

## Constructing a World: Mystical Realism in a Local Context

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“Paradoxically speaking, one of the implications of the international interest in Israeli art is the growing demand for ‘locality,’” as the art critic Ruth Direktor argues in her introductory article to the book Israeli Art Now. “In the previous century,” Direktor continues, “the commitment to local concerns and current events was largely embodied in the language of figurative art; art that was outward looking, and even art that was inward looking, were identified with abstraction. Yet since the sweeping return to painting and narrative, and by extension to figurative art, in the 1980s, the art discourse no longer requires an ethical adjudication between abstraction and figuration, nor there is a need to be judgmental in any other sense in this regard. Surprisingly, the blurring of boundaries, and the relative integration of Israeli art into the international art arena, feed the expectation for art that tells its unique story, responding to an intensive political and social reality.”<sup>1</sup>

These developments in the field of art explain the interest garnered by Matan Ben Cnaan’s works both locally and internationally. His paintings share a preoccupation with “locality” rendered through the language of figurative art; they correspond directly, yet in a subtle and multivalent manner, with the unique reality in which he is embedded. Ben Cnaan joins a generation of artists working in a post-hegemonic Israeli art world, which is no longer plagued by a provincial recoil from the local and the figurative, and no longer shares the desire to bask in the universal aura seemingly emanating from the myriad manifestations of abstract art.<sup>2</sup>

Realist painting, which has been acquiring a vital presence, points once again to the dialectic relationship between the supporters and detractors of figurative art that has persisted over the past century, and which has been charged on occasion with vitriolic overtones. Critics of figurative art continue to belittle its artistic value, and even to disparage it entirely. What is the use, they ask, of producing visual representations of reality in the age of photography? Other art pundits commend the revival of realist painting, while expressing reservations about its proclivity for exaggeration. Yet despite mounting disapproval and reservations, realist art prevails. Celebrating the revival of American neo-realist art in the mid-1960s, which emerged as a counter-response to the Abstract

1. Ruth Direktor, “Israeli Art Now,” in Israeli Art Now (edited by Iris Rivkind Ben Zur and Revital Alcalay), Ben Shemen: Modan Publishing, 2009, p. 10, in Hebrew.
2. Gideon Ofrat, “The Realists and the Question of the World,” in Minorism: Israeli Art at the Dawn of the 21st Century, Jerusalem: Omanut Yisrael, 2010, pp. 107–120, in Hebrew.

Expressionism of the 1940s and 1950s, the artist and art critic Leo Segedi wrote that, “like Lazarus risen from the dead the corpse of Realism has returned again to be embraced by the artist, but if the death of Realism had grieved the public, its resurrection does not seem to make many people happy.”<sup>3</sup>

Discontent with the emergence of neo-realist art during those years stemmed, among other things, from the fact that it did not merely seek to offer an “illusory representation” of reality, but also subjected it to various artistic strategies pursued through figuration. “Manipulative strategies” clearly appear in the works of artists affiliated with hyper-realist or photo-realist strains of art-making (Howard Kanovitz, Richard Estes, John Bader, Ron Kleemann, and many others), who sought to provide rich, detailed, and highly precise descriptions of their subjects. Yet the ensuing effect is not the same as that produced by photography; as the art historian Sam Hunter wrote about Kanovitz’s works, they “produce an atmosphere of doubt rather than certitude, and pose questions of meaning which challenge the nature of artistic experience.”<sup>4</sup> A similar yet distinct strategy is also evident in the works of artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and others. These artists challenged accepted artistic hierarchies between high and low and created a sort of “parasitical” reflection of icons from the worlds of cinema, commercial advertising images, pop music, and comics, transforming them into the subjects of art-making and of aesthetic experience.

