

# Getting a Head ST-ART

A new mentoring program helps beginning artists transition into the business world

Bernard Dichek

ISRAEL HAS BECOME A HUB FOR business innovation, especially in the high-tech and biotech fields. But the country's most original business incubator could very well be in the visual arts sector. Known as ST-ART, the venture was founded in 2008 by Serge Tiroche, a banking expert with a passion for Israeli art.

"I came up with the idea for ST-ART when I noticed the gap between young independent artists and those represented by galleries," explains Tiroche. "It usually takes young artists a number of years until they are able to find a gallery that will represent them and by then many have given up on a career as an artist."

In an interview with *The Report*, Tiroche notes that Israeli art schools don't teach the business side of the profession. "The graduates may be talented and well-trained as painters or sculptors but often they aren't equipped with sufficient business know-how to become commercially successful."

To boost their chances of success, Tiroche has devised a business model that offers young artists a type of support that is similar to what venture capitalists and incubator managers offer young scientists and entrepreneurs.

Every year, Tiroche and ST-ART's CEO and curator, Dana Hasson, invite about four to six artists, usually fresh out of college, to become members of the ST-ART incubator.

During the two-year incubator period, Tiroche and Hasson mentor the artists, help them find work space, arrange exhibits for their works and introduce them to gallery owners, curators and collectors in Israel and overseas.

And even before doing any of that, Tiroche



MICHAL SHANIR: Untitled, Oil on canvas

purchases a portfolio of works created by the artist – sometimes as many as a dozen.

The mentoring that Tiroche and Hasson offer can be quite straightforward. "Some photographers aren't aware of the need to limit the number of prints in each edition they produce, as well as how to price them," observes Tiroche.

That kind of advice has paid off. With Tiroche's help, Peleg Dishon, one of ST-ART's artists, was able to commercialize his works.

"Peleg had created a series of pieces by Xeroxing sculpture-like objects made out of paper that he created with a cardboard cutter," recalls Tiroche. "The result was a series of breathtaking images that looked like they had come from a different world. But he was presenting them by projecting them onto hanging canvases using a slide projector."

At Tiroche's suggestion, Dishon began to

convert his works into a more saleable format – a light box that can be mounted on a wall as a permanent installation. And once Dishon made this change, his pieces began to sell.

ST-ART BEGINS TO GIVE ITS resident artists public exposure with exhibitions that are held regularly in the stately, 150-year-old building that serves as the incubator's headquarters. The two-storey, arched building, located on the edge of Jaffa's Ajami neighborhood, overlooks the old Jaffa port and served as the governor's mansion during the Ottoman Empire.

It is also the house that Serge Tiroche grew up in.

"This was a lively place when I was a kid," says Tiroche, 44, walking through the first-floor gallery during this year's residents' group show. Tall, casually dressed and wearing sneakers, Tiroche has a relaxed but serious manner, some-





MICHEL PLATNIC: Self-portrait, Photograph

rently the chairman of the fund. He notes that the trust offers artists a financial cushion as their retirement years approach.

Following the death of his father, Tiroche considered trying to combine his passions for art collecting and financial investments on a full-time basis. "Art was something that was always close to my heart. I minored in art at university and I often accompanied my father to visit galleries and meet artists."

His first idea was to start an investment hedge fund, together with his brother, that would invest in expensive works of art. While at Citigroup, he helped manage the portfolios of wealthy investors in Israel and Turkey, and his research led him to estimate that in Israel there were some 1,000 well-to-do families with some \$30 billion in assets who could be potential customers. He also was aware that the annual turnover in the Israeli art market

had already reached about \$15 million.

But due to the global financial crisis and the failure of many hedge funds in 2008, they shelved the art hedge fund idea.

Then came the idea of the art incubator. "I had over the years purchased paintings from galleries and dealers but had never actually bought any from artists themselves. The incubator is a way of doing just that," says Tiroche, noting that he is completely satisfied with his career change.

"There's something very exciting about running a business in a field that you have a passion and love for," he observes. "I'm not doing it purely as philanthropy, although there is an altruistic element, and we hope to eventually make money, even if it may take some time."

By investing in unknown artists, many of whom have yet to sell a single piece of art, ST-

ART does indeed take a substantial risk. But the payoff is potentially huge.

