

Eastern promises

Six months ago, Eliahou Bokobza closed his veteran Tel Aviv drugstore to devote himself to his late-blooming art career: painting in a vibrantly colorful, romantic Orientalist style, which he says is embedded in his partly Western soul.

By Aviva Lori | Mar.18, 2010 |

After an exhibition of Israeli art in Berlin in 2005, the Felix Nussbaum Museum in Osnabrueck, Germany, contacted Nelly Aman, proprietor of the N&N Aman Gallery in Tel Aviv. "How many Bokobzas do you have?" she was asked. "We want to exhibit him in our museum."

The staff at Nussbaum had admired works by an artist named Bokobza at the Berlin exhibition - especially a large oil painting of a spectacularly colorful dervish on a flying carpet. Also on display was a salt-and-pepper shaker of silver and olive wood, designed by Bokobza. Aman, who represented the artist, passed on the request to Bokobza, who replied that he would be happy to send works to the German museum. But two months later, a confused response was received from the Nussbaum: "Sorry," they wrote. "We thought Bokobza was an Israeli artist from the 1920s, who had passed away."

"As soon as they realized that I was a living artist," Eliahou "Eric" Bokobza says today, "the story was over, from their point of view."

The premature report of Bokobza's death was due to a mistake: At the Berlin show his dervish was hung in the same space as works by Israeli artists from the 1920s, such as Nachum Gutman, Sionah Tagger and Reuven Rubin. Viewers assumed that Bokobza was from that same generation, which was a compliment to Bokobza, who will soon turn 47.

The artist's naive 1920s style is no mere pose: He views himself as a metaphorical descendant of the Oriental genre that was the hallmark of the Bezalel Academy of Arts in Jerusalem during its initial phase in the early 20th century. Orientalism is embedded in his soul, he says. It is an integral element of his personality and of the internal conflict that has raged within him for as long as he can remember. It's a conflict between East and West, short and tall, man and woman, ruler and ruled - a whole range of disparities that coexist in relative serenity inside him.

This wasn't always the case. Until about six months ago, he was still living a split life and was torn between two worlds: between Eli Bokobza, the upstanding bourgeois pharmacist, and Eric Bokobza, the bohemian artist. But even the bohemian qualities are somewhat constrained to the bounds of good taste: Even when he dons the mantle of the artist, he does not breach the framework of decorum - at least, not beyond what's considered acceptable in the bourgeois Paris quarters.

Eliahou Bokobza was a nice mamma's boy who took piano lessons and went on to study pharmacology at university - a compromise with his parents, who wanted him to go to medical school. He made his living for 20 years in the drugstore his parents bought him in central Tel Aviv, at the corner of Ben-Gurion Boulevard and Shlomo Hamelech Street. Everyone knew him and he knew everyone.

"Whenever a drugstore was needed for a TV series, they filmed at my place," he says. "I sold birth-control pills to [the actress] Orna Banai on the show 'Imaleh' ['Mommy'] and was in all kinds of other series."

Last year was the year of Eric Bokobza, however: Six months ago he parted for good from the world of pharmaceuticals and converted the drugstore into his private residence. In addition, his diptych "Banishment" (2003) appeared on the cover of the prestigious Art Journal, published by the New York-based College Art Association. An impressive solo show of his works, entitled "Jaffa," is currently on at the Nachum Gutman Museum in Tel Aviv until April. In it, Bokobza carries on a direct dialogue with Gutman (1898-1980) through his paintings.

"As a continuation of his personal dialogue with the art of Old Bezalel (1906-1929)," wrote Tali Tamir, the exhibition's curator and the museum's director, in the catalog, "Eliahou Eric Bokobza now holds an intergenerational, super-temporal dialogue - not with that art's anonymous soldiers but rather with one of its leaders, painter and writer Nachum Gutman. Into this encounter, manifest under conditions of young Bokobza's fondness and appreciation of the older Gutman, he again brings his Mizrahi identity [referring to Jews from the Arab world], confronting his interlocutor's romantic Orientalism. It is here that they meet: in a gaze over the Orient at a given point in time - the first decades of the 20th century, the beginnings of the Zionist settlement of Eretz Israel and the dawn of Bezalel art, more specifically the gaze at Jaffa and at Tel Aviv being constructed alongside it, at their respective Arab and Jewish residents and the pendulum swing between East and West."