This paradox, which is evident in the oeuvre of artists whose works all fall under the category of realist art — since they both “photograph” reality and “disrupt” or exaggerate it — seems to characterize various manifestations of realism along the axes of both space and time. Whereas its manifestations in the 1960s challenged the Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s and 1950s,<sup>5</sup> later manifestations of realist painting have sought different ways to express this paradox by both reflecting and exceeding reality, providing a representation of it while imbuing it with a personal stamp.<sup>6</sup>

Ben Cnaan joins this protracted dispute by adopting an artistic approach that is significantly different from those informing the neo-realist art prevalent in the 1960s. He does not provide an exaggerated representation of reality, nor does he seek to “disrupt” it. As he himself states, he is not a hyper-realist artist, “because hyper means enhancing what the eye does not truly see”; nor does his style owe its inspiration to photo-realism, “which aspires to copy the photograph so that the painting

3. Leo Segedin, "Realism and Neo-Realism in Art," 1964. [http://www.leopoldsegedin.com/essay\\_detail\\_realism\\_neorealism\\_art.cfm](http://www.leopoldsegedin.com/essay_detail_realism_neorealism_art.cfm)

4. Sam Hunter, "Howard Kanovitz's New Paintings," *Arts Magazine*, April 1975, pp. 7-75. <https://www.howardkanovitz.com/kanovitz-new-paintings>

5. Alex Katz, "Contemporary Realism." <http://www.theartstory.org/movement-contemporary-realism.htm>

6. Robin George Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938, Chapter III.

will resemble a photograph.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, his artistic style is clearly not inspired by pop art. Ben Cnaan’s works possess a different quality, and the encounter with them provokes an experience of astonishment and wonder; the paintings blind the eye, owing to his virtuosic ability to provide a detailed and precise representation of concrete reality in its manifold forms. When observing his paintings, the viewer’s initial response is one of bewilderment: “Is this a painting or a photograph?” Indeed, Ben Cnaan is seemingly “photographing” reality to fully capture its richness, including still-life elements, inanimate objects, natural scenes, and human beings caught in the course of mundane activities and in moments of fear, terror, sorrow, mirth, joy, and so forth.

Ben Cnaan’s works do not seek to beautify reality, nor do they aspire to depict imaginary, longed-for realms that exceed its limits. The figures and objects depicted in his paintings are located in identifiable, concrete spaces; they are tangible and assume trivial qualities; the figures are usually attired in everyday outfits, and sometimes wear worn-out work clothes. For the most part, they are not located in aesthetically pleasing spaces, but rather in back yards or charmless construction sites. Borrowing from the art historian Meyer Schapiro, this approach makes room for “humanity in art,” for “it does not view protagonists from the worlds of mythology and religion as the main subjects of art-making, giving expression instead to a physical and human reality in scenes featuring regular people, landscapes, and inert objects.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, for instance, in his works Yael and Sisera (2007) and A Levite and His Concubine (2007), the “biblical” plots unfold within buildings whose cracked walls are covered with various shades of peeling paint, and whose windows are filled in with cement blocks — a sign of old, dilapidated, and abandoned buildings, perhaps even ones slated for destruction. In Untitled (2007) and Illegal Stayer (2007), the plots unfold in stuffy basements of sorts — one whose walls, smeared with a charmless cocktail of colors, enhance the sense of distress and angst. The observation of these works makes one wonder about the degree to which the portrayal of these scenes within dilapidated and anxiety-provoking spaces points to an apocalyptic vision, to the instability of the concrete reality surrounding us, and to the inherent existential threats it harbors.

As already noted, however, the realistic representation of a concrete lived sphere in Ben Cnaan’s works employs artistic motifs that attest to his interest in exceeding the limits of this reality. Ben Cnaan seeks to achieve this effect in a unique way — not by creating tension or a

7. Dana Gillerman, “The Test of Reality,” Calcalist, July 18, 2015.

8. Meyer Schapiro, Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries, Selected Papers, New York: George Braziller, 1982, p. 227.

contrast between two opposing poles, but rather by means of an artistic strategy that seeks to create a “unity of opposites,” to forge a fusion between the physical and the transcendental and to mold them together into a holistic unity.

This approach is widely prevalent in the fields of literature, poetry, philosophy and theology. It receives full-fledged expression, for instance, in the writings of the American philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, the founder of the transcendental movement whose underlying principles include the attempt to identify the beautiful and the sublime in everyday, prosaic reality. His depiction of reality in his poem *The Rhodora* succinctly expresses this approach: Neither the description of the flower itself nor that of its surroundings — the stream of water running beside it and the birds hovering above it — exceeds their natural and prosaic features. In this sense, Emerson’s poetry assumes realistic overtones.

