Jerusalem of Light and Stone

In many ways Joram Rosov is the quintessential Jerusalem painter


THE SEPARATION WALL: Oil on canvas, 50x50 cm

MAIDAD SOCHOVELSKY

Anne Sassoon

JORAM ROZOV IS AN ARTIST with tireless energy and an unshakeable devotion to his work – continuing, at the age of 72, to produce a large body of wide-ranging paintings even though he has had strangely little opportunity to exhibit for over 25 years.

His exhibition, "Landscapes and Milestones," is showing at the Tel Aviv Museum (until February 20) and is his first solo show since 1984. Not being good at self-promotion is one reason, he says, but he also blames what he calls "the transparent iron curtain" between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

"Jerusalemites are ostracized by the Tel Aviv establishment," he says. "We are lonely wolves with no community here to back us."

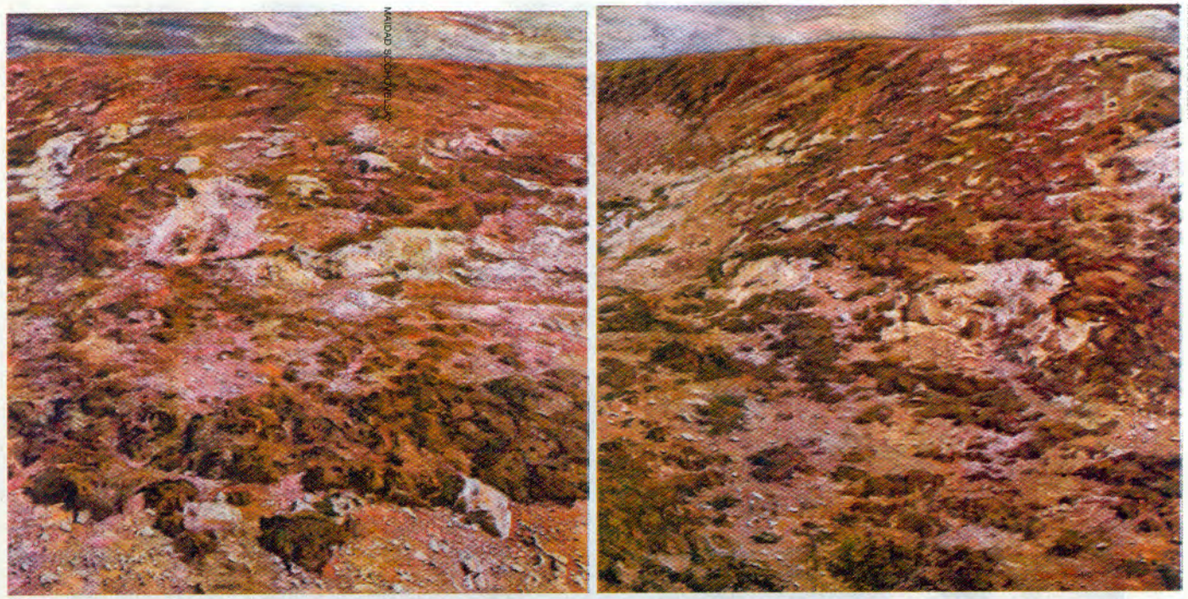
Rozov sees Jerusalem as a "dying city." He says, "It was stolen from us," referring to the growth of religious communities in Jerusalem. "The air is thick and stifling here," he says. "We are too close to God, but it is the wrong proximity."

In spite of what Rozov dislikes about Jerusalem, it is where he remains. And in many ways he is the quintessential Jerusalem painter, embodying in his work not only the complex feelings of a passionate Zionist who has served his country through three wars and now feels despairing about its current situation, but also of a Jerusalemite who includes among his subjects the carcasses of buses that were bombed; checkpoints and the separation wall; his own army uniform; the view from his window, and the hills that surround the city.

And although Rozov was born among the orange groves of Hadera, and has an intimate connection with the whole of Israel through decades of working as a design consultant for the Air Force; and although the works in this exhibition reflect his travels and experiences


ROADBLOCK: Oil on canvas, 80x80 cm

MAIDAD SOCHOVELSKY


MOUNT HEBRON: Diptych, oil on canvas, two panels each 92x92 cm

MAIDAD SOCHOVELSKY

in these and other countries he has visited, especially Italy, to which he has had a life-long connection – all the paintings somehow have a look of Jerusalem. Perhaps it is because of the rocky texture Rozov gives to his work and the sense that everything is viewed through a haze of dust. Or perhaps it is the formal, intense approach that he takes to his work, treating each painting almost as an icon that has to be carefully executed, leaving no room for accident or spontaneity.

