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Cactus Blossom, 2011
Oil on canvas , 189x178 cm

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Shai Azoulay: The Gift

By James Trainor

If we explore certain aboriginal societies, we find that the person of consequence—the man or woman who is deemed worthy of adulation, respect and emulation—is not the one who accumulates the most goods but the one who disperses them. Gift economies are marked by circulation and connectivity: goods have value only insofar as they are treated as gifts, and gifts can remain gifts only if they are continually given away. This results in a kind of engine of community cohesion, in which objects create social, psychological, emotional and spiritual bonds as they pass from hand to hand.

Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (1983)

For artist Shai Azoulay, entering the studio each day is an act of devotion, by some degrees a leap of faith – in painting, in creating, in the calm dedicated belief that the newness and potential of another day can be discovered within the same familiar four walls. To paint is akin to the act of giving a gift, the painter always conscious that the gesture may remain unreciprocated but that the practice of this offering may also generate a multitude of unimaginable gifts in return. Born in the town of Kiryat Shmona, two miles from the Lebanese border in 1971, Azoulay has chosen to live and work in Jerusalem, at a conscious remove from the contemporary commercial art world of Tel Aviv. It was at the Bezalel Academy of Art in Jerusalem that Azoulay trained to be an artist, receiving his MFA there after studying undergraduate art history at

the Hebrew University. And it is still in Jerusalem that he finds a unique energy, born of both social and political tensions as well as cultural vibrancy, that sustains his creative inner life.

Much of that inner life plays itself out in his studio, and in his paintings the artist's studio itself comes alive, serving as the elastic backdrop for all kinds of fantastic and humdrum scenarios – personal passion plays and cryptic morality tales, semi-autobiographical parables and rambunctious art history lessons, dreams and nightmares. As Azoulay puts it, he often feels that his role is to simply be there to close the door and “document it all”. The studio itself, financed by the Jerusalem municipality in a gritty former industrial building in Talpiot called “Sadnaot Ha’Omanim”, or, “Artist Workshops”, is in actuality fairly prosaic. But it provides the tabula rasa against which the artist can chronicle his various obsessions and preoccupations, rehearsing one narrative after the next. It is here that, in one painting, he imagines himself explaining the basic concepts of Euclidean geometry to a beatific white donkey (Azoulay loves donkeys, more noble in their modesty than horses, uncelebrated and long-suffering workers with one eye fixed on a better world somewhere else). It is here that he daydreams about visiting Magi, recently arrived Ethiopian migrants, gaggles of Orthodox men, neo-Buddhist gurus, rich collectors with wads of green cash. Also on the premises are rich aviaries and dovescotes of talismanic birds and other creatures, members of a polyglot transient population that always seems on the move, yet always at home. It is here too that the artist pictures himself falling into his own canvases like Narcissus gazing too long at his watery reflection, or waking to find himself tied to the ground by the colorful

paint drips splattered on the floor, come alive and made suddenly mischievous like Jackson Pollock Lilliputians harassing their Gulliver creator.



Speech, 2011
Oil on canvas, 146x157 cm

As with such diverse Modern painterly forebears as Henri Matisse, David Hockney, Philip Guston and others, Azoulay's studio forms a complete world, an unprepossessing but infinitely receptive and expansive vessel for his hyperactive musings. In his canvases, the studio is a place of intense introspection, a private sanctum that at the same time reflects a bustling and populated psychological landscape. Often it becomes a dreamlike social space in the same way that in our nighttime reveries the most intimate places can become arenas for unexpected visitors, traversed by phantoms that must be acknowledged and accommodated, figments of time spent alone imagining the world outside. Here the tools and surroundings of the artist's trade become ritualizing motifs and repeating totem objects—the brushes, the cans, pots and stark florescent lighting, the louvered industrials

windows, the stacked, half-stretched, unfinished canvases, the tape-marks on walls and floors.

In contrast to the noise and visual cacophony of the studio, Azoulay's other pictorial encampment lies somewhere out in the desert, a singular “anyplace” of clarity, precision and chimerical brightness, where truths hide just beneath the surface of things. Here his *mise-en-scènes* are defined not by their frantic maximalism but by the relation of just a few elements: a woven carpet hovers magically above the sandy desert floor, the haunted faces of African immigrants emerging from its elaborately patterned surface to gaze up into the harsh blinding sky; a man half-submerged in a hungry sand dune hangs on to a bending tree branch, while a flock of birds gathers on the other bare limbs to silently watch and bear witness. The images have the unlikely quality of pronounced hallucinations, fever dreams, mystical visions in the wilderness. According to Azoulay, the desert is a neglected realm, a metaphorical space where everything lies in wait and hushed expectancy, where things take place that can be easily missed.

The father of four children, Azoulay plays his own personal religious beliefs close to his chest while simply stating that in his work he is searching for the joy amidst the darkness. The situation of living in a city that is profoundly significant to the three major world religions is a condition never far from his creative imagination, however, and he treats religious and spiritual themes with equal parts mystical reverence, wide-eyed bemusement and lighthearted comedy. In one painting a clutch of black-clad religious men are seen performing a surreptitious guerilla bris on the massive form of Yitzhak Danziger's famous Nimrod sculpture

in collection of the Israel Museum; in another, a new age hippie prophet sits cross-legged in the Negev Desert gazing at a pair of laptop computers; elsewhere a fur-capped orthodox man chases a naked Azoulay through the undergrowth of a dark forest in a scene that may be menacing or wildly amorous. In Azoulay's theater of images, the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane, the crude and the sophisticated, the solemn and the slapstick all jostle for the limelight and find ways to share the stage. It is a big tent and there is always room for more.



Middle East, 2011
Oil on canvas, 195x204 cm

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