



COURTESY ERAN GILAT

TRADITIONAL: Reminiscent of the Dutch and Flemish *vanitas* still-life painters

Still Life Experiments

An Israeli photographer makes waves in New York

Bernard Dichek

THE TURNING POINT IN Eran Gilat's career as a photographic artist occurred last February in New York. Gilat was given a chance to pitch his portfolio to some of the leading figures in the American photography world. They were convening in the PowerHouse Arena gallery in Brooklyn to deliberate on which photographers to present at the prestigious New York Photo Festival.

Lucy Gallun, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, began her assessment with comments about Gilat's portraiture. "Your work is quite interesting, but there are a lot of other photographers out there doing things like this," she said.

Gilat couldn't hide his disappointment.

He didn't understand why they had invited him to come all the way from Israel.

But Gallun wasn't finished. "As for some of these recent photographs of yours, the life sciences ones, do you know that you are working in the tradition of Dutch and Flemish *vanitas* (a genre of still-life painting) painters?"

No, replied Gilat, he hadn't thought of that.

"In those photos I see something really special," continued Gallun.

The next reviewer cut straight to the chase. "Only about once a year do I use the word 'superb,'" said Sam Barzilay, the director of the Photo Festival. "But that's what I have to say about these photographs."

The review committee voted to include

Gilat in the festival, which was held last May. There his photos drew large crowds. "They were some of the most popular ones at the exhibit," says Barzilay in a phone interview with *The Report*. One result was a repeat showing of Gilat's photos in July at another important international event – the FOTO8 London Gallery Summer Show.

IT IS OCTOBER NOW AND GILAT is recalling this Cinderella-like turn of events at a café near his Tel Aviv workspace, a cluttered room that he shares with two architects in a rundown neighborhood near the demolished old Central Bus Station.

"I've had calls from collectors late at night who've wanted to come right over to



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LIFE SCIENCE: Scientist/photographer Eran Gilat

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get their hands on copies," he tells *The Report*, speaking in a kind of gee-whiz-I-still-can't-believe-its-happening tone of voice that might come from a young starry-eyed art college graduate.

But Gilat, 59, has come to the art world from a completely different and unlikely background. He is a Technion-trained neurobiologist, who has spent the last 30 years doing medical research. As a scientist his projects have included a wide variety of activities: while doing a post-doctorate at New York's Albert Einstein College of Medicine he tried to unravel the neural system that enables the Venezuelan hatchetfish to jump to great heights. And, working with doctors at Assaf Harofeh Medical Center east of Tel Aviv, he developed a treatment for epileptic

children suffering from convulsions.

As a photographer, Gilat actually began his career at an earlier age. He became an avid shutterbug at about 14, when his father gave him his first camera, a Zenith 3M. "The camera was a high-quality model for the time," says Gilat referring to the early 1960s, when cameras in Israel were quite expensive. "But my father, who was also a scientist, managed to pick one up in the Soviet Union, while attending a marine biology conference."

Most of the photography that Gilat has done in his spare time over the years has been in the genre of urban photography. "I would wander around New York or other places that I traveled to for science conferences and take pictures of street people. I

have a very professional-looking camera, a Nikon D3S, and lots of times they would invite me into their houses and that's how I started to do my portraiture series."

Then, about three years ago, while Gilat was on sabbatical leave at the Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, he made the decision to devote more time to art.

"Doing something with biological tissues is something that I always wanted to do," he says, referring to the "Life Science" series that had its debut at the New York Festival.

The "Life Science" photographs are quite stunning in both a beautiful and haunting way at the same time. But as there is nothing particularly scholarly or esoteric in their contents, they do not necessarily



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lead the viewer to conclude that the photographer is a scientist. The photographs generally document artifacts, laid out on a wooden table platform, that comprise some form of tissue, organ or dead animal that is juxtaposed beside antique medical instruments and other objects, including food and naked bodies.

