Home, Ruin, Painting

a conversation between
ELLA ELBAZ *and* **LARRY ABRAMSON**

LARRY ABRAMSON is a prominent Israeli artist who was born in South Africa in 1954 and immigrated to Israel in 1961. Many of Abramson's paintings include a house/home/ruin. His treatment of the subject is often seen as representing a physical building but also calls attention to symbolic and political meanings.

Abramson's artwork combines elements of abstraction and figuration, often drawing on iconic symbols in European modernist art. He was the chairman of the Bezalel Academy's Fine Arts Department (1992–99) and has served as a guest professor at the San Francisco Art Institute, HAW University, Hamburg, École nationale supérieure d'arts de Paris-Cergy (ENSAPC), and École supérieure des beaux-arts de Nîmes. For the last twenty years he has been a professor of art at the Multidisciplinary Art School at Shenkar College, Ramat Gan, where he was instrumental in founding the school and served as its head from 2013–16. In 2022 he retired from teaching at Shenkar, where he holds the rank of professor emeritus.

Abramson exhibited extensively in galleries and museums in Israel and abroad. His work is permanently displayed at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. For his contribution to Israeli art, Abramson received many prizes, including the Kolliner Award, Jacques O'Hana Award, Minister of Culture and Education Award, Pundik Prize for Israeli Art, and, recently, the Israel Museum's prestigious Sandberg Prize. His exhibition "tsooba" opened up a critical discourse about Israeli "scopic regimes" and the role of abstraction as a mechanism of denial. His book, "The Painter is a Spy" (2018: Tel Aviv, Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad), was edited by Professor Gannit Ankori of Brandeis University.

Ella Elbaz is an assistant professor at the University of Haifa in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature. She studies Palestinian and Israeli contemporary literature and art.

(*This interview took place in Tel Aviv in April 2023.*)

ELLA ELBAZ: I first wanted to ask why we are meeting today in your studio and not at home. Home is the topic of our conversation today, after all. What does it mean for you to talk about art surrounded by your art? This is a way of asking what permits the conversation about your art. Does the art itself, the matter, enable the discourse about art?

LARRY ABRAMSON: I always prefer to talk about my art in my studio because I always feel that my thoughts about art are less when I'm out of the studio. I can try to reconstruct my way of thinking, but I'm already more like a reporter, more like a witness, and less the actual actor. Only in the studio, I'm the actor on the stage of my art. It's not necessarily about having examples on hand, but just perhaps the commitment of the studio is a state of mind that is the most acute for me.

ELLA ELBAZ: I want to ask about one of your doodles. It appears on the front page of your book, *The Painter is a Spy*. You write there, "Painting is a ruin." And I want to ask if a painting can be a home.

LARRY ABRAMSON: Well, I would say that "home" and "ruin" are synonymous. I find it difficult to think of categories on just one exclusive level. To me, the interest in home is connected to the interest in homelessness. That's a metaphor pertinent across the range of meanings connected to "home," from a very private and physical meaning of shelter and protection, through the subjective feeling of being at home, of being accepted, loved, of belonging. And then, on the other end of the scale of meaning, there's the idea of a collective sense of home, a national home. But at the same time, when talking about art, it's also a question of the medium; How much are you at home with the medium, in the medium?

ELLA ELBAZ: The medium being the painting?

LARRY ABRAMSON: Yes, in my case, it's painting—the employment of paint, color, and form on a two-dimensional surface. But for a writer, for example, it would be words and sentences. In modernism, the idea of medium as home was deconstructed and broken down and doubted and sometimes even burnt down and demolished. Today, a hundred years later, the first challenge for the artist is how to work with a medium that is in a state of ruin. And if you think of the medium as a home, you are faced with its given breakdown, with the essential condition of homelessness. I would say that that's been my project, to try to make meaning in a place where meaning has been broken down.

ELLA ELBAZ: You turn the ruin into a place where you can find meaning.

