

Two Israeli Artists, Two Worlds of Art

(Part 6 in a Series)

MOSHE MIKANOVSKY

The Israeli Artists Group of Greater Toronto brings together Israeli artists in different disciplines of visual arts, to work, socialize and enhance the Israeli and Jewish culture in Toronto. In this series of articles, we will open a window to some of our artists who live and work in our midst.

As we get closer to the group's second annual art show celebrating Jerusalem Day, I first interviewed painter Meni (Menachem) Conen, whose work entwined with images of the Old City. Meni was born in Israel before the state's independence, and throughout his childhood emerged as the artistic go-to, at school, youth movement and everywhere he went. He started learning how to paint as grade 8 student, and continued throughout high school and his army service at the Air Force, which gave him opportunities to be exposed to art.

Following his university graduation, Meni worked at an architecture office, where he fell in love with model building, one of the more practical art forms. He then applied and was accepted to a program in Industrial Design and Model Making in Munich, and after completing his studies, he opened a studio in Israel for design and model construction. He loved the work, but the difficult economic situation in Israel forced him to close the shop and work for others as an industrial designer. In 1987 Meni immigrated to Canada, and until today he divides his life between the industrial design work (prototype and model-making and product design) and the artwork, mainly painting in watercolours and acrylics, but also working with other media such as oils, pastels, woodcarving, aluminum sculpting, photography and digital art.

I asked Meni what inspires his artwork, seeing the varied subject matters, from Old Jerusalem's alleys to some typical Canadian lakeshore landscapes. "Most of my life I lived in Israel," Meni told me, "and the old cities' views with their special light are still my most favourite subject. Since I came to Canada, I found that I am also interested in the landscapes, with their strong fall colours, winter's filtered and soft light, the snow and breathtaking sunsets. When I create in two dimensional media, such as painting or photography, I am always searching for an interesting subject and point of view. As a painter I have the freedom to change – ignore irrelevant things, improve and enhance colours, add or subtract in a way that feels the best. I find that my artistic creation gave me better tools to see and appreciate life and the world around me."

Meni is one of the senior members of the Israeli Artists Group of Toronto, joining shortly after its inception in 1992. Since then he participated in organizing many of its activities, such as art shows, workshops and seminars, and visiting guest artists. Meni was also the group's president for several years. In addition, he participated in many art shows such as with the Art Academy of Netanya, the Toronto Watercolour Society, and couple of two-artist shows.

Next, I met with painter Shoshana Strigberger. Shoshana was born in Sighet, Romania. At nine years old,

her family moved to Israel, where she spent the majority of her adolescent life. Shoshana loved Israel for its array of landscapes which were so much different than the ones in Romania. From the azure waters of the Mediterranean Sea to the sacred mountains in Jerusalem, Shoshana often found herself sketching the scenery surrounding her. Becoming an artist was not especially encouraged in her family. Her parents said: "One has to go to school and learn a useful trade. You cannot make a living being an artist..." And so, eventually, she became a teacher.

In 1970, Shoshana moved to Canada, and when her children were older and in school, she decided to finally explore her talents as an artist. She enrolled at Central Tech School of Art and the Ontario College of Art and Design, and also took many workshops with various teachers, learning sculpture, ceramics and painting. Although she enjoyed working in all these areas,

painting was the one area she especially liked and has been doing for more than fifteen years. Shoshana works mainly in acrylics and oil and mixed media. As she told me, "I like colour and flexibility and my work is a testament to that. As a world traveler, I was influenced by artists such as Cezanne, Gauguin, DeKooning, and Kandinsky to name a few. My work is expressive and free." I can attest to that, as her paintings, both of landscapes and nudes, are full with expressive colours and sensual shapes, drawing you to them like a magnificent colourful magnet.

"My philosophy is very simple," she continues. "I don't like perfec-

tion. Imperfection is 'perfection'. Also, artists should paint what stirs them, and if they want to draw something simple without a message, that is okay too. My main interest is movement of the subject. Even something static is in motion, and I like to capture that."

Since 1996 Shoshana has exhibited at various galleries including The Frederick Horsman Varley Art Gallery (Unionville) juried exhibitions, The Canadian Sculptor Centre of Toronto, The Mill Pond Gallery (Richmond Hill), The Praxis Gallery (Toronto) and The Market Gallery (Toronto).

Meni's art can be viewed on the Israeli Artists Group of Toronto http://israeliartistsgroup.com/meni_conen/. To contact Meni please call 416-636 0842 or email menideb@sympatico.ca

Shoshana's paintings can be viewed at her studio by appointment. To contact Shoshana please call 905-886-6979 or email shoshana@striglaw.com

Both Meni and Shoshana will be participating in the Israeli Artists Group show on May 13-16 at the MacDonald House, 121 Centre Street, Thornhill. Come to meet them and the rest of the group's artists at the show opening night, Thursday, May 13th, between 6 and 9pm. For more information please visit www.IsraeliArtists-Group.com

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Meni Conen with his painting "Safed"
Right: Meni Conen, Arches In Jerusalem, Watercolours, 15"x22"



Left: Shoshana Strigberger, Figure, Oil on canvas, 33"x43"
Above: Strigberger with her painting Memory #2