Adopting the identity of a Jaffa painter and invoking the mythic Jaffa oranges, Bokobza embarks on a quest, pursuing the city and its orchards, Gutman's sublimated eroticism and the leisurely, undulating rhythms of time. His attraction to Gutman goes back to his childhood in his parents' home, where there were lithographs of the celebrated Tel Aviv artist. For his 21st birthday, his mother bought him a Gutman reproduction and wrote this dedication: "I would like you to go on observing the world with Gutman's naivete until the age of 120 and for you to go on painting it like him." The current exhibition is dedicated to his mother Sylvia, who died three years ago from cancer.

Tunisian and Parisian roots

Eliahou Eric Bokobza was born in Paris in 1963 and immigrated to Israel at the age of 6 with his parents. Tunisian-born, they were educated in the spirit of French culture and Tunisian nationalism. The origins of his father's family lie in Izmir, Turkey; his mother was descended from the Marranos of Spain (Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity in the 15th century but practiced Judaism secretly).

Bokobza: "They did not leave Tunisia of their own volition. They stayed there another few years after the French and most of the Jews had left, when it was clear that as Jews, they would not be allowed to continue being Tunisian as well."

His mother was an opera singer, like her elder sister, and appeared in the theater in Tunis and sang on the radio. "It was more respectable for a married woman to sing in the opera," Bokobza explains. His father, Gilbert, studied international law and economics in the Tunis branch of the Sorbonne, and worked for the Tunisian national airline. In Paris he worked for Pan Am, and in Israel was the manager of Air France at the airport. After the Entebbe operation in 1976, he was awarded a Legion of Honor medal by the French government for his mediation between the Israeli army and Air France.

At the time of Bokobza's birth, the family lived in Montmartre, in an apartment that had been used since the 19th century as a hair salon. It was common at the time for families to live behind their place of business, and Bokobza's uncle, his mother's elder brother, married a Paris hair stylist and opened a chain of salons. He made his brothers and sisters the salons' managers. Bokobza's mother ran one of the branches and the family lived in the back of the establishment, while his father worked for the airlines and did his Ph.D. at the Sorbonne.

The Paris apartment, as Bokobza remembers it, was furnished in clean lines in the Modernist style; the hair salon was in Louis XVI style. Thus avant-garde and classic cohabited - just as they do in Bokobza's eclectic home and artwork, which moves back and forth in time.

Bokobza shares his Tel Aviv place, which looks like a museum shop, with his companion of four years, Lolik. The apartment is illuminated by natural lighting that enters from the yard through large windows. Everything in it is meticulously stylized and organized - even the red blanket draped "carelessly" over the sofa, 1950s-style.

On the bookshelves are colorful glass objects and an assortment of dolls. The salt-and-pepper shakers on exhibit in Berlin are here in one corner, in another is a chair by the maverick designer Ron Arad, and in the center is a classic rocking chair by Charles Eames. In the past, Bokobza had an impressive collection of designer chairs, including some by Philippe Starck and Gerrit Rietveld. The spick-and-

span kitchen is adorned with Alessi accessories. Indeed, it's so clean and tidy here that a visitor longs to move something and see if the owner notices. This is not what an artist's home looks like; it's what a pharmacist's home looks like.

Why didn't your family stay in Paris?

Bokobza: "He [my father] did not want to immigrate to Israel. He was totally secular and a member of the Communist Party. My mother was very traditional, and my grandfather, who was the treasurer of the Jewish community in Tunis and very Zionist, wanted to go to Israel. But my grandmother, who adored fashion and the good things in life, decided it would be the wrong thing to do, so they stayed in Tunis. My mother didn't get along in Paris after the move there, and after I was born she was very sick and suffered from bouts of depression.

"My parents decided that the climate was bad for them and my mother wanted to fulfill her father's vision and immigrate to Israel. Her family in Paris was against it, but looking back at this, I think my mother wanted to get away from them and also get me away from there. They were a very tribal, patriarchal family that went from hair salons into fashion and started to make money. (In the 1970s, an uncle of mine was one of the first employers of fashion designer Claude Montana.) My mother thought I would always be the 'poor relative.' It was a conflict between their money and my father's academic objectives."

