

The Queen of Sourgrass

In an era of loud exhibitions with mission statements that cut off the experience a priori, Burg's modesty and quietude are as rare as the urban wildflowers she paints.

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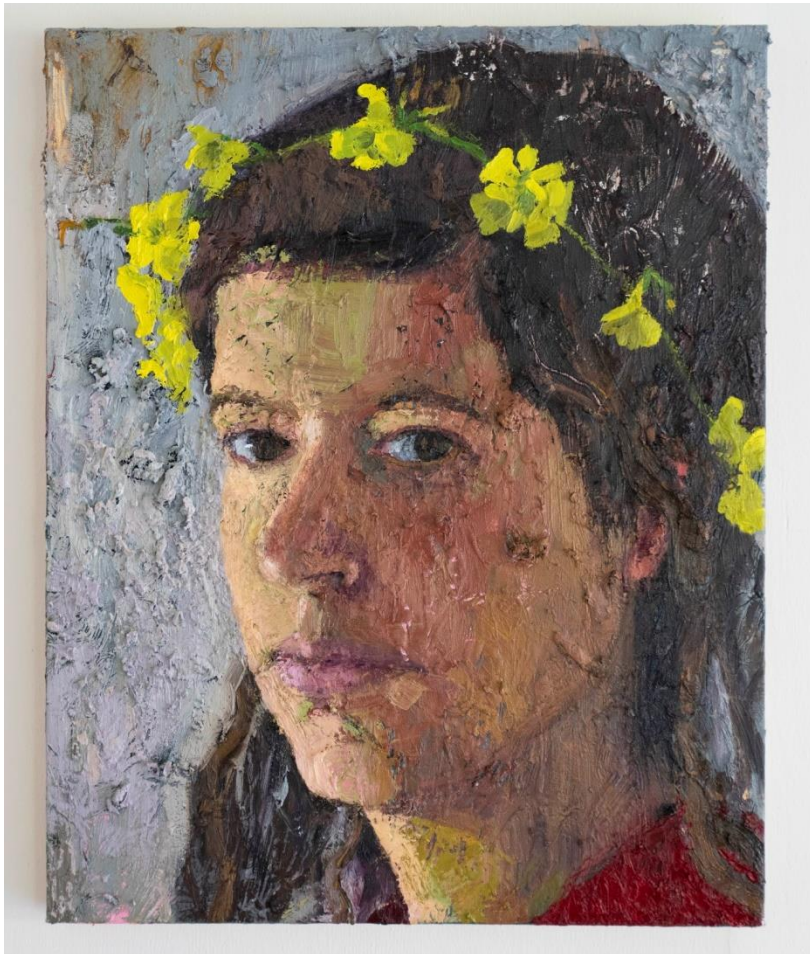
Avi Pitchon



Avital Burg, *Broken Mirror*, 2016, concrete and symbolic layering

You may have come across Avital Burg's name in this newspaper, mostly in the bylines of seasonal recommendations for exhibitions in New York or San Francisco. Burg lives in Brooklyn, but made an appearance in South Tel Aviv for a modest, in fact truly humble, exhibition of paintings (and one video work) at the Schechter Gallery. In the atmosphere of an Israeli routine collapsing under the weight of crude political vulgarity; in an artistic discourse that ventures beyond the borders of the niche ghetto only when a less-than-mediocre artist makes headlines with a vapid provocation of the type that captures Minister of Culture Miri Regev's attention; and in the refugee camps of the old elites—when one calls something humble, it is usually a compliment. It is worth mentioning that modesty as a value, rather than as an individual's temperament, is part of the Judeo-Christian slave morality described by the beloved, mustachioed Nietzsche; it is part of the repressive liberal "character armoring" depicted by Wilhelm Reich, the revolutionary psychologist who did not resemble Donald Sutherland whatsoever and yet was portrayed by him in Kate Bush's timeless music video for the song "Cloudbusting." The polite, refined liberal is merely a thin veneer that reveals, when scratched away, the barbarity that nourishes fascism.

In other words, humble and modest exhibitions are the primary culprits in the global rise of political populism, the climate crisis, the wave of anti-Semitism, and performance artists who stick the Israeli flag up their ass.



Avital Burg, Birthday Self Portrait with Sourgrass, 2019. Between longing and fulfillment

I know it's hard to tell with me, but I wasn't being entirely serious. Yes, there is a sanctimonious liberalism which adorns itself with art that makes consensual gestures towards the "cultural" and the "beautiful"; which encourages the small, the meager, the personal; which coquettishly references various art history milestones; or which, conversely, is opaque yet not in an enigmatic and exciting way but as a status symbol, as the emperor with no clothes. On the other hand, a generation of artists is being educated and set on course to make "statements," trained to publicize and communicate to death, to bury their work in context and in "what the piece is about." In a generation where almost no exhibition lacks a mission statement that cuts off the experience a priori, whoever shouts the loudest, whoever isn't embarrassed to put up their hand first in class—whoever isn't humble—gets to the top. As a result, the field is composed of contextual-political performances, of dense mediocrity that lives in the gutters but does not look up at the stars, of loud salesmanship and making do with less. All these exclude the Monumental on the one hand, and the fragile-fairylike (fairylike as a metaphor for

that which stands tremblingly between worlds, free, wild, but also vulnerable) on the other hand.