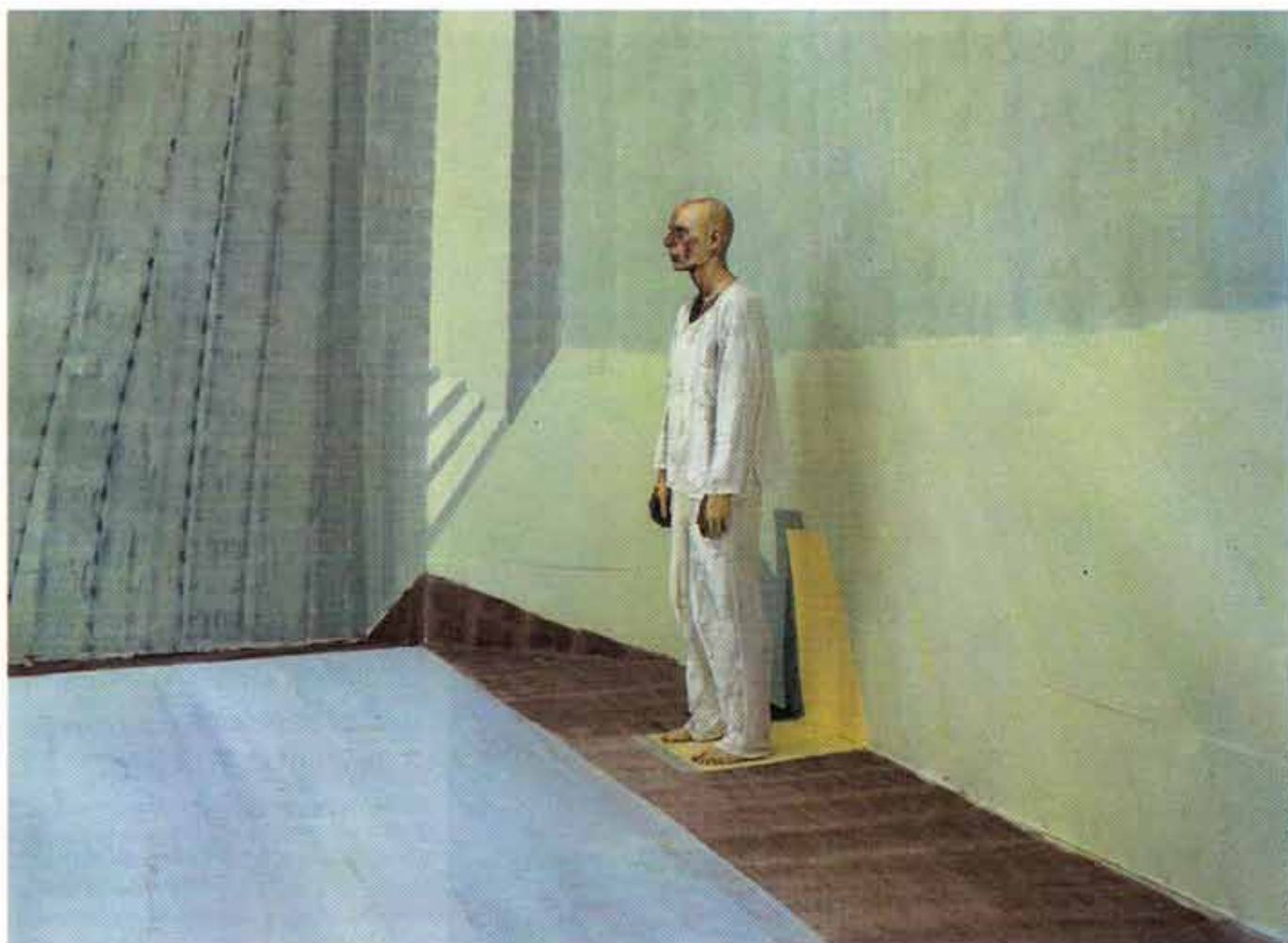
Tiroche doesn't disclose the prices he pays for the works of young artists, but an analysis of prices recently published in the financial daily *Globes* gives an indication of how art prices can soar.

'It can make a big difference just knowing that someone is interested in what you are doing'  
— Anat Canaani

According to *Globes*, in Israel the going rate for a painting by a "beginner artist" newly graduated from an art college comes to about \$800-\$1,500. During the next few years of the artist's career, if the artist starts to get exposure in exhibits, prices may rise to \$1,500-\$2,500 per painting. Those artists who find one of the 10 or so major local art galleries to represent them move into the \$3,000-\$4,000 range. Eventually, if their popularity continues to grow, established Israeli artists can command as much as \$20,000-\$30,000 per work, although most are sold for between \$10,000-\$12,000.

"For Israeli artists who reach the international market, the sky is the limit," says Tiroche, mentioning Michal Rovner and Adi Ness as examples of a handful of successful local artists who are able to command prices in the six-figure range.

**B**UT ALL OF THIS, OF COURSE, depends on the expectation that the artists will advance in their careers.



MICHEL PLATNIC: Self-portrait in a Pool

**'It usually takes young artists a number of years until they are able to find a gallery that will represent them and by then many have given up on a career as an artist'**

*— Serge Tiroche*

thing like a businessman on holiday.

"My father ran an art gallery here in Jaffa and there was a bohemian crowd with the likes of [enfant terrible Israeli filmmaker] Uri Zohar hanging around here. I remember the surprise Uri Zohar caused when he decided to become a rabbi," recalls Tiroche, with a nostalgic smile.