Rozov has spent most of his adult life in Jerusalem, arriving in 1958 to study at the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts and, after further studies, returning to Bezalel in 1965 as a teacher of drawing, painting and basic design. It was a career that spanned 40 years and, Rozov says, "continually refreshed [him] as a painter."

Walking into his exhibition, one is first impressed by the power and solidity of the work. The paintings seem as concrete as the walls they hang on – not only because of the gritty surface Rozov uses as his ground but because they communicate an almost overwhelming abundance of visual information, every bit of which is treated as precious. The paintings are heavy with content, but also with memory and personal feeling: each is based on a photograph that represents an important personal experience, and so is like a homage or monument to a past event. And they are also, somehow, heavy with ritual – the private ritual that Rozov imposes on himself in his labor-intensive method of working.

Rozov says that his subject matter is of prime importance to him and that each painting represents "a moment of great emotion." He photographs the sight that triggered his emotion in order to retain the memory, so that he will be able to relive the experience later through the act of painting.

He explains that these are not "superficial experiences" and that, although he wants to achieve a meticulous end result, it is the process of reconstructing the experience that is important to him rather than the product. Not all his experiences were as happy as the sight of fields in Tuscany. But the difficult memories evoked by the uniform he wore during the Yom Kippur War, tombstones from the Jewish cemetery in Prague, or the checkpoints separating Israel from the West Bank are equally important as painting subjects for Rozov.

Once Rozov has chosen the photograph that will be the source of his painting, he sticks to it exactly as it is in terms of light, color and composition, so that all the creative decisions are made at the time of photographing the place or object. He says that

MAIDAD SOCHOVELSKY

MY MILITARY GEAR: Oil on canvas, 50x50 cm

when he started working in this way many years ago, he felt guilty about his reliance on photography but then discovered American photorealism and other artists who were doing the same thing. Rozov projects his photograph onto a primed and textured canvas and makes a minutely detailed tracing of it. When he starts painting, he faithfully follows this map, usually starting from the top of the canvas and working his way downwards, with continual reference to the original photograph. But before starting to paint, he covers the canvas with a transparent sepia ground – "like the old masters," Rozov says.

He was introduced to Italian Renaissance painting by his teacher at Bezalel, Professor Avraham Ronen, who imparted his passion for the subject and encouraged Rozov, after he graduated in 1962, to spend two years at an art academy in Florence. The school, Rozov says, was mediocre, but he had never been out of Israel before and this gave him his first opportunity to see Renaissance art and to discover Italian culture. His enjoyment of Florence and the Tuscan landscape is expressed in his work, but with veneration rather than playfulness.

Rozov is drawn to depict huge areas of rock and earth, at times getting right up against the surface of rock or cement, clods of earth or furrows in the land. Expanses of brick wall, tiled roofs or painted cement – everything becomes a massive landscape in its own right; even the oranges he paints are densely packed together and fill the canvas. But whether it is fields, rooftops, or the drapery of fabric on a human body, Jerusalem stone manages to enter the work. In Rozov's paintings, even the sky looks tangible and solid.

In the exhibition catalogue, Ariel Hirschfeld (professor of Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University) writes of "the inanimate, dead, inorganic quality which the artist lends things as they are introduced into his paintings." Is Rozov a King Midas of stone – where everything he touches with his brush turns not into gold but stone? The Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna comes to mind as an artist who communicated concrete solidity in his work rather than liveliness, especially in the grisailles – gray monochrome paintings that imitate sculpture.

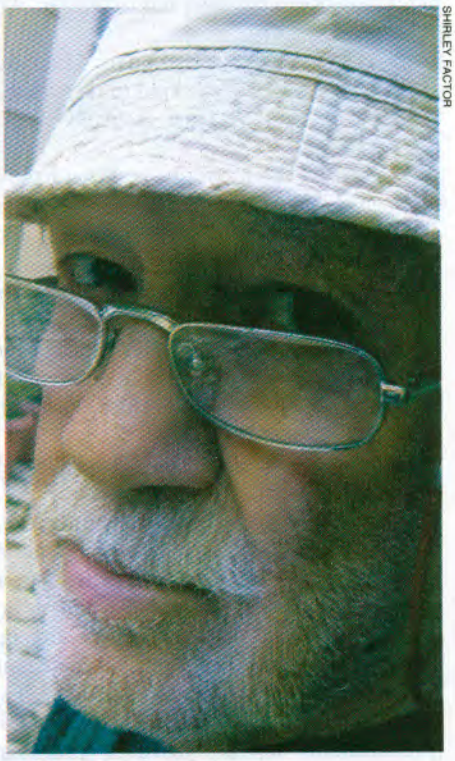
This stony, sculptural quality and the almost religious solemnity with which Rozov views his subject matter – his unswerving dedication to the master plan that is behind each painting – provokes the question: "Can you change your mind while you are doing a painting?"