LARRY ABRAMSON: Yes, exactly. I started looking specifically at ruins at some point in the early 2000s, the early years of the new millennium. There were lots of political ruins around me at the time because these were the years of the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the whole utopian world view that came with it. There were ruins in Gaza, ruins in the West Bank, and ruins after terrorist attacks inside Israel—political ruins wherever you looked. But I started looking at civilian ruins, seemingly innocent ones, not overtly political, just construction sites where old buildings were demolished to clear space for new ones, or piles of debris dumped at the outskirts of the city. Piles and piles and piles of ruins. I started looking at them, and photographing them, and bringing all this pile of

visual material to the studio. And at some point, I cleared the studio of everything else and started drawing the piles with charcoal and paper.

ELLA ELBAZ: Figuratively?

LARRY ABRAMSON: Figuratively, yes.

ELLA ELBAZ: So, just (drawing) what you were seeing?

LARRY ABRAMSON: Yes, but in a nonlinear kind of way. On the wall, I had scores of photographs of ruins and building rubble, and I'd look at this pile of ruins, this pile of images of ruins, and my eye would notice a little instance, and I would put that in the drawing. And then I'd look back, and I'd see something else and put that in the drawing. So, you see, the drawing wasn't a passive representation of an object, what you would call a photo-realistic representation of the photograph. Instead, it was a dynamic interpretation of a pile of images, an accumulated space composed of random fragments of representation. The drawings grew larger and larger, until they themselves became piles, piles I was living in. I did this for two or three years exclusively. I didn't do anything else, just hunting down piles of building debris, photographing them, "dumping" them in the studio, and adding them to my piles of drawings. In the studio everything was covered in black charcoal dust. I think that's when the concept of the ruin became consciously central to my world.

At that time, around 2002, I left the Bezalel Art Academy, where I had invested many hopes and energy. I was disappointed by my colleagues and felt that my life, too, was in ruin. My last public appearance in Bezalel was at a conference called "Ruins," where I gave the talk you quoted, "Painting is a Ruin."

What I felt then, and even more so today, is that a painting isn't a passive medium waiting there at your disposal to paint flowers, landscapes, or even ruins with. Painting is itself a ruin. And therefore, the act of painting is a negotiation of the space of a ruin. I found that if you accept the ruin, you stop seeing it as a disaster or tragedy. You start seeing it as the essence of life, the very matter of history and culture. By entering the ruin, rather than by observing it melancholically from the outside, by passionately committing to the ruin, by entering it physically with your body and your eye and your consciousness, you learn how full of life it is. It is life itself. The ruin is home.

ELLA ELBAZ: It seems to me that the figure of the house in your paintings is somewhere in-between. The house often gives the abstract painting a sense of dimension and space because it is figurative, and we identify it as a house. On the other hand, there is something abstract about the house in your work. What I find interesting is that we don't enter the house. We are not invited into this ruin. We don't see what's inside of it. In that sense, my question is about the tension between the known and the unknown, between the sense of space and the flatness of abstract painting.

LARRY ABRAMSON: There's a mutual dynamic in my work between the more abstract and the more figurative forms. The figurative forms project figuration on the abstract forms, and the abstract forms project abstraction, or abstractness, on the figurative forms, creating an in-between space, a hybrid space. My works always seem to possess this essential hybridity.

Another issue that comes up when you talk about entering or not entering the ruin is connected to what you could call the politics of the ruin. One of my early painting encounters with ruins, ten years before the pile drawings, was when I started looking at the deserted village of Tsuba, a Palestinian village depopulated in 1948 that remained in its ruined condition, crumbling shells of homes on a hilltop near Jerusalem.

This was a site I'd seen all my life, part of the landscape around Jerusalem. It was a very beautiful ruin, a picturesque example of the romantic landscape tradition, and never held political or historical significance in my consciousness. In 1993, possibly as the result of the Oslo Accords and the mutual recognition between Israeli and Palestinian national movements that was at its foundation, I too started to see afresh, and to see these landscape objects for what they actually were, the emptied homes of others. I began looking obsessively at the ruin of Tsuba, photographing it from a distance and painting it repeatedly in the studio. For me, it existed on a few levels simultaneously, both on the level of its inaccessibility to my gaze and also on the level of its accessibility only through substitution, through the medium of painting.