His father, Jean Tiroche, immigrated to Israel in 1949. In the 1950s, he was one of the

country's pioneer art dealers, operating a well-known art gallery first on Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street and later in Jaffa. Prior to coming to Israel, Jean Tiroche had lived in Paris, where he returned to live on and off with his family as his art dealership grew.

"He was known internationally as a dealer of the works of Jewish artists like Chagall, Mane-Katz and Modigliani," notes Serge Tiroche.

Tiroche's brother and sister, Micky and Orna, both followed their father into the art business world. Micky today is an international fine art dealer, while Orna and her husband Dov operate the Tiroche art auction house in Herzliya.

But Serge decided to carve out a career for himself in a different direction. He earned a degree in Business Administration at the American University of Paris and an MBA from INSEAD in France. He was hired by Switzerland's Citigroup Private Bank, where he worked as a financial consultant.

After 10 years at Citigroup, he began thinking about doing something else.

He had become involved with management of the Artist Pension Trust, an international investment fund that includes about 1,200 artists from 50 countries. "The idea is that each artist deposits 20 paintings with the fund over a 20-year period. Whenever one of the paintings is sold, all member artists share in the proceeds," explains Tiroche, who is cur-



## New ST-ART Residents

**S**T-ART, in its third year, recently recruited a new group of four resident artists: Sharon Glazberg, Michel Platnic, Michal Shafnir and Ilan Yona.

Glazberg, a graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute, is a sculptor and video artist who last year created an exhibit in Tel Aviv called "Aviva," a video work documenting the excavation of the remains of an elephant in Africa. Platnic, 40, is a new immigrant from France who gave up a successful career as an engineer to devote himself full-time to working as a multi-media artist. Shafnir, a painter and Yona, a video and new media artist, are both recent graduates of the Beit Berl School of Art.

The ST-ART Gallery in Jaffa is presenting until November 11 an exhibit called Twilight, curated by Dana Hasson, which features the works of Michel Platnic and Michal Shafnir.

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MICHAL SHANIR: Untitled, Oil on canvas

Most do not. About 90 percent of art school graduates, estimates Tiroche, give up on a full-time career as an artist within a year or two.

For this reason, says Hasson, a great deal of care goes into the incubator selection process. She and Tiroche each year invite about 30 applicants for a personal interview. "Not only the art, but also the artist, have to be interesting," she says.

She points out that there is no single common denominator among the artists that they select but mentions "a desire to explore and investigate, curiosity and the ability to totally dedicate themselves to their work" as frequently found qualities.

"But in the end, it's a bit like falling in love," she concludes. "When you meet the right artist you just know it."

Dishon was interviewed by Hasson and Tiroche right after graduating last year from the Beit Berl College School of Art.

"We were intrigued by the way he works with an unconventional format that is sort of like sculpture, drawing and photography all wrapped up into one. We also were impressed by the way he comes up with new ideas for projects and seems to create worlds of his own," says Hasson.

Those worlds, explains Dishon in an

interview with The Report, "are created out of an attempt to do things that haven't been done before."

Dishon, 31, studied fashion design before switching to art studies. "In the 'Lightbox' series that ST-ART helped me produce, I explore a post-apocalyptic world in which there are no people or signs of life. There is no sense of time or of dimensions. It's a kind of metaphysical territory that eludes definition."

Currently Dishon is working on a project based on the scene in Alfred Hitchcock's film "The Birds" in which the birds attack people at a gas station. "At the end of the scene, the bird enters the lens and breaks the camera," he mentions suggestively, without revealing exactly what his project, planned for an exhibit in Tel Aviv this fall, will look like.

Dishon is not the only ST-ART artist to use unconventional media or to come up with surprising ideas. Giora Jirafi, a sculptor and installation artist who lives and works in Moshav Sde Hemed on the coastal plain, uses wax paraffin to create novel sculptures of people and other objects, while Tel Aviv-based Shay Alony, a graduate of the Haifa University art program,

works with a variety of materials that include plastic, found objects, wood, car kits and paint.

Alony, who recently began to be represented by the prestigious Braverman Gallery, located in south Tel Aviv, is one of several ST-ART residents who began to gain public exposure during their incubator residency. Maya Bloch is another: Her melancholy paintings of faces and groups of people recently gained her a solo exhibit at New York's Thierry Goldberg Projects Gallery.

But for most of the young artists the road to financial success remains long and uncertain. Anat Canaani, 25, who joined the incubator after graduating last year from Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, continues to work in a makeshift studio located in a bomb shelter in the town of Kfar Saba just north of Tel Aviv.

At work on a series of wall-size murals in a naïve, colorful and childlike style, she tells The Report that it can be difficult finding buyers. But she is quick to add that she has been encouraged by the feedback she gets from Tiroche and Hasson, who visit her regularly. "It can make a big difference just knowing that someone is interested in what you are doing," she concludes. ●