

# Artistic freedom

Artists are going it alone and taking over the management of galleries

**Bernard Dichek**





(Above) GIDI SMILANSKY'S exhibition at the Alfred Gallery; (preceding pages) ROTEM RITOV: *Upupa Act*, mixed media on masking tape; (below) ADI LEVY: *Digitized photograph*

**T**HE CROWD OF PEOPLE gathered on the Tel Aviv sidewalk outside the Alfred Gallery for the opening of an exhibit by Dafna Gazit looked exactly like the throngs of young people, in their twenties and thirties, who attend similar events at galleries across the city.

But scattered among this crowd, sipping sparkling wine or soda on a hot and humid evening in September, were about a dozen people who were more than just ordinary art buffs. They were all artists who collectively own the gallery.

The Alfred Gallery, a non-profit collective, is representative of a growing trend of alternative art venues that have sprouted across Israel. Founded in 2005, Alfred was one of the first to appear on the local art scene. Today there are more than a dozen, and they include the Cabri Arab-Jewish

collective in the north and the Wing Gallery (Ha'agaf) in Haifa, which doubles as a pub.

"Alfred gives me a chance to do whatever I want without having to take into account the commercial pressures that influence the private galleries," Gazit tells *THE JERUSALEM REPORT*, noting that private gallery owners, who generally take a 50 percent cut on all sales, tend to showcase artists with works that are easy to sell.

Gazit's current show consists of an exquisite series of photographic works that she produced using the original daguerreotype method employed by the inventors of photography in the 19th century. "I may or may not sell some of these works, but at least I have the satisfaction of creating something that really interests me," she says.

Alfred has hosted many exhibits that by the very nature of the materials used and

the on-site location required could never be transported or sold. "There was one exhibit that you looked at through an aquarium-like glass that consisted of a cloud of cement dust," recalls Gidi Smilansky, an early member.

Another exhibit called "Painting Over Painting", created by Naomi Lev and Elad Rosen, turned the entire gallery into a large canvas with the artists painting on the wall.

Smilansky himself recently designed an exhibit, which comprised a series of erotic images drawn on perishable industrial paper.

"To be unrestricted by commercial constraints was only one reason for the founding of Alfred," he says, referring to other exhibits that dealt with political or sexual topics unlikely to have made it into a private gallery or public museum. "Another goal we had in mind was to attract people who don't normally get to galleries and we've been surprised at how successful we've been at drawing crowds to our exhibits."

Smilansky points out that decisions are made democratically and that each member is entitled to do an exhibit of their own each year and to choose their own curator. "None of us had any administrative experience when we started, we just felt like setting out on a kind of adventure."

Alfred frequently pioneers the use of experimental media. "We were one of the first galleries to use the medium of video streaming and, during the past year, we have focused more and more on digital art and new media," says Smilansky.



One example were works by Adi Levy, a digital artist, musician and graphic designer whose recent exhibit consisted of a series of digitized photographs, done in a wry, minimalistic way. The photos show the buildings in the Kfar Saba neighborhood he grew up in, just north of Tel Aviv.

**A**T A PUBLIC DISCUSSION HELD during the exhibit in August, 34-year-old Levy described how the photographs combined his passion for exploring forms and structures with an attempt to preserve childhood memories in a kind of idealized way.” You can see the building housing the supermarket where my mother pushed me in a shopping cart, the building where my best friend lived,” he said, noting that the air-conditioners



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– Ruti Direktor

and other unattractive elements that often stand out in an adult perspective have been eliminated.

Levy’s presentation led to a lively discussion. One audience member observed that by deleting all signs of organic life from his images, he had reduced everything to the terms of taxidermy, where everything is preserved except the living cells.

“It’s like an obelisk or a totem”, agreed Levy, suggesting that his goal was to reduce the structures – and in effect the memories – to their purest forms.

