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Into a better place

Yanai Segal describes his art as a kind of trampoline to another place, which is both foreign and familiar **By David Stromberg**
Photos by Miriam Alster / Flash 90



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Yanai Segal is a rare specimen on the Israeli art scene. A quiet, reflective, questioning individual, he also commands a powerful presence. His artistic abilities combine several elements that don't often come together – technical skill, an original vision, a personal style, and freshness of approach.

Segal's uniqueness is visible in the evolution of his works, which repeatedly reframe previous explorations with new directions. He surprises with every new piece – keeping the level of his art high, while searching for new ideas, images and forms. Yet, he also questions the viability of art, in general, and the works he creates, in particular. He takes nothing for granted, and examines his every decision. The severity of this self-critique is felt in the works he exhibits – in their precision and sense of having withstood a trial.

"I see myself, and what I do, from a perspective that's self-critical," Segal, 37, admits to *The Jerusalem Report*. "Artists often create public personas that are consistent with their work. When alone, I'm a lot less nice to myself."

This personal severity lends an air of austerity that has always accompanied Segal's works. But in "Walkaway", his new exhibition at the Jerusalem Artists House, he further introduces an emotional layer that harkens back to childhood – fusing visual elements from his local landscape with the history of art in Israel. Whereas his former paintings recalled modernist, minimalist and abstract streams in 20th century art, the current works are more "contemporary" in style and intent.

"I wanted to hold a dialogue with Israeli art, something I'd avoided for a long time," explains Segal, who is also one of the founding members of the Barbur art collective and gallery in Jerusalem. Traveling abroad with Barbur, I noticed that being Israeli creates expectations from others who meet you. The contemporary style is such that you see artwork and don't know if it's Belgian or Swedish. I started asking myself: I come from Israel but what in my works brings my story along – the specific story of the place I come from."

In the Barbur collective's most active years, the artist group – which has also included Masha Zusman, Rami Saadi, Avi Sabah, and Denis Mashkevich – traveled to Tokyo's Wonder Site residency, Lon-

don's No Soul for Sale independent fair at the Tate Modern, and to Sweden for the Supermarket art fair. During those trips, Segal began to distinguish between artists who work in general terms and those who connect directly with the place from which they come.

"It stems from the artist's decision," he suggests, "from a sensitivity to the place where you live. It can also come from an external gaze: you suddenly see where you're from in a new context. Or it can be internal – you feel a need to do your work about something that's specific to you, your experiences, your life."

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For Segal, that specificity comes with a measure of complexity, not least because of his personal background. His parents, both renowned scholars of Russian literature, made *aliya* to Israel in the early 1970s. Segal was born in Holland while his father was a visiting professor at the University of Amsterdam. He grew up in Jerusalem, studied art at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, and lived in Jerusalem until moving to Tel Aviv in 2012 – where he lives with his wife and five-year-old twin girls.

THE FIRST languages he heard were Russian and Dutch – and Hebrew only after arriving in Jerusalem at the age of two. He traveled with his family back to Amsterdam at the age of five and later to Los Angeles at the age of 11. His view of Israel was always imbued with a sense of the world beyond – which was relatively rare in the more insular society of the 1980s.

In Jerusalem, Segal spent most of his childhood in the Nayot neighborhood, right next to the Israel Museum. The artworks he encountered at the museum as a child had a deep impact on his personality. "As a kid, I spent entire days, weeks, months

and years at the Israel Museum," he recalls. "The sculpture garden, the gravel, the abstract sculptures – I experienced them as a fact. As if this was the world itself."

As he grew up, he says, he learned that they were considered modern and avant-garde. But as a child, he saw them as part of nature. He didn't stop and admire the monumental Yehiel Shemi sculptures – he simply climbed them.

"When you're six and you see a sculpture, you don't think that someone made it, someone else bought it, and a third person put it there," he explains. "You take it as something natural. You see that they have no function – but you're a kid and you don't doubt things."

As he matured, as a person and an artist, Segal understood that these big abstract works dealt with public spaces. Placed prominently in locations like the Israel Museum, the Government Quarter, and the Hebrew University, all close to where he grew up, they represented an attempt to use monumentalist aesthetic to give people an aesthetic representation of the country's ethos – creating a precedent for what was "right" or "beautiful."