Avital Burg, Daylight Box with Dried Flower, 2019. Temporariness and nomadism

The Monumentalist in me resists “still life” and its presence in this show. Burg paints urban wildflowers that she picked on the streets of the Big Apple, with the title of each painting stating the street and the date on which they were picked. She also paints cardboard boxes. When I finished high school, after the trauma of my final exams, I swore I would never pay to take exams again of my own free will. I kept my oath and never set foot in the academia except to worship Brutalist architecture. I studied at Camera Obscura School of Art, but that was fun and easy. I regale you with this in order to declare: I swore never to write about flowers! With that said, Burg’s self-portraits flicker in the same fragile-fairylike-figurative-realistic territory in which something romantic is present and which embodies modesty as a temperament, a fragile stillness that must be protected from the terrible din of the current, the transient.

The exhibition includes four portraits, all of which are beautiful and moving. The largest and most impressive is also one of the earliest, from 2016. In it, Burg looks straight ahead, with a cheap paper crown on her head. Behind her are cardboard boxes. The piece is titled “The Queen of Box Street.” There is such a street in Brooklyn, but this is also probably a reference to her irksome—at least until proven otherwise—fascination with boxes. Two other portraits are in fact versions of the same painting of Burg, in a semi-profile, wearing a chain of sourgrass on her head. The differences between them relate to tonality and shading, as well as to the stoic expression in one and the slightly miffed one in the other. Both of them, like all the 2019 pieces in the show, are distinct from the larger portrait in their use of a relief-like painting technique: the oil paint itself mixes the dried remnants left on the palette with fresh paint, packed and piled onto the canvas until it protrudes from the surface and takes on a relief-like sculptural quality. This features to various degrees in the paintings of flowers and cardboard boxes

alongside the portraits. The handful of sentences I just typed are a broken oath of sorts: “I will never write about brush strokes, about textures!” I cannot believe I wrote “tonality and shading.” What is happening to me?

I suppose I had to mature a little. Or encounter Burg’s exhibition. Or did the latter cause the former? If the show had included only the flower paintings, or only the cardboard boxes, or only the flowers and the cardboard boxes, I would not have given it a second thought. But the trifecta of flowers/boxes/portraits, and the repetition of each of them in a sort of secular, sad homage to the repetitiveness of Christian icons, together with the peculiar distress aroused by the packed-in paint—creates a meaningful narrative. The portraits project a melancholy a lonesome royalty with a touching yet pitiful defiance: Burg is a queen, but she is the queen of cardboard boxes. Her crown is a disposable party crown, or a chain of sourgrass, the yellow urban flower we used to chew on as children, which connects Burg’s past (in Jerusalem) to her present in Brooklyn. When childhood memories turn into a crown, it’s a sign that there is no crown afforded by adulthood. What keeps you upright is coming across sourgrass in New York. Yearning for the fragile-fairylike moment of your existence as a promise; between worlds, between longing and fulfillment. Between the yearned-for and the concrete. I swore I would never interpret paintings of cardboard boxes. However, I have no choice but to conclude that they signal temporariness, nomadism, rootlessness, all in a manner that completes the paintings of those flowers that insist on poking through the sidewalks. As the French student uprising slogan declared: Under the paving stones—the beach!



Avital Burg, Adamah Flowers, 2019. Raising the kitsch to dazzling heights

Burg’s fourth self-portrait is also from 2016. It features the relief technique, but it is the only one in which there is concrete and symbolic layering. Burg’s face and shoulders are

reflected in a broken mirror, with only one fragment still stuck in a decorative hexagonal frame in the style of old paintings. The associations border on kitsch, but the quality of the painting, the compressed paint, the blurred reflection (oh no, it's happening again), raise the kitsch to dizzying heights. I am reminded her of the hyper-Romanticism of singers like Efrat Ben Zur or Virginia Astley. There are echoes of Israel Hershberg and Aram Gershuni, though with significant differences. For the curator, Shira Friedman, Burg invokes Velazquez and Avigdor Arikha and the sourgrass is reminiscent of Christ's crown of thorns. It is not reminiscent of that at all. And references to the great masters, even if Friedman finds that Burg "is well aware of these affinities," is, as I said, a sort of self-indulgent engagement with referentiality that actually says very little. On the other hand, I myself just mentioned icons. Well, so long.

Avital Burg, *West Street*. Curator: Shira Friedman. Schechter Gallery (42 Chelouche St., Tel Aviv). Sun-Thur 9:00 – 5:00, Fri 11:00 – 1:00, Sat 1:00 – 4:00. Through Jan. 31.

Translation: Jessica Cohen