

# How Steffa Reis paints her soul

*The renowned artist's half-century of creativity is celebrated with a retrospective exhibition in Tel Aviv and a lavish new book*

• By CARL HOFFMAN

At the moment, Steffa Reis has two very good reasons to be happy. Energetic and in apparent good health, she is contentedly looking forward to her 80th birthday. At the same time, she is looking back upon 50 years of artistic vision and a solid body of critically acclaimed art work.

Those 50 years of creativity are currently being celebrated with a retrospective exhibition in Tel Aviv and the launching of a new book. Both called *Seasons of the Soul: 50 Creative Years*, the lavishly illustrated book and the exhibition chronicle the career of an Israeli artist well-known both here and abroad, with more than 50 solo painting exhibitions under her belt.

Reis was born in Berlin in 1931 – an inauspicious year for a Jew to be born in Germany, just two years before the Nazi seizure of power.

“We finally emigrated to England in 1937, and were fortunate enough to become naturalized citizens before the war broke out,” she recalls. “But all of my family, on both sides, who remained in Germany were killed in the Holocaust.”

An only child, Reis grew up first in Cardiff and then in Liverpool, in a cultured environment where she was exposed to art and music at an early age. She eventually opted to focus her attention on art, studying first at the Harrow School of Art and later at the Royal Academy in London.

Art and music were not her only passions, however, during her formative years. Reis was also a dedicated member of Habonim, the labor Zionist youth movement. It was through Habonim that Reis made her first visit to the fledgling State of Israel in 1949, in a yearlong training course for youth group leaders.

She returned to England for a while after that and lived for a year on a preparatory kibbutz in order to get ready for life on a real kibbutz back in Israel.

There is an old saying, however, that life is something that happens to you while you are planning something else. Reis spent a year in Paris, and then married in 1954. It was not until 1957 that she made aliya, along with her husband and six-month-old daughter. Two more daughters were to follow in due course.

The little family settled first at Kibbutz Ein Harod in the Jezreel Valley. Then, after another period abroad while her husband completed his medical research, the family returned to Israel and settled in Safed, where Reis promptly established a music school, started a film club and organized summer concert programs.

By 1969, she had opened a studio in the heart of Safed's artists quarter and had become an integral member of the city's artist community.

“It was the first time I had an organized space for work,” Reis recalls. “The atmosphere and the view and the climate of Safed just brings art out of you. The connection to nature, and the connection to music – which is a very important part of my art work – was all there, all



REIS CONSIDERS her paintings to be ‘experiential.’

around me.

“I had a lovely house with a magnificent view. My studio was on the second floor. It was wonderful, like living in a beautiful dream.”

Reis's paintings from this period reflect the joy of a young artist living in spectacular surroundings. Many of the works are landscapes which, though largely abstract, are nevertheless somehow lyrical, conveying a feeling of euphoria.

One can almost imagine Reis standing at a big open window, listening to music and periodically breathing in Safed's cool, clear air – as though it were a kind of drug – while making these large paintings.

NOTHING LASTS forever, though, especially beautiful dreams. Safed began to grow and change, Reis became tired of the cold winters, and her daughters grew up and began moving to Tel Aviv.

Reis herself began to travel abroad frequently, to solo and group exhibitions, and needed someplace a bit closer to Ben-Gurion Airport than distant Safed. An apartment on Tel Aviv's Rehov Ben-Yehuda seemed a more logical alternative.

Thus, as her life began to shift to Tel Aviv, Reis found herself spending less and less time in Safed every year, until she finally based herself in Tel Aviv in the early 1980s.

Reis's early fascination with her new urban home can be seen in a particularly evocative series of paintings, “Tel Aviv Rooftops.” Like the earlier landscape works painted in Safed, Reis's Tel Aviv paintings display a guiding impulse that drives much of her later and current work.

Reis essentially paints her experience of viewing a subject, rather than the actual subject itself. Although inspired by a view of distant mountains or urban rooftops, the painting we see is more Reis's emotional reaction to the mountains and rooftops rather than their physical reality.

Asked whether she considers her paintings “abstract,”

she replies that they are more “experiential” than anything else. This focus on experience shapes her appreciation of art in general.

She says, “I like to see work that comes from the gut. I like to see work that comes from feelings and emotions, that comes from an experience in life. I'm left cold by something I have to read up on before I understand what it's about.”

For Reis, the 1980s were also a time in which she began to come to terms with the land of her birth and early childhood.

“In 1980, I started going back to Germany. I went for social reasons, really. I had a lot of exhibitions in Germany until 1989, when I had a retrospective in Berlin, just three days after the Berlin wall came down.”

Asked what it felt like to go back to the land her family fled, she thinks a moment and replies, “Well...