Gilat's images may be blunt and disquieting but they are quite tame in comparison to the works of many contemporary photographers, such as Joel-Peter Witkin and Nobuyoshi Araki, whose studies of dismembered corpses and grotesque erotica also entail radical juxtapositions.

What sets "Life Sciences" apart is the way the artifacts bring to mind the game-piece *vanitas* genre that MOMA curator Gallun commented on during her review. That genre, which includes works by painters such as the 17th century Dutch Realist Harmen Steenwyck, show objects such as food and hunted game rotting on lavish banquet tables. In doing so, those painters put across a sobering message about the transience of the material world.

GILAT SEEMS TO HAVE FOUND a way to raise the same philosophical questions that the Renaissance painters asked but goes one step further by bringing in a medical science dimension. That dimension is subtly apparent in the layout of the items: There is something about the orderly way in which the medical implements are laid out that implies that a medical experiment is about to take place.

Whether or not an actual scientific experiment is about to take place, is, of course

left to the imagination of the viewer. What is clear though is that Gilat seems to have found a way to ask deep questions in a refreshing way.

Is it really possible for researchers or doctors to disconnect their feelings while observing animal or human flesh? What are the borderlines between scientific examination and eroticism? What is it like for medical researchers to work day in and day out in an environment that is filled with dead animals? Is it possible to see beauty in exposed flesh? At what point do the tissues of dead animals become repulsive and at what point do those same tissues become attractive as edible food?

When asked if he is trying to address some of these issues in his works, Gilat points out that it is easier for him to discuss science than art. "I can lecture about electrophysiology to an auditorium full of doctors for hours," he notes with a smile.

But if he is reluctant to discuss the ways in which his art may be interpreted, he is outspoken about ways in which it may be misinterpreted. "We have to sacrifice rats and guinea pigs if we want to develop medical treatments," he says quietly, emphasizing that he is not an anti-vivisectionist. "But sometimes we have to give animal and human flesh more respect."

He also stresses that all of the artifacts in his photographs are obtained from marketplaces, slaughterhouses or natural history facilities. "As a matter of principle, I don't believe that animals should be sacrificed for the sake of art."

In addition, he suggests that there could be an educational value to exposing medi-

SOBER MESSAGE: About the transience of the material world

cal students to his exhibits. "I recall from my training that medical students were expected to be able to walk into an operating room without much preparation. Maybe this could be a way of softening the transition."

Another topic that Gilat is able to talk about readily is his methodology. Unlike many artists who are unable to explain how they go about doing things, he is very straightforward in describing his approach to lighting. "I always use some natural light, usually from behind and on the left side. But on the right side I use artificial light, letting the artificial light take over and give the image its shading."

One viewer of Gilat's photographs who did not know about his scientific background was Barzilay. The Greek-born Festival director, a well-known social documentary photographer and curator, was completely unaware of Gilat's biography until after reviewing his photos.

"I don't think there really is anything scientific about the images," says Barzilay. "What hits me about Gilat's photos is the light and the framing and his juxtaposition of the animate and the inanimate. If there is something scientific about it, it's maybe the way there is a sort of precision in the chaos."

Barzilay also dismisses the suggestion that some of the images may be sensationalist. "They are unsettling but not freakish, a bit like Dr. Frankenstein meets the Christian Renaissance. The light is very refined yet very basement. They have a quietly contained energy that is just so charged." Barzilay points out that he believes the photographs have what really counts in a work of art. "It's hard to look at his photos and not care. Some people are offended, others aren't, but everybody feels something."

Gilat is currently working on expanding the "Life Science" series, which will be shown in fall at the Herzliya Artists' Residence Gallery under the title "Ex Vivo & In Vivo" (*da'at hayim* in Hebrew). Asked to explain his quest for perfection, he refers to something his father told him when he gave him his first camera. "Most people photographed in black and white then, but my father suggested that I go for the highest possible quality. He pointed out to me that you could get better quality by shooting with Kodachrome color slides. Interestingly enough those slides have survived, the others (black and white) have faded away." •