The Bokobzas arrived in Israel in March 1969. A photograph taken before they left at the airport in Paris shows three people - a father, mother and 6-year-old boy between them - holding bags with the final purchases before the flight. The mother's smile is broad and emotional; the father looks more restrained, not enthusiastic; the child seems curious about what the future will hold. As none of them knew Hebrew, they were sent to an ulpan (intensive language course) for academics in Netanya. From there they moved to the apartment they bought in Ramat Gan.

Bokobza was the only new-immigrant child in his elementary school and at first felt like he was in a fishbowl. The children and the teacher uttered sounds he did not understand.

"In the first years the teachers complained that I was daydreaming," he recalls. "The reason was that I didn't always understand what they wanted from me. I think that helped me develop my imagination."

In turn, his well-developed and active imagination made it hard for him to manage with other children. They grasped straightaway that they had a French geek on their hands and abused him at every opportunity.

"It wasn't easy for me," he continues. "I was totally ostracized in elementary school. I later dealt with that experience in my second exhibition, 'Tzayar-Tayar' ['Painter-Tourist'], in 2002 in Nelly Aman's gallery. I maintained that I was like Ephraim Moshe Lilien, the graphic artist of the Zionist movement in the period of Theodor Herzl: We observed the land through tourists' eyes."

Why were you ostracized?

"I was different. My mother sent me to school wearing a red coat over the school uniform, and I did not object. But I was the only child who was dressed like an enfant modele. I had the image of a very polite boy who was thrown into a society of Israeli children who played outside and got dirty in the sand, whereas I showed up in sandals and socks."

Why didn't you rebel?

"I thought it looked nice, and individualism was very important to me even then. The children really pestered me, but the more they did, the more I made it a 'personal thing.' Since then I have been fond of red. I remember friends of my parents asking me why I didn't wear the same clothes as everyone else. I think I just liked being like that. I wanted to emphasize that I was different."

Did you enjoy it?

"No. I suffered a lot, but I turned the suffering into a banner. I was not invited to parties and I was not accepted anywhere. I sat home alone. I painted and played the piano. Things changed in high school. I attended Blich in Ramat Chen, and there I emphasized my aberrance even more. But because I was a good student and very active socially, and because the country had changed and the population in that neighborhood was more open-minded - I became very popular. That was my prize for sitting home alone in elementary school."

Mixed identities

Bokobza says that his sexual identity was not well defined during his adolescence. He thought he was attracted to girls.

"I had girlfriends, but never had an intimate one," he explains. "I think I possessed the sexuality of a child - you can see that by the toys I had. Everything was very fluid, unformed. On the other hand, it didn't preoccupy me or bother me. I like not being decisive about many things. I don't know whether I like black or white, old or new. I think indecision means great freedom. Today I know that I missed opportunities of various kinds. There were very nice girls who couldn't understand why I wasn't interested in them, and also men."

When did you arrive at a decision?

"I came to a realization on my own when I was about 30. But I didn't come out of the closet to family and friends until I was over 40, not until I had a serious relationship with a partner."

Why did you wait so long?

"When you come out, you bring your whole milieu out, too, and for a very long time I thought people were not ready for it. In any case, they understood that I did everything different from others, so why should I suddenly marry like everyone?"

Bokobza did his army service in Military Intelligence, in research, and there too he became the focus of attention: "I am not suited for army life, but at that time it was unimaginable not to serve. Individualism and army are incompatible. I think I was the only soldier who came to the Kirya [defense headquarters in Tel Aviv] in a tie. I found an Israel Defense Forces tie from the 1950s and a vintage U.S. Army parka with an IDF seal. The Military Police in the Kirya - this was in the period of Rafal [chief of staff, Rafael Eitan], when everything was very rigid - didn't dare say a thing. They would keep stopping me and I enjoyed showing them the regulation IDF seal, and they just stood there, gaping. The sweater was also the right olive-green color, but from Benetton.

"I did two things in the army," he continues. "Half the time I dealt with maps - there are many maps in my paintings - and the other half I translated African press reports from French. That brought me back for the first time to the things that had unraveled in my Mizrahi identity."

Bokobza's real problems began after he completed his army service: He wanted to go into fashion, but his parents vetoed the idea outright.