In contrast to the Romantic poetry of his time, Emerson’s poetry supplies a factual and “dry” report concerning natural phenomena as they appear before our eyes, yet these banal facts provoke in him a deep sense of wonder and lead him to a transcendental experience. They carry the stamp of the sublime, of a heavenly power. As Emerson wrote in one of his essays, “[n]ature is the symbol of spirit.”<sup>9</sup> Emerson’s poetry is rightfully perceived as one plagued by an internal contradiction, or oxymoron, captured by the term “mystical realism.” This approach is succinctly described by the 19th-century German playwright and writer Georg Büchner: “Art,” he wrote, “does not imitate nature as such. Rather, the imitation is to preserve a sense of creation.”<sup>10</sup> This “sense of creation” is present, according to Büchner, in the daily experience of human beings and in the prosaic manifestations of natural reality.

It is tempting to detect the presence of mystical realism in the works of Israeli artists, yet acknowledging it requires more than the observation that, in these works, “figuration rubs against realism while simultaneously freeing itself from it.”<sup>11</sup> Artists such as Aram Gershuni, Sigal Tsabari, Ofer Lellouche, Jan Rauchwerger, and many others may allow this kind of friction to appear in their works, yet the mystical dimension is not present in them in a clear and decisive manner. Contemplating his own work, the artist Israel Hershberg, one of the prominent representatives of realist art in Israel in recent decades, noted that the illusory representation of reality cannot be reduced “to a generalized and addictive gaze that devotes itself to every detail and pursues every bit

9. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Nature / Walking, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991, p. 23.

10. Quoted in Anna Guillemin, "Mimesis of Everyday Life in the Kunstgespräch of Büchner's Lenz: Realist Aesthetics between Anti-Ideal and Social Art," in Commitment and Compassion, Essays on Georg Büchner, edited by Patrick Forthmann and Martha B. Helfer, New York: Rodopi, 2012, p. 140.

11. Ofirat, "Realism and the Question of the World," p. 109.

of visual information; the real task lies beyond the demonstration of skill; it is related to an attentive observation of nature and its transformation into what lies beyond the concrete realm.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, even when this task is the one guiding the artist, the journey beyond the realm of the concrete does not necessarily require the presence of a mystical element; it can take on a rich range of manifestations, corresponding with the artist’s inner world, serving as an allegory for a social and political reality, and so forth. Yet in Ben Cnaan’s case, the works allude to a transcendental sphere that can be intuited in the paintings, even as they remain loyal to a strictly realistic depiction of reality.

### **A Gaze from Within — The Light that Replaces the Halo**

Engaging with mystical realism, Ben Cnaan’s paintings attest to an obvious effort to depict reality in its entirety, while simultaneously transcending it. One of the artistic motifs he frequently uses to generate this effect is that of light: the blazing light that gleams, emerges, penetrates, and is reflected in the various scenes in his works. “They were astonished by the light in the painting,” he notes in discussing the response of the prize jury at the National Portrait Gallery in London, which awarded his work Annabelle and Guy (2014) First Prize in the museum’s portrait competition. “They didn’t know it was an Israeli artwork and were sure it came from the Midwest, Italy, or Spain. They said: ‘We didn’t think of Israel, and felt there was something behind the painting, that something was happening there, and it gripped us all.’”<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, one cannot ignore the light and its dramatic, heavenly, glorious appearance in Ben Cnaan’s works. The presence of the light, which acquires a local quality, is not always contrasted with a dark and dimly lit background, except for the shadows cast by the objects that it illuminates. This unique light manifests itself in various settings. In some cases, it is not the light of warm summer days, which fills the entire space; it more closely resembles the light of gray, rainy winter days, which appears briefly as rays of sunshine bursting through a crack in a dark mass of clouds. These rays create gleaming spots of light on the ground and on the various objects placed upon it, accompanied sometimes by a rainbow. These translucent spots are enhanced by the shades of gray that circumscribe and surround them.

This light is also revealed in its full glory when the sun is about to set, and its rays, to borrow Ben Cnaan’s own words, “light up” the objects. The gleam of the “lit-up” objects is enhanced by the shadows cast by

12. Tali Tamir, “A Long-Distance Painter,” Kol Ha’ir, December 1, 1989, pp. 60, 83, in Hebrew. Quoted in Ofrat, “Realism and the Question of the World,” p. 113.

13. Gillerman, ibid.

other objects that block the sunrays. Nature provides us with a play of light and shade that allows this light to appear in all of its power. This is the light that clearly appears in Naboth's Vineyard (2016), as well as in Annabelle and Guy, Trespasser (2017), Judith (2018), Pandora (2017—2018), and David and Michal (2017—2018) — alluding to the existence of a heavenly realm that goes beyond the limits of concrete reality, while nevertheless borrowing its characteristics from this very reality.

