



COURTESY ST-ART

LIAT ELBLING: 'You belong to me'

# Mirror Mirror on the Wall

Three Israeli women artists  
examine and challenge  
our notions of beauty

## Bernard Dichek

**L**IORA BELFORD REMEMBERS the distressing moment that inspired her to put together an art show on notions of female beauty.

"I asked my daughter, who is three-and-a-half years old, to put on her beautiful dress and she turned to me and said: 'Beautiful is important, isn't it?'"

What troubled Belford, an art curator at Jaffa's ST-ART gallery, was how Nola, her blue-eyed, blonde-haired daughter, who frequently attracts compliments about her looks, was being influenced by the emphasis people place on physical appearance.

She also realized that Nola was not the

only one wondering about the significance of beauty.

"While reviewing the portfolios of young Israeli artists, I noticed that a number of them were exploring themes relating to ideals of beauty and female archetypes," she tells *The Report*, during a tour of the 3-woman group show that she designed.

The exhibit is a colorful, edgy and fun-filled display of photographs, sculptures, videos and paintings. It is thought-provoking, perhaps even a bit unsubtle in places. The works included range from Liat Elbling's "You belong to me," a mocking goddess-like idealization of beauty; to Rachel Monosov's "Bananot," a series of

fashion magazine-style portraits that challenge the exploitation of the female body; to Vanilla Royal's "Gate," an intricate and exquisitely colored commentary on feminine symbols.

The three participating artists differ in their choice of media and styles yet all touch upon a common theme: Beauty can be a double-edged sword, and that sword often cuts up its beautiful subjects.

**B**ELFORD, 37, WHO WAS A sound artist before switching to a career as an art curator, points out that she sees her role as a curator as being 'the voice of the artist.'



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**RACHEL MONOSOV: 'I'm the one you don't know'**

“When something moves me I try to find a way to express it in words, to distill into words what the artist is conveying intuitively through images,” she says.

She chose the words for the title of the group show to be “Hard Pop,” she suggests, because the artists use subject matter in their works that is rooted in the style of pop art, the genre in which artists comment on aspects of mass culture, often with irony.

But the words that seem to best describe the exhibit appear in Belford’s introduction to the exhibit: “A woman is not born a woman, she becomes a woman,” wrote Simone de Beauvoir, the French existential philosopher, considered by many to be the founder of mod-

ern feminist thinking.

In their interviews with *The Report*, all three of the participating artists reveal that de Beauvoir’s statement resonates with them.

Liat Elbling, 31, who studied photography at the Minshar School of Arts and is the 2011 winner of the Tel Aviv Museum’s prestigious Constantiner Photography Award, notes that she happened to have recently read the “The Second Sex,” the book from which the de Beauvoir quote is taken. She notes, however, that she has never made a conscious attempt to focus on female archetypes.

Indeed, most of Elbling’s work deals with architectural subjects. While discussing her work, Elbling, speaking in a shy, reticent way,

seems most comfortable commenting on general philosophic issues surrounding the photographic medium.

“I’m interested in exploring how photography mediates between reality and memory,” she says, pointing out that the writings of another French philosopher, Roland Barthes, who developed tools for inferring hidden cultural meanings in photographic images, have also had an influence upon her.

But over the years, Elbling has periodically taken time to photograph herself in various poses and imaginatively constructed situations.

“It’s a way for me to shed light on what is going on around me,” she says.



BERNARD DICHEK

RACHEL MONOSOV: 'Sometimes you have to take things to extremes, if you want to shake things up'

SEVERAL OF THESE SELF-PORTRAITS feature prominently in the selections that Belford includes in "Hard Pop."

In contrast to Elbling's own demure manner, many of Belford's self-portraits are quite bold.

One untitled self-portrait suggests a visual twist to the idea that people have both feminine and masculine sides. In the image, her head is seamlessly melded into a naked male body. A cigarette dangles from one hand and the expression on her face conveys a self-confident, unashamed look.

Similarly, in "Self-Portrait With Flowers, 2010," she finds a hard-hitting way to parody advertisements that position women in the kitchen.

In "For each time I wanted to leave," Elbling uses technology to enhance beauty. Here Elbling artificially cross-breeds plants by using glue and other materials to fasten flowers to plants of different species. The result, despite the damage that technological intervention seems to convey in other parts

of the exhibit, is quite aesthetically pleasing.

"In effect she has made something that is beautiful even more beautiful," observes Belford.

LIKE ELBLING, RACHEL Monosov, 24, is a photographer who uses her own body as subject matter.

Recalling the first time she did a self-portrait, as a student at the Bezalel Academy of Arts, she notes that the event marked a major turning point in her life.

"When I was a young teenager, I worked as a fashion model, something that I was never very comfortable with," she says in a sad, almost tearful voice. "I remember situations when I was 12 years old, where photographers would say things to me like 'now we want you to look more sexy.'"