He answers, "No. By the time I finally decide on the photograph, I am committed to it."

But photographs, however recent, record past events. Rozov speaks of trying to resuscitate and relive an emotional response from the past, so the next question is: "Does this mean you are always subjugating yourself to the past? What about the way we change over years?"

Rozov replies that the experience behind each painting remains alive for him. He says he clings to the past. "I find it hard to let go," he says with a smile. "All this is in the past and I am holding onto it."

Perhaps this is part of Rozov's relationship with Jerusalem. ●



SHIRLEY FACTOR

LONELY WOLF: Joram Rozov

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There are a number of noted individualists outside all the mainstreams of Israeli art: Oded Feingersh, a maker of Pop-cum-sado-sexual images; Uri Lifshitz, an expressionist who also deals in sado-sexual themes; American-born Ivan Schwebel, a figurative painter who casts himself as a Courbet-like painter-hero and knight-errant, but who cleverly divorces his often magical use of color from realism; and Yoram Rozov, the nearest Israel has to a photo realist, and the only one to make moving records of war damage and the aftereffects of terror bombings.

Thursday, June 7, 1979 THE WASHINGTON POST

Paintings of War

By Joanne Sheehy Hoover
Special to The Washington Post

There is a curious paradox in the paintings of Yoram Rozov, currently on exhibition at the Goldman Fine Arts Gallery of the Jewish Community Center in Rockville. Rozov's works do not portray any human being at full length nor is any human face depicted, yet they stand as a passionate poem to humanity.

Rozov, an Israeli in his 40s, has served in various conflicts that have plagued his part of the world. Not surprisingly, his subject is war, but as he said in an interview, not "the obvious event of the battle; it was the aftermath . . . the stillness, the smells, the leftovers."

His paintings of empty doorways surrounded by rubble evoke a silence so palpable that the viewer can feel it, even hear it. The emptiness sounds an anguished call for the presence of a human being—and there never is one.

Rozov makes another approach to the subject of war through his paintings of torsos of military men. His torsos of jet pilots reveal the human shape bound by a mass of crossed lines and circular belting. They are powerful images for the human beings trapped emotionally and spiritually, as well as physically, in the paraphernalia of war. In his torsos of army leaders,

Rozov evokes ironic echoes of the past by modeling the rumpled green fatigue jackets as carefully as if they were the gentle folds of classical drapery.

Rozov's approach, in general, is very painterly. In the copper and cream tones of a wrecked ammunition train, for example, or the luminous quality of a heap of sandbags, he creates a beauty that derives its power from the contrasting grimness of the subject.

The show, which is Rozov's first in the United States, will remain at the Goldman Gallery through June. In the fall, Rozov, who is currently a guest lecturer at the Parsons School of Design, will have an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York City.

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IMPRESSIONS OF WAR, PAINTINGS BY JORAM ROZOV (The Jewish Museum): Rubble-filled buildings, a pile of sandbags, gas masks, a wrecked plane, a lone aviator or soldier, a group of mourners —these are the images of war for Israeli super realist Joram Rozov. They are rendered without emotion or comment. Surfaces are gently textured and details meticulously recorded, particularly the multitudinous layers of gear worn by pilots, with all the straps, belts, pouches and wrinkles. Forms are kept close to the picture plane by dense, dark, yellow-green skies. The military men are faceless and impersonal, shown as large cropped torsos or with impenetrable masks. In a different context, without the titles, these could be any soldiers, any abandoned buildings, in any land.

If the paintings are drab, clear, matter of fact, how else is an artist to portray modern warfare, especially in a small country where such sights are ubiquitous, where disaster or salvation may be only seconds away, where survival depends equally on technology and individual will? If Rozov's pilots lack the spiffy uniforms and erect postures of traditional military heroes, they are heroes nevertheless *because they are there*. While the artist refuses to editorialize or make emotional appeals, his choice of impressions to depict speaks for itself. The fact that the paintings are presented in a museum as a unified group forces the viewer to confront an ugly reality and come to terms with it on his or her own terms.

