

Fighting disharmony, but nicely

Although many of her artworks are amusing, idiosyncratic artist Ronit Yanizki, a former national team basketball star, insists that her exhibit 'Harmony: In the Gap between Thoughts' has a distinctly serious message

• By CARL HOFFMAN

If there is anything Ronit Yanizki knows about, it is how to change careers and reinvent herself. Probably no one who knew her as a child or adolescent could have imagined that Yanizki, now 52, would today be thriving as an emerging new artist presenting her 10th exhibition, "Harmony: In the Gap between Thoughts."

"I was a tomboy," she recalls. "I played football with the boys. I kept the boys away from the girls. I was like a guard. I was athletic. I ran. I played basketball."

The tall, coltish young girl, in fact, played basketball so much and so well that she was eventually able to join the Israeli women's national basketball team and play professionally with them for 20 years.

"You can't continue to play basketball when you are 80 years old," she says. "After 20 years, I knew I needed to do something else."

That turned out to be a brief but exciting career as a producer of rock 'n' roll concerts by local Israeli musicians. Yanizki produced evenings of rock music that highlighted young rock combos, as well as performances of Eran Tzur, Inbal Perelmutter, Korin Allal, Lea Shabat, Dudi Levi, Mira Awad and others. She also managed performances by Gali Atari, Riki Gal, Ronit Shahar and Shabat, for whom she served as personal manager.

Yanizki might well have gone on doing this forever, had it not been for the equally compelling career of her partner, Asnat Raziell, an acclaimed bariatric surgeon specializing in weight loss.

In 2003, Yanizki accompanied Raziell to Minnesota for a two-year sojourn in Minneapolis. With Raziell busy at the University of Minnesota, Yanizki found herself far from her former frenetic life as a rock music producer and somewhat at a loose end. Unable to work in Minneapolis, she decided to mine her soul for an interest she could cultivate and pursue.

"Art was always with me, always around me," she says. "My brother is an artist. I loved art and painted a lot, but I never thought of it as a professional career until 2003, when I went with my partner to Minneapolis."

"I started to do art, only art, because I couldn't work there. I started painting all day, because I had a lot of time. In the two years we were there, I made six shows. After we came back to Israel, I made another two shows."

BY THIS time, it was obvious to Yanizki that she had entered a distinctly new phase in her life, and she rented a studio at Kibbutz Givat Hashlosha to create her works of art. It is at that studio where she is presently showing her current exhibition, and where *Metro* was recently able to track her down.

Over plastic cups of vodka – purchased for the opening of the exhibition – the chain-smoking



RONIT YANIZKI cites her anger at the state of Israeli society as the main influence on her work. (Carl Hoffman)

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artist tells *Metro*:

"I started this as someone not so young, but I believe I have been reborn to do this. I believe in changing life, changing career. First I was a basketball player, then a producer, now an artist. It's very good, because it makes you young all the time, learning how to do new things, how to do your new career. But you need to have courage for this."

Yanizki has evidently found her groove, at least for the foreseeable future.

"I can't even imagine not doing art now," she says as she lights up another cigarette. "I did other things in the past, but what I want now is to work for myself. When you are a producer, you are working for others all the time. When you play basketball, you're playing for the team. Now, I work for myself."

She continues to watch basketball, but she no longer plays.

"I'm crazy about sports – football, basketball, anything. I get all the sports channels and watch all the live games. Barcelona, Madrid, everyone. And I'm a big fan of the Ramat Hasharon basketball team."

Only American football leaves her cold, however. "I don't understand it. I like baseball much better," she says.

Yanizki also still loves music, but she is no longer involved in her former rock music world. And yet, she declares, "I think that in a way music is the best form of art, because all the time it is coming to you – on the radio, TV and other media. This kind of art here in the studio, people have to come here to see it, to galleries, to museums."

"I believe that painting, sculpture and other plastic art should be not in galleries, but outdoors, on the walls of buildings. Video art should be outside. You should bring art to people, not people to art. I'm thinking about doing something like this in the future."

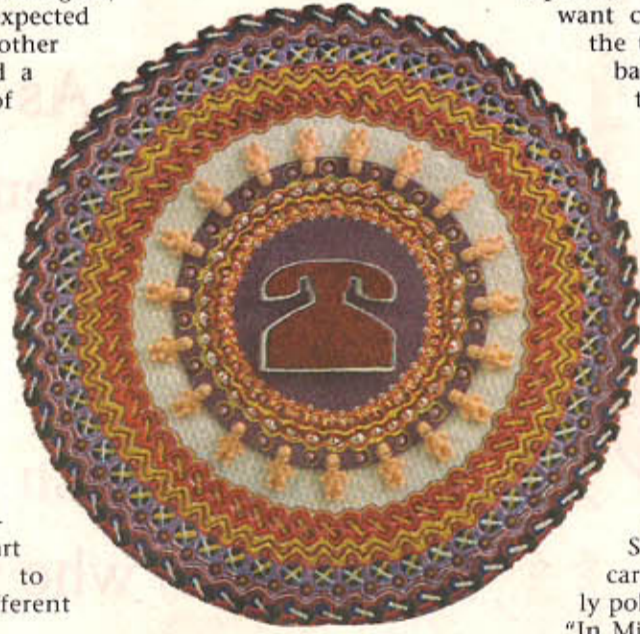
In the meantime, however, Yanizki both creates and shows her art at her studio in Givat Hashlosha. The title of her current exhibition, "Harmony: In

