

Josef Halevi – “Secret verses”

Fragments of words, syllables, cantillations and pictorial hieroglyphs are the subjects of works created by Joseph Halevi during his “Amsterdam Period,” to which an exhibition is dedicated at the Presler Museum. It was a period of 30 years (1974-2004) that the artist spent in the city of Rembrandt and Spinoza, in a busy studio packed with fabrics and paints, located in the Jordaan quarter.

Born in the Yemenite neighborhood of Kerem HaTeimanim in Tel Aviv, Halevi, who received a religious education, became a gifted athlete and physical education teacher at the Herzliya Hebrew Gymnasium. After meeting Arieh Allweil, fellow artist and teacher at the Gymnasium, Halevi was captured by the charms of paint, brush and canvas, and began to paint. After two years of studies at the Art Teachers College he declared: “I want to be a painter and nothing else.”

His earlier works featured figures and animals on canvases saturated with color – a type of oil paint Halevi concocted himself. He painted scenes of biblical pilgrimages to Jerusalem during the Three Pilgrimage Festivals, and portrayed a variety of winged figures. As he said in an interview once: “I loved the winged characters that appear in sculptures and reliefs of Babylon and Assyria.” Later on, these figures became calligraphic forms and images the artist called “my statement”.

During his frequent trips to Europe and the United States in the 1960’s, Halevi encountered the French “Arte Informale” movement, the “action painting” style of Jackson Pollock, the expressive canvases of Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell, the radiant “fields of color” in the works of Mark Rothko, as well as the painters belonging to the CoBrA avant-garde movement from Belgium and the Netherlands.

Upon his arrival in Amsterdam in 1974, Halevi harnessed his brush for the benefit of intense colors and impulsive lines, creating passionate and sensual pictorial drama. Like strands of cloth in luxurious carpets of the ancient past, the artist let the paint flow to the bottom of the canvas. During breaks from painting Halevi visited the Rijksmuseum to enjoy his beloved work “The Milkmaid” by Johannes Vermeer.

It is during his “exile” the artist chose to literally write the Bible on huge canvases; however a fire in his studio finished that chapter of his works. “One cannot use the Bible for personal needs,” he decided. With time, the secret calligraphy appeared in Halevi’s works, translated into acrylic paint of blue-green and brown-ochre shades associated with him. “My colors are the colors of the desert” the artist confessed, as his soul was residing in the east, and his body – in the west. At the same time, his Amsterdam “Tablets of the Covenant” took shape – Halevi created single, double and even triple reliefs depicting cantillations, Hebrew words, fragments of words, syllables and letters – a “secular” permissible version of the Torah books, written on parchments and used in the synagogue.

Works by Halevi, a rare colorist, who dipped his brush in the blue skies and the golden sands, are a dazzling fusion of abstract painting and his old passion for the ancient Eastern cultures. Halevi succeed in creating a personal mythology of his own: “I tried to find my own alphabet,” he said. His art combines the biomorphic organicity of works by Joan Miró, Paul Klee and Jean Arp, with qualities of the Israeli-Canaanite paintings.

The works displayed in the exhibition showcase the cantillations and mark the way of “playing” the images similar to a music sheet. We, as viewers, should look for the font used to create these “secret verses.”

Curator: Shulamit Guretzki-Federman