For aspiring curator Rotem Ritov, the Alfred collective provided an opportunity to break into the art world in a way that she feels would have been very hard elsewhere. “I didn’t exactly have the right résumé that art gallery owners were looking for,” explains Rotem, who previously worked as a dancer and architect. She notes that she has brought her architectural background to her work as an artist and curator.

Prior to joining Alfred, Ritov was the creator of Apart. Art, a studio-cum-gallery-cum-home. “I’m especially interested in exploring where public and private spaces meet,” she says.



**(Top) DAFNA GAZIT: The artist shows one of her daguerreotypes; (above) ROTEM & YIFTACH by Gidi Smilansky**

**ART**



One humorous exhibit which dealt with spatial relationships aimed to draw attention to the way in which walls are used as the space on which most art is viewed. Known as “Chairs”, the exhibit consisted of the entire gallery space being filled with chairs that went in rows from one wall to the other. “Normally you put works on the wall and you have to take a step back to see them, but in this exhibit to see the work [the chairs] you had to stick to the wall and squeeze by the narrow aisle to get from one side of the gallery to the other, so the viewing experience was reversed.”

**M**OST ALFRED MEMBERS don’t earn their livelihood from their work as artists, and many are teachers in their daily lives. One way in which they are able to help finance the gallery’s activities is through conducting an annual public sale in which Alfred sells works of art provided by prominent Israeli artists. Half of the proceeds from the public sale go to promote Alfred’s activities. “Just as important as the financial assistance we get from the sales is the expression of solidarity provided by these well-known artists,” says Adi Levy, referring to Sigalit Landau and Tzippi Geva, who participated last year.

Another form of recognition, notes Levy, was a recent exhibit called Haifa-Jerusalem-Tel Aviv at the Haifa Museum of Art, which gave 14 different artist collectives – including Alfred – an opportunity to display their works. “It was a very energizing experience,” recalls Levy. “We decided to give each of the 40 artists who have exhibited since the inception of Alfred a chance to do a solo show. Everyone had to work quickly and we created something very unique.”

Ruti Direktor, who initiated the project, maintains that the idea of artist collectives is growing around the world. She sees the collectives as playing an especially important role in developing curatorial skills. “There is now an entire generation of young art curators that has grown up in this environment,” says Direktor, the chief curator of the Haifa Museum of Art.

As for Alfred, she concludes: “It’s a good example of a group of young artists who decided to take their destiny into their own hands. They have shown that it is possible for artists to survive outside the world of private galleries and public museums.” ●



COURTESY ROTEM RITOV



COURTESY ADI LEVY

**(Top) PORTRAIT by Gidi Smilansky; (above) ROTEM RITOV and ADI LEVY: Expression of solidarity**



ODED ANTMAN

Yael Oren: *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 2011, 120 cm x 120 cm

## Contemporary art quantum

**R**ACHEL SUKMAN HAS BEEN SUPPORTING non-commercial art for more than two decades as a curator and manager of several alternative art spaces. When asked for examples of works of art that would be hard for a collector to take home, she mentions several provocative ones. "There was Ran Slavin's installation, which included a wax sculpture of his own head melting slowly by a candle placed underneath," she says with a smile. "The wax dripped slowly for the duration of the exhibit

and had completely fallen to the floor by the time it ended."

"In another exhibit held in Jerusalem on the theme of borders, Yael Oren filled rooms with artificial eggs and tomatoes," she adds.

Today Sukman is the director of Office In Tel Aviv Gallery, which she describes as a "contemporary art quantum". "Each time the artists create their work here, they redefine its space," she says about the gallery on Zamenhof Street near Dizengoff Square, which also serves as

her business office.

Recent exhibits at Office In Tel Aviv included a work comprising a new type of environment-friendly neon light that suggested a kind of futuristic world. In another, the space became a mini movie theater when various artists brought in movie chairs and TV monitors and showed films they had made.

Sukman is also the editor of *Terminal*, a bilingual (Hebrew-English) review of art trends and exhibits in Israel and abroad.

**B. D.**