The motif of light, which is virtuosically employed by Ben Cnaan, is inspired by two Old Masters: Michelangelo Caravaggio (1571—1610) and Diego Velázquez (1599—1660). In the works of these artists, realism is expressed through the gradual dissolution of halos in favor of natural light as the representation of a heavenly presence; the natural light and the heavenly halo become one — residing in reality itself, naturally integrated into it, and constituting an inseparable part of it. Caravaggio's painting The Conversion of St. Paul (1600) [p. 25] exemplifies this new manifestation of the motif of light in religious scenes. The light shines on the figure of the saint, enveloping it against a gray and gloomy background. "Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him," as Acts 9 describes St. Paul's journey to Damascus.<sup>14</sup> The riders and their horses, who stand around the saint in the shadows, underscore his figure, which is surrounded by a shining halo. The light symbolizes the spiritual transfiguration experienced by the saint. By means of his radiant body, Caravaggio does away with the presence of heavenly light as a foreign, external element that has taken on a physical form. He locates this supernatural spiritual or heavenly element within nature itself, as a part of everyday reality.

Unlike the figures in Caravaggio's works, which sometimes have generic features lacking in specificity, the figures in Velázquez's paintings tend to be more tangible and intimate. Even when he chooses to represent mythical heroes, they assume temporal and particular qualities. And even when Velázquez surrounds his figures with heavenly light and positions an artificial halo over their heads, as befits divine figures, he does not subject them to mythical ideals or glorify their physical characteristics. Such representations, which assume temporal and realistic qualities, are powerfully manifested in Volcan's Forge (1630) [p. 23]. The exposed bodies of Apollo and the accompanying figures bespeak an entirely temporal existence, yet are enveloped in gleaming light whose source remains unclear, since the fiery forge is located in the back of the scene.

14. Acts 9, 3.

Like Velázquez, Ben Cnaan preserves for such earthly figures a central role in his paintings; they are devoid of pomp and splendor, and are located in prosaic scenes. As for the spiritual and heavenly touch he inserts into his works, Ben Cnaan subjects it to a complete realist turn that is made evident by the gleaming light, which blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Borrowing the words of the artist James Turrell, one of the founders of the Light and Space art movement, one could state that the light in Ben Cnaan's works is not a spotlight that shines upon and exposes objects in the world; light "is the revelation."<sup>15</sup> Yet light as a revelation existing onto itself is not exclusively restricted to a specific object, nor does it assume a uniform character; rather, it appears in various manifestations of reality. Thus, for instance, in the work Trespasser, Ben Cnaan "illuminates" the ground on which the figures stand, the tangled tree branches in the background, and the exposed body parts of the figures. Light in its brighter manifestation is clearly discernible on the ground in Joseph and Simeon (2010), Untitled (2010), Babylon (2009), Naboth's Vineyard, David and Michal, and Annabelle and Guy, as well as in the foliage in Pandora.

The motif of light, which carries a heavenly stamp, is naturally integrated into Ben Cnaan's works, even when the scenes he depicts are circumscribed within closed or semi-closed spaces. The natural light, which cuts through the spaces and penetrates through narrow apertures or cracks, replaces the artificial halo, yet is consumed by mystical intimations. This type of conversion can clearly be seen in the paintings Illegal Stayer, Yael and Sisera, Untitled, and A Levite and His Concubine. The light in these paintings creates a stark contrast, a dramatic tension, between the illuminated and dark areas; it cuts through the dense and oppressive atmosphere characteristic of the closed spaces, whose walls are smeared with a mixture of brown and yellow hues, imbuing them with a mystical quality.

#### **A Gaze from Outside — The Projection of Biblical Narratives**

As repeatedly stated, Ben Cnaan does not view his works as a mere attempt to faithfully depict reality; he also seeks to stir sensations and emotions mediated through the specific iconographic interpretations that he projects upon them. He invites his viewers to observe his works through the prism of the biblical narratives that inspired them, narratives that provoke a myriad of emotional responses in the viewers.

