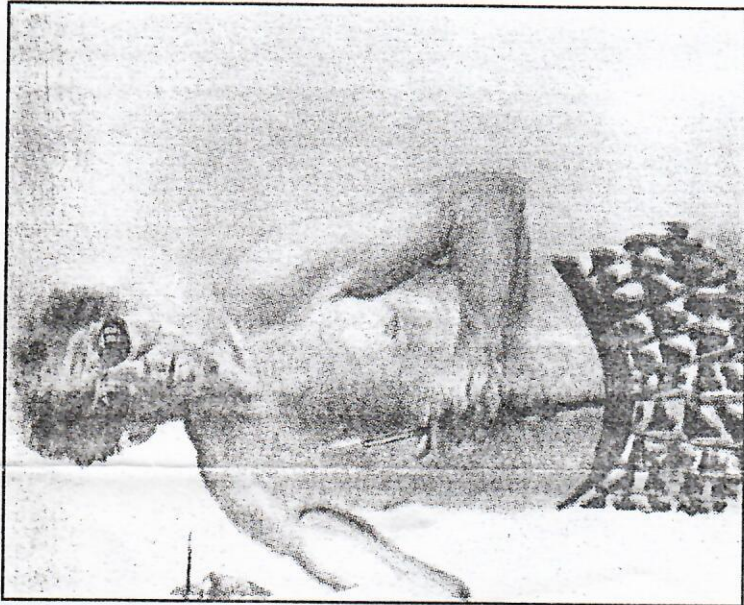


Ran Hadari: oil on canvas (Tel Aviv Museum)

Avigdor Arikha: self-portrait on a hot day, oil on canvas (Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv)



Hungry Eye

By Angela Levine

An Israeli artist with an international reputation (also as a writer, educator and curator), Avigdor Arikha (b. Romania 1929; resident in Paris since 1954), has long merited a major museum retrospective in this country. At last one learns that this overdue event is in the planning stage, with simultaneous exhibitions of his work scheduled for the Tel Aviv and Israel Museums sometime in 1998.

Whetting one's appetite for this occasion is a noteworthy exhibition of Arikha's work at the Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv, consisting of a small but significant collection of oils and a 63-piece selection of his graphic works

which, although based on observation, can never be described as realist representations. Arikha's uniqueness lies in his ability to depict a figure, object, or scene, as if frozen in a fleeting moment of time.

The freshness of Arikha's images — whether a self-portrait, a view of his wife holding up a mirror to her face, or icon-like renderings of modest household objects like a broom or a teaspoon — derives in part from the fact that he paints directly onto the canvas without any preliminary studies.

Arikha also employs other distinctive devices. He opts for unconventional angles, sometimes showing figures from the back or in three-quarter profile. There is usually something unfinished about his depictions; he crops off limbs; or alludes by a gesture to some person or situation out of sight. In

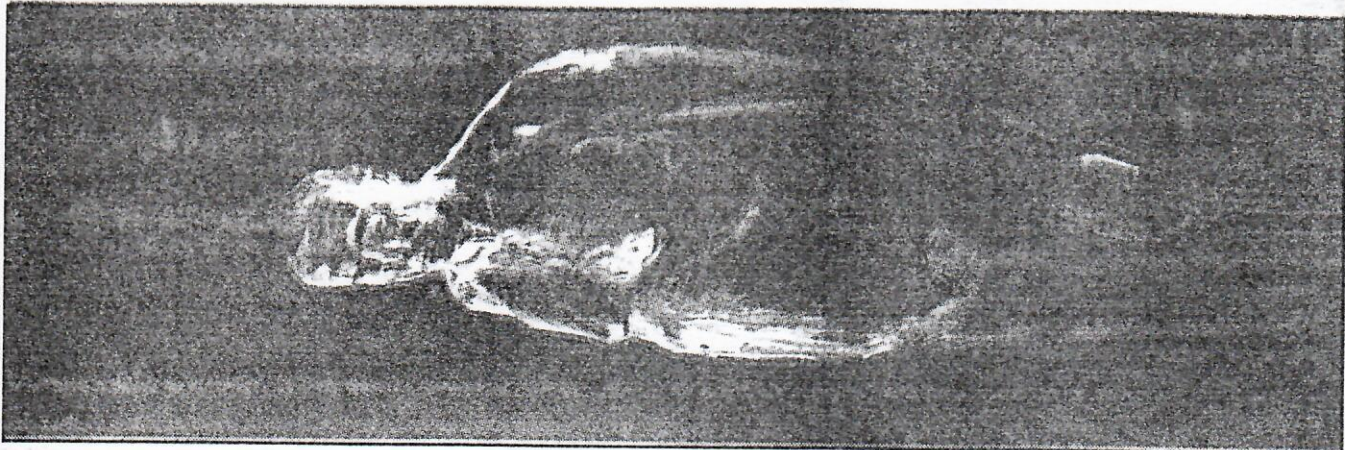
tral background behind his subject giving no indication of place or time.