"I had very good grades in mathematics and physics, and everyone said that with grades like that, it was stupid to go to Shenkar [a design school in Tel Aviv]. My mother wanted me to be a doctor. I was accepted into medical school and dental school, and no one could understand how I could turn them down. But to me it seemed too long a process, so I reached a compromise with my parents and enrolled in pharmacology in Jerusalem. But twice a year I wandered around Bezalel [the city's art academy], threatening to enroll, though I never really tried to get in. In the end, when I was dissatisfied with my career and felt I was mired in something I didn't want, my father said: 'You didn't show enough determination with your threats.' I think that if I had said back then that I wanted to study architecture, for instance, they might have agreed."

Why were you so intent on pleasing your parents?

"From the time I was very young we had a sort of dialogue - I was involved in family decisions about business affairs. I didn't go through the period of youthful rebellion until a very late age. I always cooperated. On the other hand, I never had a reason to rebel. I got a great deal from them. My father took me to the Louvre when I was 4, I went on trips all over the world, went to all the exhibitions I wanted. I always had sophisticated cameras, materials and paints, whatever I wanted, but only as an afternoon hobby. It was all closely bound up with my mother's missed career. There is life and there is reality, and even if you are very talented and a good artist, a boy has to have a profession. A few years ago a gallery owner from Munich, about 60 years old, visited me. I showed him a sequence of my paintings from the time I was 4. He said: 'If you were my son, there is no doubt that you would have studied painting.' But my parents couldn't cope with it."

Bokobza concluded his studies in pharmacy by inertia and the family bought a drugstore, he says, with "my diploma and their money. I was the youngest drugstore owner in the country: 26 years old. It was a great responsibility."

'A serious school'

At the beginning of the 1980s, his mother opened a fashion shop on Tel Aviv's fancy Dizengoff Street. It was called Miato, which may sound Japanese but was actually the name of her grandmother in Tunisia. Bokobza felt that at last he was swimming in the right direction: He accompanied his mother on her search for textiles and designed the show window for her. The owner of a neighboring shop asked him to design her window, too. That was his ticket to a new and exciting field. He later became friends with fashion designer Ronen Chen and designed the first shop Chen opened on trendy Sheinkin Street.

"The shop was photographed for a design magazine," Bokobza relates. "The article said it was designed by 'architect' Eli Bokobza. Afterward, my apartment appeared in an Israeli house-design magazine and I started to produce handmade furniture. I also studied photography, and gradually began to frequent circles that I found more natural for me. I was my own work of art: I traveled a lot. I was in Tokyo, I wore Gaultier clothes - terrible stuff, with broad shoulders, huge trousers, very avant-garde. I wasn't doing anything, but the people I hung out with were certain I was involved in something important, because otherwise why was this pharmacist in the Gaultier clothes hobnobbing with them? Then I met the painter Naomi Siman-Tov, who was the art critic of Ha'ir [the Tel Aviv weekly]. That was a critical moment. She saw my paintings and said: 'If you want to pursue this, you have to go to art school.'"

Bokobza was 32 when he entered Tel Aviv's Kalisher Art College, at first in extension courses and then as a full-time student. He split his days between studying art and working in the drugstore.

"For 10 years I was both a pharmacist and an art student. It was a serious school - Issam Abu Shakra, Tal Matzliach and Meir Pichhadze studied there - with serious teachers: Pinchas Cohen Gan, Asaf Ben Zvi, David Reeb, Pesach Slabosky, Sarit Shapira and others. If I had devoted all my resources to the drugstore, I might have been the owner of a chain today, and if I had been accepted to Bezalel right after the army, it's more than likely that I would not paint the way I do."

You think Bezalel would have spoiled you?

"The field of art has changed tremendously since then, but even when I was in art school there were attempts to make me toe the line. I remember that in the first critique of my work the teachers quarreled. Pinchas Cohen Gan came to visit me in the studio, which was also my home, then went back and told the others: 'You don't know what you're talking about. The house is spick-and-span and absolutely tidy - it's not an atmosphere anyone can paint in.'"

"Every painter paints in his environment, and I don't like getting dirty when I paint. I went to art school in the same clothes I wore afterward to the drugstore. I developed a theory about art students: The more paint they have on their clothes, the less they have on the canvas. With me it's the opposite."

