

Bezalel and the Family Album Yaniv Shapira, *Painting is a Home*, 2018

“Reality, what can we do with it? Where is it in words? Just as it flickers, it vanishes.”
— Czesław Miłosz, from “Six Lectures in Verse: Lecture IV”¹¹

Vered Nachmani’s works during her Bachelor of Fine Art studies at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design (1993–1997) suggest a fount of well-defined content, coupled with a search for an appropriate painterly language. One of her primary sources was the family photo album, as repository of documentary memory from which she drew images in an attempt to recreate a world that no longer exists.¹² These include *Girl with a Stick* (1996), *Mom and Dad* (1996), *Transit Van* (1996), and *Lady* (1996)—all done with painterly gestures that indicate a light yet confident hand. Their predominant color scheme is one of shades of sepia and black and white, in keeping with the photographic source. *Vered at Six Years Old* (1996) is a self-portrait of the artist as a child, lying by the side of the kibbutz swimming pool, and biting into an apple. It is notable for her decision to paint the bathing suit in blue and green, as it was in real life. Painting from photographs and images from memory would become Nachmani’s preferred method of working in years to come, defining how she approached the “painting from observation” genre in its various forms. Her use of the photo album as a source of material also gave rise to her use of grids as a time management device, that allowed her to draw out the painting process. She describes the process as one where “the painting hand tries to retrace the thoughts, in a bid to nourish the body with the memory of the photographed image.”

Nachmani’s attempts to capture the photographed moment are driven by a desire to focus the mind, rather than the gaze – in line with how she perceives herself as a thinking artist, as opposed to a mere observer. Unlike “painting from life” or “painting from observation” – which is usually carried out outside the studio in an attempt to convey the direct impression of the reality surrounding oneself as one paints – Nachmani strives to represent a mood, or awareness. One of the means she uses for this purpose is photography. Nachmani photographs the objects of her paintings dozens of times, from which she selects the photographs she deems most suitable – those that make it possible to follow the elusive scenes in nature, to capture the fleeting sight. She then uses these photographs in her studio as raw materials for her painting: through them, she breaks the image into fragments of color, patches, and light, and reassembles it into a new whole that appears to be figurative.

Another painting technique that she adopted – in order to eliminate the illusion of depth or realism and to focus on the experience of awareness – was to fuse together foreground and background:

From the very start of my career as a painter, as an undergraduate at Bezalel, whenever we painted a naked model in the classroom, my eyes were drawn to the world behind the figure and surrounding it – to a dense secondary image. I never saw a figure and a background: rather, the background very quickly became the subject itself.¹³

Another influence on Nachmani's development as a thinking artist is her habit of perusing art books. This habit, which began at her grandparents' home, carried on to the Hebrew University bookstore, where she happened upon a book on the painter Édouard Vuillard – and experienced what she describes as instant infatuation, an epiphany:

In Vuillard's works, I found confirmation of my interest in fragments, in depictions of home interiors, in the manner in which figures are embedded within a thicket of home decor. The time needed to absorb all the visual information, and the enforced lingering of the gaze reminded me of the experience that one's eyes must undergo in order to see in the dark. The value of the patch of color, the richness of the reds, or the browns, the blues or the yellows, which suddenly appear as a mere patch of color, long before the eye realizes that it is the dress of a young woman seated in an armchair. Vuillard has a wonderful knack of depicting how the wallpaper retains the design experience that was common in bourgeois living rooms in the late nineteenth century. When I began to seek out his paintings during visits to museums, I also discovered how he managed to preserve the intimate, the simple, and human.

Vuillard's influence was also evident in the works she presented at her graduate exhibition – in particular, the diptych *Kitchen* (1997), which depicts the small kitchen in her apartment:

When I realized what my eye was looking for in a space, I entered the small kitchen of my student apartment one day, and discovered that my kitchen contained all the colors I wanted to put on the canvas. This discovery sharpened my understanding that the sights for my paintings were all around me, close by.

This painting is notable for its detailed elements of a home kitchen: porcelain tiles, spice containers, grater, a cup-holder rack, and a mosaic at the top. In addition to its artistic boldness – its large size, its division into two canvases and presentation on a plasterboard wall built expressly for the purpose – it reveals Nachmani's use of a grid as the foundation for a network of lines that enables the systematic and consistent

filling of color surfaces. This organizing principle also allows her to paint piece by piece, square by square, thereby precluding the notion of a painterly gesture.

This work gives a glimpse into how Nachmani observes her living surroundings in real life as a favorite artistic subject. In other works at the same exhibition, the image-packed space of the home interior becomes the subject of observation. In *Painting Is a Home* (1997), the artist herself is depicted painting the *Kitchen* painting next to a table laden with tubes, paints and brushes; while in *Painting and Home* (1997), the studio is shown with the painting *Painting Is a Home* hanging on one of the walls, next to another familiar work – *Mask* (1997) – which was also on display at the exhibition. *Mask* is a small picture, in which the artist's eyes appear through a dark, rich color screen. Here the observation is already clearly from a different perspective: what may be a veil or a mask suggests a desire to hide, to observe the world from the sidelines, with Nachmani as one who sees but is unseen. What distinguishes this work from others in the corpus of Nachmani's works is its use of dark colors, rich material, and abstraction – a nascent, intuitive, and liberated form of expression. This painting of painting – a kind of painterly *Ars Poetica*, as it were – is something that Nachmani would return to in years to come when she retraced her biographical or chronological scenes as significant landmarks or as causal processes.

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Czesław Miłosz, "Six Lectures in Verse: Lecture IV," *Selected and Last Poems 1931-2004*, trans. Anthony Milosz (New York: Ecco, 2011).

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See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Thoughts on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: The Noonday Press, 1988). The artist Meir Agassi also refers to the family photo albums as treasures of memory and oblivion. "However we may use them," he wrote, "in the end, they serve as the only visual evidence that every cell in our individual and collective past must ultimately reach its inevitable demise." Meir Agassi, "Notes on Life as a Blurred Image," *Anthology of Memory and Amnesia* (Meir Agassi Museum, 1995).

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Vered Nachmani, *Two Hundred Words about My Painting*, artist's declaration, 2006 (in Hebrew).