Many of the individual paintings, especially the ruined facades with their small scale and forms set slightly back from the picture plane, are just too impersonal, too remote, to be very moving. But the show is carried by the torsos—close to the surface, much larger in scale, cropped at shoulders, arms and thighs—literally bursting out of the canvas on all four sides. These are dynamic images that make their presence felt.

—Ruth Bass

Joram Rozov, *Torso III*, 1977, oil on canvas. The Jewish Museum.

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THE WEEK IN REVIEW

4 wars & a few ghosts

Post Photo by Dan Brinzac

Joram Rozov and "Yitgadal Veytkadash."

HERE ARE these pilots, faceless behind their helmets. Or painted from the back, in minute photographic detail — lacking heads altogether.

Here is this family burying its young dead, reciting the *Yitgadal Veytkadash* under the hot Israeli sun. Joram Rozov has painted them from the back. They are his real relatives, and the boy for whom they are praying was a real 18-year-old paratrooper killed along with 53 others in a helicopter training crash that devastated that nation in 1977. The boy's name was Roy Milner — "from my home town of Hadera." Joram Rozov's own mother is in the picture — the woman in the babushka, at the right.

Why are they painted from the back?

"What I deal with is realistic," said Rozov, a short, wiry man who does have a face, and a beard. "Yet at the same time I'm dealing with symbols and prototypes, and looking to avoid the momentary or the instantaneous. I feel," he said, surrounded by these dozen canvases of his at the Jewish Museum, "that the only way for me to elevate the instant is to remove myself from the instant."

Had he tried painting the mourners the other way, head-on?

"I tried it the other way. I found it betrayed the purpose. It makes it more petty, more sentimental, more illustrative.

"With the pilots — well, I have friends who are pilots, two generals in the Air Force who somehow survived and who have just retired at the age of 40 and 42. As close as we were, I always felt they were somewhat beyond my reach, maybe because of their obsession, their occupation.

"People who are flesh and blood on the one hand, and yet going off to risk their lives every day of their lives. There

ART

is something superhuman about them. So, again, I wanted to make a relatively removed statement. More clinical. Unapproachable."

With not quite a laugh, Rozov said: "I can't afford to be sentimental about something about which I *am* sentimental."

In his own 41 years Rozov has fought in four wars, flying for the last of them, the Yom Kippur War, "from Fifth Avenue here, straight to the Sinai Desert." He thought he would "rush right back to my studio and start painting" after that one, but in fact it took him a whole year to recover. "I was completely washed out, completely drained."

When on active duty Sgt. Rozov heads an anti-aircraft gun crew.

He was in Egypt itself in that grim war-between-the-wars, the War of Attrition of 1968-71. That's where he saw (and photographed) what he's painted of the wrecked buildings of Quantara, on the Suez Canal. "Walking all by myself through a totally empty ghost town, peeping through open doorways into nothingness; but a nothingness loaded with all the traces of civilization. I was supposed to be the victor, but none of those feelings filled me: only a sorrow for these people who were the direct victims of an absurdity."

So. Before all this?

"Before all this I was in the Army band, believe it or not. Saxophone, trombone, violin, viola. Then I switched to cannons. Long-range cannons."

He was also, and is, a teacher at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, in Jerusalem, from where in 1968 he flew "with nine of my toughest students, tough but at the same time very sensitive guys," to help dig out and save the flooded art treasures of Florence.

In a way, he says, it was repaying his debt to Michelangelo.

At the moment Rozov is here on sabbatical, teaching first at Parsons, now at St. John's University in Jamaica. In June he and his wife — the painter Shirley Faktor — and their two small sons head back for Jerusalem. No, he's never tried to paint at the front. "It is a very different planet, and your whole organism reacts very differently."

He walked up close to one of his pilot paintings and peered at the play of light and shadow on a leather knapsack. "Hmmm," said Joram Rozov, "I was talented once." That once was three years ago, in 1976.

Jewish Museum, Fifth Avenue and 92nd St., through Jan. 6. Closed Fridays, Saturdays. — JERRY TALLMER

THE JERUSALEM POST DECEMBER 1974.

SAVAGE CONTENT, beautiful illusions

Yoram Rosov at Tel Aviv Museum

By Gil Goldfine

THE large collection of black and white drawings and etchings by Jerusalem's Yoram Rosov, at the Tel Aviv Museum, are documents of life, sometimes rendered realistically, but more often cloaked in veils of allegorical and fantastical images. Interpretive secrecy, however, is not Rosov's intention. His metaphorical pieces, describing destruction, isolation and human frustration, despite their savage content, are somewhat more obvious than his narrative works.