It should be emphasized that Ben Cnaan's oeuvre does not exhibit a clearcut affinity with biblical narratives. The discrepancy between

15. James Turrell, "Mapping Spaces, 1987," in Kristine Stiles, Peter Selz, Theorie and Documents of Contemporary Art, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, Second Edition, 2012, p. 649.

the biblical scenes and stories and their visual representation is so deep, that it does not allow for an immediate affinity between them based on the existence of a given cultural context — of a community of meaning characterized by unique traditions and social norms. As Ben Cnaan notes, his works do not seek to “illustrate” the biblical stories.<sup>16</sup> An iconographic interpretation of the works by means of the biblical narratives is not readily available. As Irwin Panofsky writes, “Iconographical analysis, dealing with images, stories and allegories instead of with motifs, presupposes, of course, much more than that familiarity with objects and events which we acquire by practical experience. It presupposes a familiarity with specific themes or concepts as transmitted through literary sources, whether acquired by purposeful reading or by oral tradition.”<sup>17</sup>

The absence of an immediate affinity between the scenes depicted by Ben Cnaan and the biblical narratives he projects onto them thus precludes a self-evident iconographic interpretation of his works. The titles affixed to the paintings must thus be viewed as an invitation or imploration to view them through a prism that allows for a wide range of interpretations, which may be inspired by these narratives. Ben Cnaan calls upon the viewer to observe his works based on the biblical narratives that inspired their creation. He sees them as a rich cultural repository that contains “a highly powerful concentration of moral dilemmas and other questions that preoccupy human beings in their everyday life . . . a cornerstone of human culture, beyond our interest as Jews . . . it is a literary oeuvre that I am surprised and sustained by.”<sup>18</sup>

Ben Cnaan employs a similar artistic strategy to the one used by Adi Nes in his series of photographic works titled “Biblical Stories” (2007). “The protagonists of these stories,” as Nes noted in an interview, “are street people, homeless people, lower-class people who have ended up on the margins of society, worn-out people on empty streets who live in a deplorable reality with no hope or future.”<sup>19</sup> The choice made by these two artists to capture figures inhabiting mundane reality serves a similar goal. Had these works simply aimed to provide illustrations of biblical stories, they would have made it difficult for viewers to reflect upon their relevance to our contemporary social and political reality. If this were the case, the viewers would have tended to locate the paintings in a distant past, possibly charging them with a mythological quality. This undesired effect is generated, for instance, in the “realist” illustrations created by numerous 19<sup>th</sup>-century artists, such as the French painter and etcher Gustave Doré.

16. Gillerman, ibid.

17. Erwin Panofsky, “Iconography and Iconology: an Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art,” in Irwin Panofsky, Meaning in the Visual Arts, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, pp. 51-81.

18. Gillerman, ibid.

19. Dafna Yudowitz, “In the Role of God: Adi Nes,” Globes, January 28, 2007, in Hebrew.

When Ben Cnaan invites viewers to observe the contemporary everyday scenes depicted in his works, he is thus seeking to entice them to provide interpretations of the biblical stories vis-à-vis the reality in which they are presently embedded. A similar aspiration guides Adi Nes:

“The construction of figures lacking a specific identity, based on the mythical stories of the Bible,” gives rise to “a confrontation between contemporary Israeli reality and the history of the Chosen People.”<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, when we observe, for instance, Ben Cnaan’s work Babylon, we are urged to wonder how it relates to what is transpiring in the here and now. We notice a charmless mound of earth, two inconspicuous men, a wheelbarrow, and two building blocks — a scene that seems to correspond with the artistic motifs in the painting The Stone Breakers (1849—1850) by Gustave Courbet, one of the major representatives of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Realism. Yet the local context of Babylon encourages us to envision not only a linguistic cacophony, but also the social and national tensions nourished by the reality of our contemporary political life. Babylon symbolizes an absence of harmony and dialogue, destruction and desolation — an apocalyptic vision whose potential realization is the result of human arrogance and folly. Similarly, when we examine Naboth’s Vineyard, we may find ourselves consumed by daunting thoughts about the insatiable greediness of corrupt leaders operating within our midst.

The female figure in Judith may be looked upon as a tribute to Caravaggio and his painting Judith Beheading Holofernes (1602), while leading us to reflect on the courage and bravery of women living and acting in local contexts. Yet who is the contemporary Judith beheading Holofernes and placing his severed head in a sack, as if it were a bone or some object? What does the concealment of his head in the sack symbolize? Does it allude to the moral dictum “Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth”? Or does it perhaps symbolize equanimity in the face of this harrowing image, in contrast to the dramatic and shaking depiction of the decapitation in Caravaggio’s work?