When Monosov turned 17, she relates, she turned down an offer to sign with a major international modeling agency. "I decided that I was finished with all that," she recalls. Instead, she decided to embark on a career in art and enrolled at Jerusalem's Bezalel

Academy of Art and Design.

"As a photography student it was very important for me to explore self-portraiture, because I guess what I was saying to myself was 'from now on I'm going to be the one who decides how I look.'"

In "Heavy Pop," Monosov appears in several self-portraits, including a life-size statue in which her kneeling body, depicted as half-rabbit, half-woman, has a hose connecting her mouth to her buttocks with real carrot juice being pumped through.

"I realize that it's a very aggressive image," she says, noting that the rabbit-like figure is poised to jump but is being held back by the hose, a phallic symbol that destroys the beauty. "But sometimes you have to take things to extremes, if you want to shake things up."

To produce a work called "I don't like it," Monosov invited several American blonde models to pose in her studio in an attempt to create "the perfect blonde." But the resulting montage is anything but perfect, as Monosov presents faces with teeth growing out of eyes



**VANILLA ROYAL: 'The Icon of Gracia Vanilla'**

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and cheeks with flowing tears.

"The quest for beauty has led them to the breaking point," she says, pausing as if to look for a better way to express herself. "To a situation where they have become very fragile," she finally says. "Fragile is a good word to describe their predicament."

Monosov is currently working in New York, where she studied for a while under the tutelage of well-known Israeli-American artist, Elinor Carucci.

She was drawn to work in New York, she says, because she felt that the New York art scene, with its wide range of tastemakers, would be more supportive of the work that she was trying to do.

"At Bezalel everything seemed to move in the direction of politics and, if you tried to do a project that deals with a topic as simple as something like beauty, people would accuse you of being superficial," she contends.

However, when it came to garnering support for her current sculpture project, it was the Israel-based ST-ART gallery that stepped forward. "[ST-ART founder] Serge

Tiroche saw some of my works in New York and when I explained the idea for the sculpture to him he was very enthusiastic."

Her parents, newly Orthodox Jews, have also been supportive of her work, she notes, despite the fact that Orthodox Jews normally object to graphic displays of nudity. "They recognize that what I am trying to do comes from the soul," she says.

**I**N MARKED DIFFERENCE TO THE highly visible personal appearances that Elbling and Monosov make in their art, the third artist participating in "Hard Pop" chooses to conceal herself and to be known through a pseudonym, Vanilla Royal.

"My only appearance is my work," says Vanilla Royal with a smile, noting that she doesn't mind if people think her works were created by "a man or a blonde."

Speaking in a way that combines humor with seriousness – a mixture that is reflected in her art – the 37-year-old brunette points out that she chose her name because of the dichotomy inherent in it.

"Vanilla in the world of S&M (sado-masochism) refers to someone who is plain and ordinary, while royal suggests something or someone that is magnificent and extraordinary."

Indeed tensions between extremes permeate the images in her works. In "Sumo Ride," an animated video, she playfully contrasts enslaved, muscular sumo wrestlers with a carriage-drawn scoop of vanilla ice cream that moves freely like a princess in a fairy tale. Similarly in "The Icon of Gracia Vanilla," a formalistic acrylic painting on a gold background, she crowns the spiked iconic head of one of the Greek goddesses of beauty with her ubiquitous vanilla ice cream, even including for good measure a few red cherries.

Though the colors she uses are often brilliant, almost psychedelic, the actions depicted tend to be repetitive. "This is in contrast to the mundane daily routines and Sisyphean experiences that are part of a woman's life," she says.

The attention to fine details and the vibrant colors in her work also seem to reflect Vanilla Royal's background as a jewelry artist. She studied art at the Beit Berl Academy of Art and worked as a sculpture apprentice with Israeli artist Sigalit Landau who is representing Israel at this year's Venice Biennale.

She has moved in and out of the art world, working for a time as the manager of a high-tech company, but during the last four years "has been totally into art."

But she admits that she continues to sometimes have doubts. "I'm investing all my life for something that may have no purpose," she says, laughing.

Taken as a whole, Hard Pop's whirlwind swirl of feminine images and vessels, some broken, others enhanced, certainly does seem to serve a purpose as it contemplates the vexing gender issues that Belford set out to raise.

But the exhibit, with its many examples of technology gone awry, also touches on a number of universal issues that go beyond that.

As Serge Tiroche observes in an interview with *The Report*, the three artists all seem to be troubled by fears relating to technology getting out of control.

"What clearly preoccupies this generation is where technology will lead us," he says, referring to the examples of cloning and cross-breeding that are apparent in many of the exhibit's works. "And that fear is not limited to any age group or gender." ●