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don't forget I was a child when we left. I hadn't even started going to school. As you can hear, I don't even have any sort of German accent.

"I never personally felt any sort of anti-Semitism. And my family was totally secular. So through friends, I started going back to Germany.

"It didn't affect me much until I got back to Berlin. That was a big shock. I remembered how it was, where we lived, the stairway, the back yard – all the small things a child remembers.

"The shock came at the time of my retrospective exhibition, when I was taken to a Sunday flea market, with all kinds of odds and ends. I was going around and suddenly saw pieces of engraved cutlery and other bits and pieces here and there that could have come from my own home.

"I looked at these things and suddenly felt an overall feeling of terrible disintegration. I felt the terrible destruction of the families that had owned these pieces, and of all the families caught up in the Holocaust. It was a terrible shock, and that was the first time I really felt very deeply about going back to Germany."

Several noteworthy series of paintings, including "Berlin Memorial," were inspired by Reis's visits to the city of her birth.

Numerous exhibitions followed, displaying several series of paintings, each series reflecting a different set of feelings or experiences. Particularly memorable collections of paintings have been "Transcriptions of a Dance Image" and "Reflections on Elsa Lasker Shuler." The latter series entailed several visually striking paintings – all hypnotically blue – inspired by Reis's reaction to Shuler's poem "My Blue Piano."

The current exhibition, "Seasons of the Soul," ambitiously tries to represent 50 years of Reis's art work.

"But it's a very limited representation," Reis says. "I have done many things. I have done three or four actu-



AFTER MAKING aliya in 1957, Reis settled in Safed, which she describes as "living in a beautiful dream."

al projects which would not fit in here, such as 'Berlin Memorial,' and the 'Reflections on Elsa Lasker Shuler.'" These series, as well as others left out of the exhibition, are, however, well represented in Reis's new book.

WHAT WE do see in this exhibition of 40 works on canvas, paper and silkscreen prints reflects a good sampling of Reis's preoccupations and skills. There are landscapes; abstract pastels; a series called "Small Joys" – small works on paper that seem to explode with color; and "Calendar Pages" that are, yes, actual calendar pages with Reis's artistic embellishments. There are one or two paintings from a series called "Cyphers," and several paintings that seem to spring from somewhere deep within Reis's psyche. These are called "Square within a Square" and are exactly what they are called – a painted square of some sort, inside a larger square.

"It comes from music," she says. "It is the idea of the solid square that is permanent and self-contained. You can go out of it, you can come into it. But it's always there to contain you.

"To me, it's the music of Bach. Baroque and confident. The inner square is there, as a given, like the ground under your feet. It doesn't move. It's solid and unchanging. And yet, you're able to go everywhere you want, but

when you come back, the square is still there to keep you balanced, and to keep you contained."

Not only are there several "Square within a Square" paintings in the exhibition, there are also two or three other paintings from other series in which this motif occurs, over and over again, like some kind of template in Reis's mind.

When this recurrence is pointed out to her, she says simply, "Yes, they really do connect. I hadn't thought about it, really. I don't analyze what I do."

Asked why not, she brusquely replies, "It's not a good idea. If I analyze it, the creative [impulse] for these paintings – whatever that might be – will die. The minute you analyze anything like this, it simply becomes nothing."

Gazing at the impressive variety of paintings on display, we are moved to ask Reis whether or not she thinks talent can be taught. Her reply is immediate: "No. I think that talent is something inherent that can be brought out. I think there's something in everyone, in different ways. But unfortunately the education systems don't always try to do harness it.

"I teach art from time to time. But I do not teach the basics of art. That doesn't interest me. I like to have people who know something about art and then work on experimentation, with different materials. And suddenly you see something happen, the excitement.

"But it's in the doing, and not in the end result, where someone looks at what he's done and then says, 'Oh, I'm going to sell this!'

"I think everyone has gifts, but life as it is doesn't always allow them to emerge. Those people who manage to create something with their talent are very fortunate, because they have managed to arrive at their own dynamic; or they've just simply been touched by someone who does what I would do for them. But talent is either there, or it isn't."

So what does Reis have planned for the next 50 years?

"Well, at the age of 80, it's not like I'm going to embark on a new career," she says, laughing. "I'm certainly going to go on working. I'm always connecting back to the square within the square.

"I can't even remember the first one I did, but it was a long time ago. I have to pick up the threads, because there have been so many interruptions."

"Seasons of the Soul: 50 Creative Years" is currently showing until January 2 at the Artists House, 9 Alharizi Street, Tel Aviv. For further information about the exhibition or the retrospective book, contact Steffa Reis at [steffareis@bezeqint](mailto:steffareis@bezeqint), or call (054) 454-4022.