the Gaps between Thoughts," comes from a recent unexpected encounter with her brother Ilan, also an artist and a long-time resident of Japan. Ilan recently visited Israel just long enough, apparently, to turn his sister on to Zen and get her thinking about concepts like *wa*, inner harmony, and *satori*, sudden enlightenment achieved without words.

There is, however, very little that is overtly Buddhist or Japanese-inspired in Yanizki's art work, which seems to spring from very different sources.

Yanizki assertively proclaims herself a lesbian and a feminist, and these are the impulses that seem more clearly to drive her creativity. And in speaking of this artist's works, the word "creativity" has perhaps never been more apt.

I am fighting the 'black hand,' the kind of disharmony in society that makes me want to scream, "Stop! Listen to yourselves! Listen to each other! Talk!"



explains, "All my lesbian friends want children. And they're all the time going to the sperm bank to have another child, then another child, and then another."

"I say, 'Enough! This is crazy!' They ask me why I don't have children. I say I don't want any. I think that just me, and maybe two or three of my friends don't have children. So this piece is about going against [a trend], but nicely."

For Yanizki, the nice-ness has come with time. She began her present career as a much more overtly political artist.

"In Minneapolis, my first show was called 'Tel Aviv – Minneapolis.' It was the time of the intifada – 2003, 2004. I made pictures of all the places that had been bombed. After that, I was in a group exhibition about the recent election of president George W. Bush. Everyone else was doing work about Bush, but I did a collage from the Internet about Yasser Arafat."

"So my start was very political. A lot of things were happening, and I was a new artist. But slowly, slowly, I began to put more of my own art into my work."

One particularly amusing result of this shift is a piece in the current exhibition called *Babysitter*, which continues Yanizki's satire of baby-craving lesbians and gays. A telephone rings and a halo of baby dolls' heads seem to burst out of the telephone.

"The phone is ringing because a desperate mother is calling to beg someone to please take her child for a couple of hours because the kid is driving her crazy," Yanizki explains, laughing.

ALTHOUGH MANY of the artworks are amusing, the artist insists that the exhibition overall has a distinctly serious message. "I am fighting the 'black hand,' you know? I'm talking about disharmony, the kind of disharmony in society that makes me want to scream, 'Stop! Listen to yourselves! Listen to each other! Talk!' Disharmony could really lead to the end of things here. And I'm afraid of this."

Yanizki gestures around the studio at her artwork and says, "This is how I fight the black hand, the disharmony. All the time, you've just got to keep believing that in the end, everything will be okay. The power of light will win over the power of darkness. You must believe this, because if you don't, then it's bye-bye."

"Many people here in Israel find themselves fed up with all the problems, all the issues. But you cannot just give up. So I fight the disharmony, but nicely, with color. And I want these works to be funny, sometimes."

"Harmony: In the Gap between Thoughts" is showing until December 30 at Ronit Yanizki's studio at Kibbutz Givat Hashlosha, Sunday-Thursday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Call 050-375-7475 for further details. (And don't be surprised to find the artist working in her studio while you view the artwork. "I get crazy if I don't work," she says. "I just wander around not knowing what to do.")



"SPERM BANK" is a piece about going against the trend.

YANIZKI DOES not paint. Nor does she sculpt. One might say that she "arranges," or "puts together" in the style of the Arts and Crafts movement that flourished in England in the late 19th century.

She spreads acrylic paint and expanding tulip paint on round, rectangle or triangular pieces of wood, onto which she then glues beads, dolls, mannequin heads, stuffed animals, toys, Purim masks and other objects she collects from anywhere and everywhere. The results are fascinating, funny, and occasionally disturbing.

Asked about the influences on her art, Yanizki replies, "Not the art world, but the world around me. What's going on in politics, in society, nature."

"I'm very mad about a lot of things – what's happening in Israel, the occupation, the society – this is the influence."

Yanizki points to a large work called *Big Brother* featuring rows of identical simple masks, all painted the same color. The identical face masks suggest a rigid conformity, all of them taking on the role of Big Brother, watching you. One supposes that this is Yanizki's vision of mainstream Israeli culture. She says, "This is what I like to do, expose bad things, talk about bad things, but nicely."

An evident playfulness runs through much of her work.

One piece, *Sperm Bank*, uses a series of identical dolls' heads to lampoon a current trend. Yanizki

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