

## Letters to You My Love, from a Distant Country

Yehudit Matzkel, Haifa Museum of Art, April 2003

Vered Nachmani has a painterly discourse with her far-away lover in the tradition of letter writing. Judging from the number of museums that exhibit the letters of distinguished personages - from eminent philosophers, poets and novelists, through statesmen, to correspondence between lovers - this is a well known and highly esteemed tradition in Western culture.

Epistolography is a widespread genre in literature — both the kind based on authentic letters, and on fictional ones. The penetration into the writer's mind and soul through his letters brings about an intimate understanding of his personality and motives. The letter - a peephole into the writer's inner self - gives us a chance to look into the complex relationships between him and his addressee.

In an era when personal correspondence is almost non-existent and most communication is electronic, one tends to suspect Nachmani of a nostalgic quest. The discourse, even if imaginary, that she seeks to have with the discipline and tradition of correspondence, evokes a sense of longing for an extinct world and for a kind of intimacy attained through personal handwriting and personal expression that are obsolete. We daily receive in the mail hundreds of advertisements, bills or bank statements — all of which are impersonal and alienated. Whatever happened to the personal address in handwriting? Where is the intimacy embodied for hundreds of years in stylized handwriting? Where are the thoughts and ideas? Why has all this gone?

Vered Nachmani has conjured them up in her Paintings. She has exchanged the desk for the easel. The intimacy is found in the subjects of her works, in the bright colors and in the way she has laid the thick sensuous paint on the canvas: a springtime banality in her backyard; the red, sensual and lustful blossom of a tree; the landscape with an Israeli prickly pear, whose thorns challenge the grayish-blue sky; a red toy car in the same backyard, abandoned by the child who has just played with it; long shadows of an early afternoon dimming the local dazzling light. All these sights contain a story of most intimate longings: "The series took form in my mind and heart after a love affair with a stranger," says Vered Nachmani. "In our long talks, a lot of questions arose about what ties me to Israel, why I am so deeply committed to this place, why I am connected to this country with all my heart and soul. I could not find words to explain the complexity of the reasons of my belonging here. These paintings attempt to combine beauty with

insanity, to draw a map, a full range of sounds, a blood count, a nervous transillumination. The beginning of the journey was a red tree I happened to see last year, a staggeringly beautiful sight that inspired and urged me to paint it.”

All the answers can be found, then, not on stationery but on the canvases with their abundant Juicy paint splashes.

Vered Nachmani’s paintings reveal some further visual information — each work has a postage stamp ‘stuck’ (painted) on it precisely at the top corner, because if you want to ‘mail’ it you must have it stamped. Through the painterly language there emerges another dialogue between two visual traditions - that of stamp design juxtaposed with that of traditional painting. The tension between the two disciplines charges Nachmani’s works with another cultural discussion that attempts to find its place between two visual cultures. One is connected to the practice of stamp collecting that focuses on various subjects or on special chronological axes. Nachmani, in a clever move, turns the paintings into seemingly legitimate letters while giving a seal of approval to the tradition of stamp design. The visual information offered by the stamps serves as a system of coordinates that concretizes the artist’s Israelism: the distinct bold letters ISRAEL provide a graphic answer to the question ‘where do I come from?’ while the answer to the question ‘why?’ can be found in the choice of the stamp designs: the yearning for peace (a white dove holding an olive branch in her beak), a mushroom, a flower, a deer, a bird, and a turtle - all of which epitomize her Israeliness.

Vered Nachmani’s complex and layered exhibition is engaged at the same time in a captivating dialogue with a number of cultures and disciplines. Embodied in her paintings, this discourse with traditions of letter writing, philately, the idiom of illustration, and the graphics of stamp design, expresses her search for the new language of traditional great painting. We must also remember the intrinsic personal and autobiographical aspect of an intimate story of love and longing embodied in the paintings themselves: the story of a separation from a beloved person due to geographical, cultural and physical distances.

A letter written by Vered Nachmani's grandfather, Adi Nachmani, to his 50-year-old daughter, Rachel Gliek, in Washington:

*Tuesday, November 15, 1985*

*Best wishes and countless blessings to you on your birthday,*

*my love!*

*It is perhaps a proper custom to look for, collect, iron and polish all the eloquent congratulatory phrases that one possesses on such occasions, let alone on such a supposedly round and meaningful birthday. I will deliberately do without. I trust you believe me anyway and know what's in my heart. Suffice it to say: the perfect trust, understanding and rapport between us are far-reaching and a source of comfort and endless Joy to me, in the past, the present, and will certainly be so until my last day. (Such intimate things, that need not be expressed orally or in writing, may possibly spring from the geographical distance.)*