



'Mother I am a Girl and I Love Girls' by Ronit Yanizki (Courtesy)

## Art that talks

For artists Ronit Yanizki and Joel Yasur, creating is a means of finding their voice

'Birth of a Lesbian' by Ronit Yanizki (Courtesy)



• By CARL HOFFMAN

Ronit Yanizki was born 54 years ago on Kibbutz Gan Shmuel, grew up as a self-confessed "tomboy," became an athlete, and played professional basketball on the national women's team and in the Premiere League for 20 years before becoming a successful producer of Israeli rock concerts. Then, in 2003, during a two-year sojourn in Minneapolis, Minnesota, she heard the call of a still, small voice deep within her psyche and became an artist. She has since had 11 critically acclaimed solo exhibitions.

Joel Yasur, too, was born 54 years ago, to a stringently religious family in Tel Aviv. She lived in the city's Neveh Tzedek neighborhood until the age of nine, followed by another nine years in the southern neighborhood of Kiryat Shalom. She also sojourned in the United States for a while, receiving a PhD in holistic psychology from UCLA, then returned to Israel and directed a home for the aged for 12 years. She began painting in elementary school, and later turned to art for emotional release.

"Sometimes I can't express my feelings well," explains Yasur, who has practiced privately as a psychother-

apist for more than two decades and has built her reputation as an artist with six solo exhibitions. "I can shout, or scream, or cry. And I found really the best way to deal with my feelings is to paint."

The two women are now staging a joint exhibition called "It Takes Two to Tango," after realizing how much they have in common: Besides their age, both artists smoke heavily, speak with almost identical voices, and are gay. Both have had to make painful choices in life, requiring courage and a determination to break rules and flout social conventions — themes amply reflected in their respective works of art.

Yasur says simply, "I paint not only to express myself, but also to make a statement about my life. I was born into a

very religious family. I got married when I was 20-something. And when I was 20-something, I got divorced. And I met a woman and fell in love with her. I have three children. And I have lived with a woman for 17 years."

She does not divulge that woman's name, saying only that she is a photographer.

Yanizki's life partner is a well-known weight-loss surgeon, Dr. Osnat Raziel.

Of the exhibition, Yasur says, "Tango is about dancing, and we don't need a reason to dance... because we tango all our lives. Tango is not something that you have to complete with someone. People meet. The two of us, Ronit and I, met when we were like 26, 27. Since then, we have danced the tango together, without words. I talk a lot in my life,



Joel Yasur is drawn to Barbie as a cultural icon of perfect feminine beauty. (Courtesy)

12 METRO | FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2012



Yasur's works are untitled (Courtesy)



For me, being gay is not really about living with a woman. Being gay for me is a way for me to be free, to live my own life. I think I became gay in order to be like this. I was married, and I had boyfriends. For me, it was an ideological choice. Being gay gave me the freedom to do what I want

— Joel Yasur

but I'm silent in my art. Ronit talks with her art. She doesn't give a damn; she uses her art to say everything."

"I must," says Yanizki. "Because I'm so angry about what is happening today — wars, violations of human rights. I must express myself. I believe that art can make changes. Really! An artist must talk, because they have the power to change things. The world is not a funny place to live."

Be that as it may, her works are usually funny — often playfully so — and just occasionally disturbing. She neither paints nor sculpts, but "arranges" objects artistically, in a style reminiscent of the Arts and Crafts movement that flourished in late 19th-century England. Her métier includes things like beads, dolls, doll shoes, mannequin heads, stuffed animals, toys and other odds and ends that she manages to collect.

She graces this exhibition with creations like *Birth of a Lesbian*, in which a female mannequin head, garlanded with jewels, appears to be emerging from a pillar of heavenly rejoicing. *Go for It* shows several pairs of doll shoes, moving in what appear to be personal marches of liberation. The tiny shoes, says Yanizki, are supposed to represent the kind of shoes worn historically by Chinese women with bound feet.

Somewhat more seriously, a large collage of objects frame a statement written in Arabic: "Mother, I am a girl and I love girls."

Yanizki created this in protest of the status and treatment of women in Middle Eastern countries. Her most amusing work, however, is *Barbie Comes Out*, featuring a standing Ferris wheel that the viewer can turn, in which several Barbie dolls sit with different female doll companions.

Yasur is also drawn to Barbie as a cultural icon of perfect feminine beauty, and two of her works feature Barbies in



Joel Yasur (left) shies away from the term gay artist while Ronit Yanizki embraces it. (Carl Hoffman)

different situations, one displaying three dolls' heads and a Frisbee, and another in which Barbie seems to be melting in a pool of blood. Most of her work in this exhibition is more conservative, however, expressed in abstract oil painting on either canvas or wood.

"In my art, I like a lot of color — for my art, and for my heart," she says.

WHEREAS YANIZKI uses art to make statements about what is going on in the world, art for Yasur is something quieter: "For me, art is like a clear lake where you go in to become clean. It's a place where I can really be free."

As a form of self-therapy, Yasur often takes a camera and bicycles through the early morning streets of Tel Aviv.

"I take pictures of old buildings," she says. "My passion is buildings. If you look at my paintings, you can also find walls, and parts of buildings, like in a puzzle. Because my memory... I don't

remember buildings. I remember puzzle pieces of buildings — from here, from there. Buildings — old buildings, especially — remind us that we are not the first people here, and not the last. These things were here before us and will live after us."

Unlike Yanizki, she does not title any of her works, explaining, "For me, the name of our exhibition is enough."

Yanizki feels the exhibition "is basically a meeting of two artists, with the figurative art that I'm doing, along with the abstract art that Joel is doing. It goes together somehow."

Adds Yasur, "The way we live, the way we work and the way we speak is almost the same. We're both gay, we both started our lives at the same time, and we met each other when we were both very young. This is the communication. We don't need anything else."

Asked whether they consider themselves "artists" or "gay artists," the two

reply in unison, "Good question!"

While Yanizki states forcefully that she is a "gay artist," Yasur's answer is more complex.

"I don't like these labels," she says. "I don't like to hear that because I am gay, I am doing 'gay art.' I prefer to call what I do 'woman art.'"

So what is the difference between "woman art" and, well, "man art"? Yanizki replies, "The life of women is different from the life of men. So when you live your life as a woman, your art will be different from the art of a man."

Says Yasur, "They say that a woman is never satisfied. Well, that's true as far as art goes. A woman artist is never satisfied with her work. She looks at it, even when it is hanging in a gallery, and still wishes she could add more strength, more warmth. Women are also more flexible and more inclined to always try new things, both in life and in art."

She concludes her thoughts with the surprising statement that she did not become a creator of "woman art" because she was gay, but rather became gay in order to be an artist.

"For me, being gay is not really about living with a woman," she says. "Being gay for me is a way for me to be free, to live my own life. I think I became gay in order to be like this. I was married, and I had boyfriends. For me, it was an ideological choice. Being gay gave me the freedom to do what I want."

Yanizki adds, "Sometimes, you're born with it, like me. But a lot of women become lesbian because it's very difficult to live with men, to sleep with the enemy."

"It Takes Two to Tango" is on display until December 5 at the Shorashim Gallery, 6 Reines Street, Tel Aviv, on Sunday, Monday and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Friday from 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. For further information: (03) 685-3553.