing how, for example, sun-glinted tear sliding down a cheek comes to aqueous life with a well-placed fleck of white paint.