Obvious symbolism is evident in pictures of grotesques and in "hide and seek" compositions that interlace bodily configurations within assorted peace signs, rubble and armament.

Despite Rosov's pronounced sig-

Yoram Rosov: Stone Year, 1970 (pen drawing).

nals and the injection of sardonic humour into his style (which I think is slightly divorced from the ultra-serious in social statements) his draughtsmanship and technique are first class. Illustrations which could easily remain in the realm of story-telling are transposed into solid works of art by virtue of their compositional and descriptive drama. Together with dynamic, spacial and objective proportions, Rosov maintains a full range of grey values with pen and ink or charcoal, creating in each drawing a unique rhythmic balance of voids and masses.

FACTS AND POETRY

In contrast to the pictures in which he compiles and inverts iconography are his renderings of observed "casual" scenes like "Notre-Dame, Jerusalem" (30), "Unlike Other Walls" (31), "What Was So Dear to My Father" (56). In these, while concentrating on a personal statement, he builds a drawing of stated facts. The results are beautiful illusions coordinated with literal and poetic harmonies. And with strong chiaroscuro effects he is able to project an inconspicuous emotional narrative less openly visible than elsewhere in the show. It is here, when the content is less absorbing for the viewer, that one can relax and enjoy the quality of the art and become emotionally involved within the totality of a visual experience.

Yoram Rosov was born in Hadera. He studied at the Bezalel Academy and the Academy of Art in Florence. In addition to teaching drawing and illustration at Bezalel, he has been lecturer at the Art Department of the Hebrew University. (Tel Aviv Museum, 27 King Saul Blvd.) Till end of December.

THE JERUSALEM POST FRIDAY. MAY 7th. 1971.

Moments of truth

By MEIR RONNEN

AT the end of the Second World War I attended an enormous exhibition of works by American and Australian "war artists," painters who had been commissioned as officers and sent to record the war and the lives of the men who fought it. I was not entirely surprised to find that the paintings were not only more vividly realistic than photographs but that they were also art; that the selective eye could make order out of the chaos and carnage; that a bloated corpse could be a horrifying deterrent and a thing of odd beauty at one and the same time; or that everyday implements of war we had taken for granted could be shown as if they possessed a life of their own — and indeed often possessed the men who used them. The impression made by the show was deep and unforgettable.

I have often wondered why neither Zahal nor the Ministry of Education have commissioned war artists, but the answers are not hard to find: this is the age of the camera and hard-edge abstract painting; and neo-realism has not yet arrived here because apart from rather second-hand impressionism, there was scarcely any tradition of realistic painting here, a few surrealists notwithstanding. For war art also requires the literary and literal element of record.

My first choice for such a post would be Joram Rosov, Dean of Students at the Bezalel Academy, who is now exhibiting a remarkable series of black and white compositions at the Jerusalem Artists House. They are made with a rapidograph pen and Indian ink on hard white paper but it would be a denigration to regard them merely as drawings; they are actually powerful monochrome paintings, most of them composed with classical skill. Rosov's subject matter includes the wreckage of a shop front after the Mahane Yehuda explosion; the gaping mouth of the shattered facade of Jerusalem's Notre Dame, with a fence of tin sheets sitting in it like teeth; a mined jeep; a pilot climbing into his warplane, a shattered olive tree at the top of Nebi Samwil. Oddly enough, it is the inanimate objects that are most alive: they seem to be frozen in the moment of truth that records all there is to be said about them; the virtuoso technique is matched by a grasp of what is essential to both the description and the composition; the result is a sort of super-realism.

The other side of Rosov's work, some of which dates from an earlier period, is less literal and a combination of expressionism and fantastic surrealism that is very European: tortured figures swathed in winding clothes or a space-suited figure trailing a dozen umbilical cords; or latter-day crucifixions. The best of them project the sense of almost nameless horror that one finds in old German engravings. Then there are some straightforward statements, like Florence's flood-hit Ponte Vecchio and the rendering of a group of oranges; but even these look as though they are about to roll over you.

Rosov is a rare bird in today's thickly populated art aviary: an artist with technique and know-how *and* intense emotional feelings about his subject matter. This sometimes leads him into sentimentality, particularly in his renderings of pilots, wives montaged into their husbands, symbols of danger, but his more recent work has surmounted this, just as it has got away from merely naturalistic drawing that crops up in some of the more editorial subjects of three years ago. The exhibition shows the measure of his advance in this period. It is a singular achievement; his drawings are quite unlike anything else in our art scene.