Arikha's sense of humor surfaces in a recent self-portrait in which he depicts himself in bathing trunks, his flabby middle-aged body exposed. Yet this pose of the artist, eyes turned towards the viewer, hand raised towards his easel, is a traditional one. Arikha's use of it appears to be a calculated debunking of the pomposity of this tradition. (Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv). Till November 25

ARIKHA'S "hunger" to relate to the real world is shared by 17 artists, most of them in their early 30s, participating in "Virtual Reality," a new exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum.

Highlighted are two current trends: the vogue for realism (both in painting and illusionist crafting); and the popularity of motifs culled from the domestic arena.

Recent local shows have all hammered home a social, sexual or feminist message, and contained (together with religious)



Ofer Lellouche: self-portrait, acrylic on canvas (Tel Aviv Museum)

produced between 1960 and the early '70s. It was during this period that Arikha made a significant turn-about in his art. In 1965 he temporarily ceased painting and threw all his energies into black-and-white drawing and printmaking, particularly etching (pulling his own prints). About the same time, he made the decision to abandon abstraction, a style with which he had experimented for more than 10 years. The reason he then gave was a "hunger in the eye" to paint the real world.

Arikha's move away from abstraction can be traced in this graphics selection, but the majority of pieces show him already working from direct observation. Among them are a number of light-filled impressionist pieces, but truer to his distinctive style are the intensively worked etchings-cum-aquats in which velvety blacks give way almost imperceptibly to dark and light grays and clear whites. Only by close study is one able to pick out the central motif emerging from a tightly woven mesh of lines.

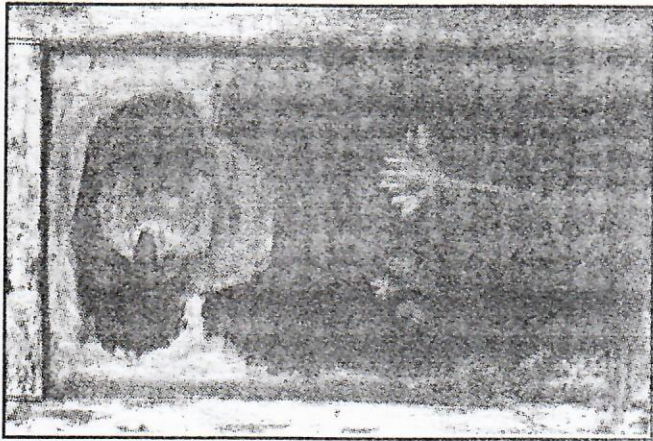
There is also evidence here of Arikha's professional association with the Irish-French playwright Samuel Beckett. Take the small, expressive depiction of a crouching nude woman, long hair fanning out over her body, for example, which was one of his illustrations for Beckett's "The North" (published in 1972 in London).