After painting the site on canvas, I pressed a sheet of newspaper to the wet oil painting's surface, ending up with two images, the one a ruin of a painting and the other its traces on a daily newspaper. I did this repeatedly, but though I felt this process dealt well with the question of abstraction's role as camouflage and art's role in distancing history, I still felt I had avoided the issue of actually being there. I had not entered the phantom streets, the homes, the houses of Tsuba. I went back there and collected objects from the site, mainly branches and plants, which I brought back to the studio, and painted. This time, as an antidote to abstraction, I employed a "clinical" painting process, representing the objects as trompe l'oeil images that appeared to protrude from the painting surface and seemingly prick the eye. This entire cycle of landscape paintings, their imprints on newspaper, and the realistic images of the bits and pieces taken from the site eventually became one multilayered work, which was exhibited in its heterogeneous entirety and has remained whole ever since.

ELLA ELBAZ: We're moving from talking about the ruin as a metaphor to talking about the ruin as related to something very real, to real people who are dispossessed phantoms in Tsuba but are alive elsewhere. Which brings me to asking you about responsibility. Do you find that as an Israeli artist you have a responsibility for commemorating or immortalizing these lost homes? Is it about Tsuba, the actual ruin, and not as a metaphor? Or is this a conversation among Israeli artists about Israeli art? Where do you see yourself in that discourse?

LARRY ABRAMSON: When art is at its best, it's everything. It's all those things at once. You can't make art only on a theoretical level, or on a political level, or on a level of self-expression. It has to be all of these things together. And when it is, when it is multilevel and complex, it can carry a metaphor, it can serve others, other eyes, other consciousnesses. I think that's what happened to me in Tsuba. First and foremost, it was a very personal awakening. Not that I wasn't political before. I was political from a very young age. But I could not see through what Israeli culture had camouflaged. I could not see through the camouflage net that Israeli culture had thrown over reality before that awakening I experienced in '93. And that was inherently connected to responsibility. I felt that mutual recognition

between Palestinians and Israelis was really important. If there was a key to a better future, this was the key. For me, it was about seeing without the cataract, without the camouflage, and it was very exciting. You can imagine the feeling of being blind and gaining sight again. There's something very energizing about it. It helped me understand the primacy of lyrical abstraction in Israeli visual culture. You see, after the Shoah and the Naqba, Israelis needed blinders. But they didn't want to be blinded in a dictatorial, "socialist realism" way—they wanted to be blinded in a modernist way. Lyrical abstraction provided that camouflage, [it] allowed Israeli culture to feel modernist and at the same time to deny the dark side of recent history.

After making tsooba, I was faced with a dilemma: What next? For the first time, I experienced the kind of art I had dreamt of. Everything was in it. It was about observing, it was about painting, it was about history. And above all, it was about the critique of representation.

ELLA ELBAZ: I want to ask about your worlds of reference, where you feel comfortable, and what are the limits of those worlds that you choose? Where do you feel at home? Or when do you say to yourself, "Okay, that's not mine, and I'm not going to go there"? When I think of home, I think that one of its defining characteristics is that we can take whatever we want. We can pick whatever we want from the shelf. We don't need to ask permission. What do you permit yourself to see, to do, to take, to borrow? It's clear that you're borrowing a lot. You're in conversation with European and American art, not to mention Israeli art and biblical mythology. You often quote the botanical drawings of Ruth Koppel and have had an ongoing dialogue with Kupferman and Malevich

LARRY ABRAMSON: For me, dialogue is the essence. It's a tricky dialogue, of course, because when I conduct it in my work the others are represented through my eyes. So in many instances, I will invite someone else's voice into my work, like inviting someone into my home—not as a passing guest, but as a significant presence that, through the dialogue, the conversation, or the argument, changes the home itself. In a way, all the artists you mentioned, like Malevich and Kupferman, and Zaritsky and Nussbaum later on, all these artists were a presence in my work, not as references, but as interlocutors, as counter-presences for me to talk to, to argue with, and consequently to identify what I reject and what I accept.

The idea of dialogue is important for the idea of a work process founded on heterogeneity, a hybrid composition of different languages. My voice echoes other voices. That doesn't mean I am surrendering the sovereignty over my work to others, more that I am recognizing the multiplicity of voices that composes a work of art, and echo in it. So yes, in the technical sense, there's a lot of what you could call quotation in my work. But in a deeper sense, that's how art works, especially for a studio artist like myself, working in active solitude, alone in the studio. The voices you hear in this isolation are, in a way, imagined voices, but must be there for you to determine yours.