And what is the biblical analogy of the painting Anabelle and Guy? Does it allude to the epic tragedy of Jephthah, who sacrificed his daughter in order to fulfill his vow to God? What is the meaning of this vow in the context of the present time? Who is the father? Who is to be sacrificed, and for what cause? Such existential reflections arise when we are urged to observe the works by Ben Cnaan through the biblical narratives that he projects onto them.

20. Ibid.

The painting Trespasser offers an especially demanding challenge to those seeking to interpret it, inviting queries concerning existential human concerns that have long separated nations and distinct social groups. “The person who, having fenced off a plot of ground, took it into his head to say this is mine and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society.”<sup>21</sup> What, then, is “the plot of ground” in dispute, and what are its borders? And who are the trespassers? The Hebrew title of this work offers a play on words that is lost in English, raising questions concerning the elusive difference between those who cross borders illegally and pioneers who break new ground. Is the distinction between them sustainable? Who owns the rights to “the plot” that presumes to have clear boundaries? Who are the alleged owners of the territory and who are the illegal trespassers roaming the land? Is the artist asking the viewer to reflect on the violent struggle for ownership over the concrete land, whose light-flooded landscapes are present in his works? And does the mystical dimension of the landscapes point to the possibility of overcoming this conflict peacefully, without bloodshed?

### **Constructing a World: Mystical Realism in a Post-Hegemonic Age**

Gideon Ofrat decries the minor character of art-making in the early 21st century, seeing it as “the art of a shrunken, limp organ . . . erotic sensuality fused . . . with flaccidity or infertility bordering on illness and death. Inevitably, perhaps even declaratively: minor art.”<sup>22</sup> One of the expressions of this minor art, according to him, is the total absence of “the world” from the works of Israeli realist artists.<sup>23</sup> “Artists of quality,” Ofrat writes, “are those who construct a ‘world,’ whether it is one based on an external reality or on inner reality. The ability of a given body of work to construct a ‘world’ is the ability to create a mental, intellectual self-portrait that is not necessarily identical to the direct content of the works.”<sup>24</sup> The emphasis on works, in the plural, is essential, since this self-portrait, as Ofrat adds, “is consolidated from one work to the next, deepening and maturing parallel to the artist’s artistic development.”<sup>25</sup>

Ben Cnaan meets this ambitious challenge — the construction of an artistic world — with impressive and admirable results. As I have sought to show, the construction of a world receives his conscious and deliberate attention, first through his frequent use of the motif of light that introduces a mystical element into his works, and second through the projection of interpretations inspired by biblical stories onto a significant number of paintings. He invites the viewer to join him on a challenging

21. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin of and Foundations of Inequality,” in The First and Second Discourses, edited by Roger D. Masters, New York: St. Martin Press, 1964, p. 141.

22. Ofrat, pp. 72–73.

23. Ibid., pp. 107–120.

24. Ibid., p. 115.

25. Ibid., p. 118.

hermeneutic journey, whose aim is to detect in his works meanings that are relevant to the present time. These two layers — the motif of light present in the works and the unique iconographical interpretations he imposes on them — are two complementary pillars of the emotional and intellectual world constructed by Ben Cnaan, as well as of the mental and emotional self-portrait he consolidates for himself in the course of his artistic development, gradually leading him from one artwork to the next.

The construction of this artistic world corresponds, as noted, with the long tradition of mystical realism, assuming various forms and expressions in philosophy, literature, and visual art. This process of construction, which bears Ben Cnaan's unique imprint, does not compete with any specific genre of Israeli art — if only because both the local and the international art fields are no longer characterized by the existence of a hegemonic center. "Israeli art at the threshold of the 21st century," as Ruth Direktor has astutely noted, "is characterized by multiple voices and great vitality, and dedicates itself to various types of descriptions, as offered from different angles and with a range of emphases."<sup>26</sup> Gideon Ofrat similarly announces, albeit with some reservations, "the end of the age of artistic hegemony," and the rise of "artistic pluralism in the field of Israeli art."<sup>27</sup> The warm embrace enjoyed by Ben Cnaan both locally and internationally strikingly attests to these welcome developments.

26. Direktor, p. 9.

27. Ofrat, Minorism, pp. 107–112.