Their long and close friendship is marked by half-a-dozen portraits of Beckett. Each is a gem. Some are formal studies, with his face etched in profile; others show him in a casual pose, like "Beckett with a glass of wine." In this particular rendering, perhaps to suggest Beckett's shyness or intense desire for privacy, Arikha hides Beckett's eyes behind thick spectacles made even more opaque by the blinding rays of light.

Arikha started painting again 1973, and all the works on view are in his new style

some instances (as in his painting of sticks of rhubarb), he banishes his main motif to the far corner of his canvas, employing a large blank area as a positive element in his painting. It is interesting to note that all these features, characteristic of 19th-century Japanese woodcuts, were also adopted by Degas and other Impressionists.

Although steeped in the techniques of the great masters (Beckett called him "the most erudite of painters"), Arikha could never be confused with them. He is essentially a modern artist, painting with a dry, rough brush on a flat plane, with the neu-



Dorrit Yacoby: self-portrait with golden flower, mixed-media painting (Tel Aviv Museum)

predominance of ready-made objects culled from the artists' environment.

In the present show, one finds painting for painting's sake instead of message art; and hand-crafted objects which are only illusions of reality, like **Noa Holzshstein's** tiger skin rug made from polyester and pigment; and **Guy Ben Ner's** built-in oven which turns out to be a painted illusion.

The strongest offerings in a rather bitzy show are all paintings containing some local reference; like **Reuven Kuperman's** still-lives of Israeli-style fast food (which looked even more effective when last displayed in an installation at the Central Bus Station); **Jordan Wolfson's** modest but well-brushed painting of a household plant sitting in a saucer; and **Aram Gershuni's** immaculate rendering of a towel stamped with Hebrew letters reposing on a shiny surface.

The plus of this presentation lies in the opportunity it provides to give some up-and-coming artists a museum showing. The downside is that two "hot" subjects — realist painting, and the theme of domesticity — are treated with a casual superficiality that is disappointing. (Tel Aviv Museum)

"PORTRAITS." THE 10-person painting exhibition mounted in an adjoining gallery, is a feast for the eye. Arikha leads the way with a marvelous self-portrait in which he is seated at his easel, hand raised as if to fend off a blow. This painting is matched by a series of monumental self-portraits by **Ofir Lellouche**. Marvelously handled in chiaroscuro, with touches of white and muted pastel outlining portions of muscle and bone, these nude figures possess a timeless, haunting quality.

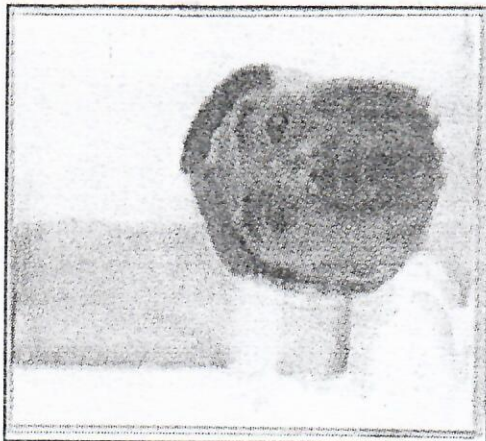
Another outstanding contribution comes from master painter **Israel Hershberg**, in particular his trio of psychological studies

up, warts and all. (One wonders for what reason Hershberg's marvelous paintings of food were left out of the "Virtual Reality" exhibition.)

In this distinguished company, the other contributions, some quite striking if viewed alone, seem lightweight and quickly fade from memory.

However, one must mention a poignant series of black ink brush drawings by the late **Nora Frenkel**. Produced in the weeks before her death, they bravely chart her physical disintegration. Other participants are **Michael Gross, Jan Rauchwerger, Elie Shamir, Liliane Klapisch, Rachel Moses and Dorrit Yacoby** (Tel Aviv Museum). ■

CORRECTION: The photo-portrait of the late Yitzhak Danziger, which accompanied a recent review in this column, was made by Drora Spitz.



Jan Rauchwerger: self-portrait, oil on canvas (Tel Aviv Museum)