Being dirty was the least of his problems in art school. "Between second and third year, Asaf Ben Zvi persuaded me to apply for a prize from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation. I brought works that were based on drawings, and people came up and said: 'You are in the wrong school.' I asked Asaf if that was what he thought, too, and he said: 'You have to decide whether you want to paint lemons your whole life [in a naive style] or do other things as well.'

"At that point I realized I had not come to school tabula rasa and I went back to doing my paintings: children's paintings and Orientalist works in bold colors. I remember one student smearing something on the canvas, all kinds of lines, and Pinchas Cohen Gan saying in the critique: 'At least one can't say it's kitsch.' My work was next, and he said: 'For sure one can say that this is kitsch.' Some of the students and teachers thought I was a provocateur who was either spiteful or didn't understand anything. I was about 20 years older than everyone else. In art school there are always these 'auntie types' and people have no idea what they're doing, and some of the students treated me like that kind of auntie. Others thought I was a drug dealer, because I seemed to have a little money and I was knowledgeable about medicines and drugs."

'Foothold in the canon'

Bokobza refused to yield to the atmosphere in which art students - at least in the beginning - try to imitate their teachers. The more he felt he was being pressured to conform, the more he entrenched himself in his own authentic style: naive, demonstratively colorful, reflecting his Mizrahi identity - "the kind [of art] that is easily categorized as primitive," he notes.

"There is a synagogue on the second floor of the Kalisher building," he continues. "The coexistence between the two institutions is extremely interesting. The man who cleans the school is also in charge of the synagogue. He's there the whole week, a Yemenite in a skullcap, opening the door and entering in the middle of a master class, seeing the nude models - and nothing upsets him. Whenever he entered my class, he used to stop next to my work and make gestures to the teacher about my paintings. I call it the 'cleaner test.' I am working in order not to lose [people like] him. The seeming populism of my work is perceived as non-elitist."

Why do you insist on this?

"My art is a reaction. It's like when I wore the red coat: The elitism of art and the fact that it is not accessible to everyone is harmful, in my opinion. In this exhibition with Gutman, it can be understood for the first time that my naive painting carries on a dialogue with the naivete of the East. I paint for 'Masuda from Sderot' [i.e., a typical resident from a typical town]. My mother was also Masuda from Sderot."

Nelly Aman accepted Bokobza's work for her gallery in 1999 - straight from the Kalisher show of students' graduation projects. Since then he has had six solo exhibitions (the Gutman show is his seventh) and taken part in four group exhibitions: at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the Haifa Museum of Art and the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin. In 2004 he was awarded a prize by Israel's Ministry of Education and he was a finalist in the competition to represent Israel at the Sao Paulo Biennale (Doron Rabina won).

"I have a foothold in the canon of Israeli art," Bokobza says. "I think one of the reasons I succeeded is because collectors know I am thorough in my work, precisely because I am a pharmacist. I was privileged in that sense."

While working on the current exhibition, he discovered something that no one else had noticed before, he says: "In Gutman's paintings there is a representation of the reality of the East and of the West, but there is no painting that connects the two worlds. The paintings of the West are perceived as factual truth: Here is where Gymnasia Herzliya stood, here is where the kiosk was located. [Gutman's] paintings of the East are perceived as an Orientalist fantasy. Whenever a Westerner and an Arab are placed in the same frame, the Arab automatically loses control of the situation and becomes subjugated. Only if the Arab is on a horse, for example, and is alone in the frame is he the dominant one - the noble

savage. But if you situate him next to a Westerner, the colonialist hierarchy automatically comes into play and the Mizrahi assumes the role of being subjugated and discriminated against."

Why does this bother you?

"I am occupied with the disparity between the way I am perceived and what I really am. I grew up with the name Bokobza and it always led me to places where I had not been. In the army, for example, I was asked if I had sisters in Ramle - there were the Bokobza sisters who were singers and performers. I went to Blich High School and was close to the population of Ramat Chen, but was always associated with Ramle. My piano teacher never managed to pronounce my name right. She always called me Bokovska. In retrospect, I imagine that a Bokovska playing Bach or Chopin sounded fitting to her. In the army, it was obvious to people when they heard my name that I came from Netivot, and they were surprised when they saw me. I had to change a little in order to bridge the conceptual gap. That's why I decided to go back to my French name, Eric. It's possible that if I had called myself Eric in elementary school, my life would have been different." W