

EXTERNAL / INTERNAL | ORLY SHALEM

The paintings in “External/Internal” are lyrical interpretations of the outside world as filtered through Orly Shalem’s internal struggle. Orly is a lover of nature and people, a woman who thrives on getting out of her house, and when the coronavirus pandemic closed the country down and she was forced to turn inward, she externalized her frustration in paint. Although this period was difficult for her, and indeed for many of us, Orly is also a woman who is always looking for balance, and thus, with each dark feeling she also searched for hope, beauty and redemption. Orly invites us into every corner of her soul, into the lighted spaces as well as the shadows.

In the pastoral town of Nili, Orly lives and works in nature, which influences her paintings spiritually but never directly. She lets the scenes of mountains from close to home and water from her excursions flow through her to the canvas and the paper after they are distilled in her mind and soul, and through this process, she amplifies nature’s colors and harmonies to these dynamic and emotive scenes. Through this explorative method she created original landscapes, which are both rooted in her recollections of pre-pandemic trips around the country and maps of her psychological state. While the landscapes are fantastical, unreal places, they are very real parts of Orly’s mental landscape. She has managed to describe visually the internal struggle of the locked-up soul.

This group of works contains a black paint and cool colors dominate the canvases. Drips, streaking down like tears, make recurring appearances in this group of works. It feels like the works are crying, or that the scenes are experienced through a rain drenched window. But in these works, the drips do not muddy the colors, they unify them, and draw the eye from tone to tone. While melancholia may permeate the works, there is also a sense of balance and calm, an attempt to be Zen with the new reality.

During this period, Orly also became absorbed in water colors, blotting muddied tones to the paper. Water color is a difficult mistress, the marks cannot be taken back or covered up. It takes courage and confidence to work in water color. Orly’s water colors contain all the drama of her works on canvas but with an elegance and transparency that has a graceful quality. They are less built up and sparer, letting the paper shine through at certain points. On top of the water color layer, Orly uses other media like charcoal, pastels and pencils, allowing those richer deep pigments to play off the elegance of the water color.

Orly also created a group of small works on fiberboard which are intimate, filled with scratches and scribbles. Their modest size draws the viewer close, and they are full to the brim with hurried, exacting marks that are intense and piercing. Unlike the water colors, they are worked over with layers of pigment, an accretion of feelings, overwriting each other. They are small thunderstorms of emotion. These works are full of dissonant harmonies, unsettling the viewer’s eye, keeping them searching for resolution. When viewed together, they present as a series of small outbursts, but they are easy to digest because of their diminutive size.

Orly Shalem’s works in “External/Internal” delve into what we lost when we were kept away from one another in the height of the pandemic. They remind the viewer of how blessed we are that we have been able to return to a life of freedom of movement and social interactions. They also display Orly’s fortitude in the turbulent period of uncertainty, where she managed to express both hardship and hope in every piece she created. Orly’s works mark an important moment in history, and they do it with grace, intensity and beauty.

Curator of the exhibition: Ophra Shushatri