There's a nice little story that Philip Guston told on camera in his show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, a short time before his death in 1980. He says something like this, "When you start working, everybody is in your studio—the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas—all are there. But as you

continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone." And then, he says, "If you're lucky, even you leave." This is a beautiful expression of the modernist idea of pure art, an art so autonomous that people, and even the artist, are a contamination. With all my admiration for Guston and his work, I prefer to reverse his idea, and to say that in the beginning, when you start working, you are completely alone, and then, one by one, all the others join you, and in the end, if you're lucky, everyone is there in the studio with you. That's how I see it.

ELLA ELBAZ: I want to ask about the relationship between you and the voices because I'm sure there are many. As you said, some of them you oppose, some of them you take, or you borrow from them and you make them your own. And you said in the past that the artist is a spy, a *flâneur,* a wanderer; Is the artist a native or a settler? A native in the technical sense—that the artist has to feel at home to create—and a settler in the sense that you turn what doesn't belong to you into your own. Or maybe the artist is an immigrant, a tourist, a visitor? I'm asking that in an artistic as well as in a political way, but I also want to ask it on a personal level, because I feel you haven't been asked a lot about your own immigration experience. You came to Israel at an early age from a very different political environment. Where is South Africa in your work?

LARRY ABRAMSON: That's true, for many years I didn't encourage the discussion of my personal circumstances, not to be pigeonholed as this or that artist. But some years ago, as part of my ongoing dialogue with the American theorist W. J. T. Mitchell, who wrote about his childhood in the Nevada desert, I wrote a long essay that included quite a detailed discussion of my childhood as an immigrant child in Jerusalem, back in the early 1960s. I was born in South Africa to parents who were both also born there, to parents who were immigrants from Eastern Europe. My grandparents moved to South Africa in the early years of the twentieth century as the result of persecutions against Jews, and my parents grew up as liberal South Africans who were morally and politically opposed to apartheid. As a child, their lesson to me was loud and clear: all men and women are born equal and should enjoy equal social and political rights. As apartheid got stronger and more oppressive, they decided to leave. As professionals, they had many options, but they eventually left for Israel. And why did they choose to move to Israel? Because, ironically, they thought it was a wonderful, liberal democracy where all men and women were equal.

I just turned seven when my parents came. Even though I was run over by a bus and lost my leg in those first few months of arriving, paradoxically, the first years of immigration were very sweet, mainly because my parents felt they had arrived to an egalitarian and just country. And for me, too, despite months of hospitalization and rehabilitation, it was great. Our life as kids was very free. There were no restrictions on us, we could roam around freely outside, in the streets, valleys, and fields.

And then came 1967, with the occupation and oppression that followed the military victory. My parents were not alone in naively believing Israel was a just society; an entire generation of Israelis was rudely awakened from this dream. Emotionally, I share that experience of disillusionment, the feeling that a utopia was lost in 1967. So, when you talk about home, that's where I am. You can live to make art for one hundred years, and it'll always

be about your early, formative years. That's my formative experience: the sweetness of a utopia taken away, a home lost.

ELLA ELBAZ: One last question. What inspires you today?

LARRY ABRAMSON: Today, what inspires me?

ELLA ELBAZ: Yes, today, right now, this week, this past month.

LARRY ABRAMSON: I can't wait for the anti-government demonstrations on Saturday night. They give me more energy and hope than I've enjoyed in many, many decades. For the past thirty years, it's been downhill. There's really been nothing much to hope for. And suddenly, these days, there's a young generation out in protest, shoulder to shoulder with old-timers like myself, hundreds and thousands and hundreds of thousands of Israelis who understand the ideas and tenets of democracy. They are not naive. They are not superficial. They are nothing like the commodified postmodern man we were warned against. And even though they were schooled by books that prepared them for less democracy, they know a thing or two about democracy, they know what counts. And that, for me, is the most hopeful and inspiring thing I can imagine. The young generation has taken the task of preparing a better tomorrow, and I am free to continue playing in the studio for how many years I have left.

ELLA ELBAZ: That's a good ending.

LARRY ABRAMSON: A good beginning. A