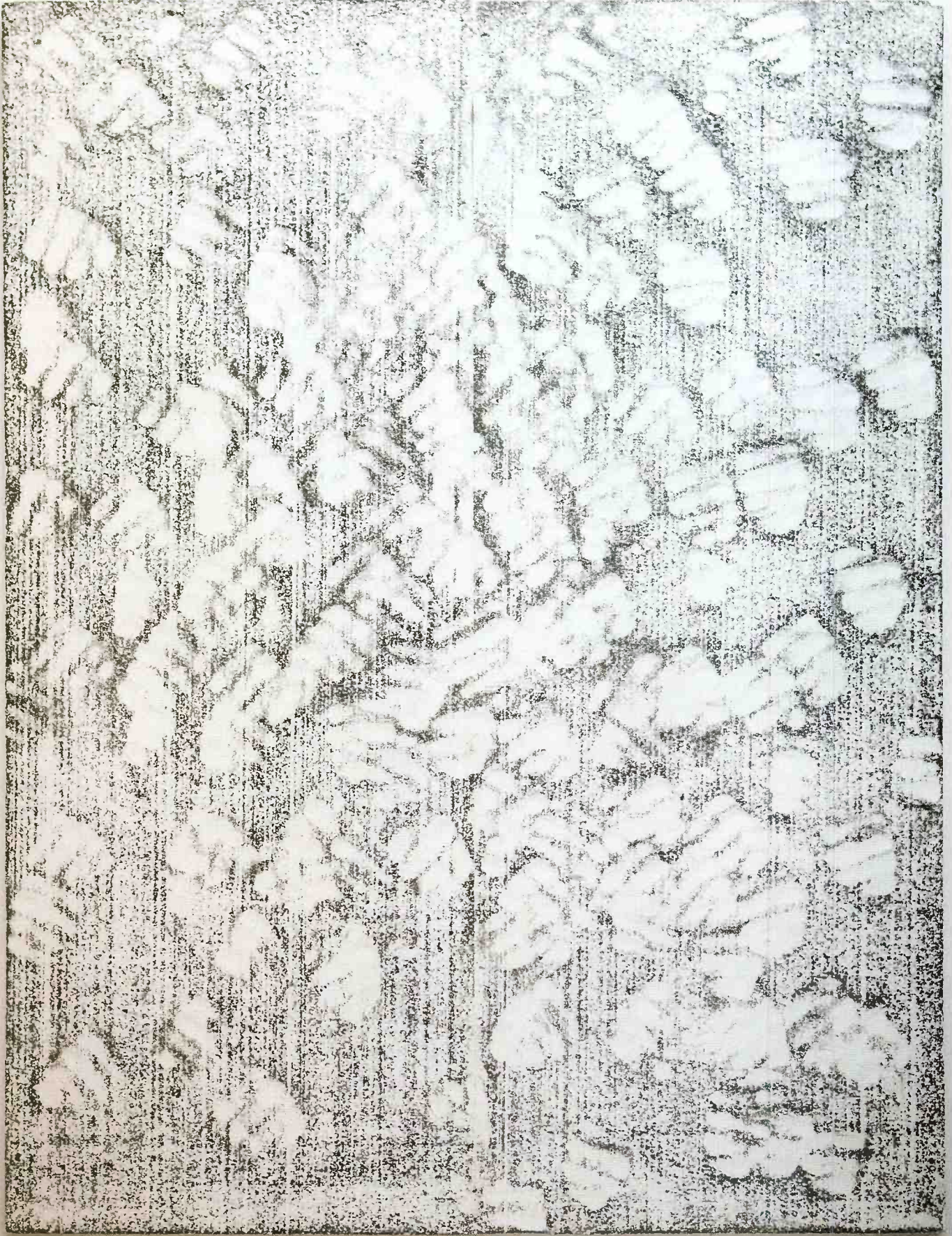
"As a kid," he explains, "the modernist space felt natural. I didn't know it was new, a kind of experiment, and also – to a degree – temporary. I didn't understand that it was relative. It seemed absolute."

Segal's current exhibition stems directly from this confluence between his early years and the artistic landscape of his childhood. For him, it comes from a need to arrive at something more personal in his own artwork. It developed from an objective process – consciously deciding on subject matter that would be expressed in a local dialect. And, yet, this brought him directly in touch with the subjective experience of being a child.

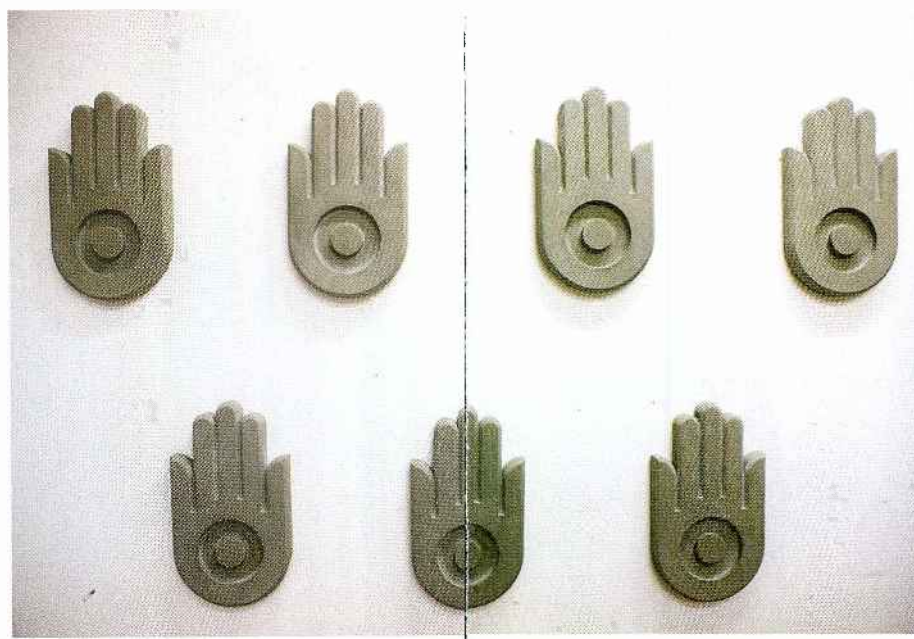
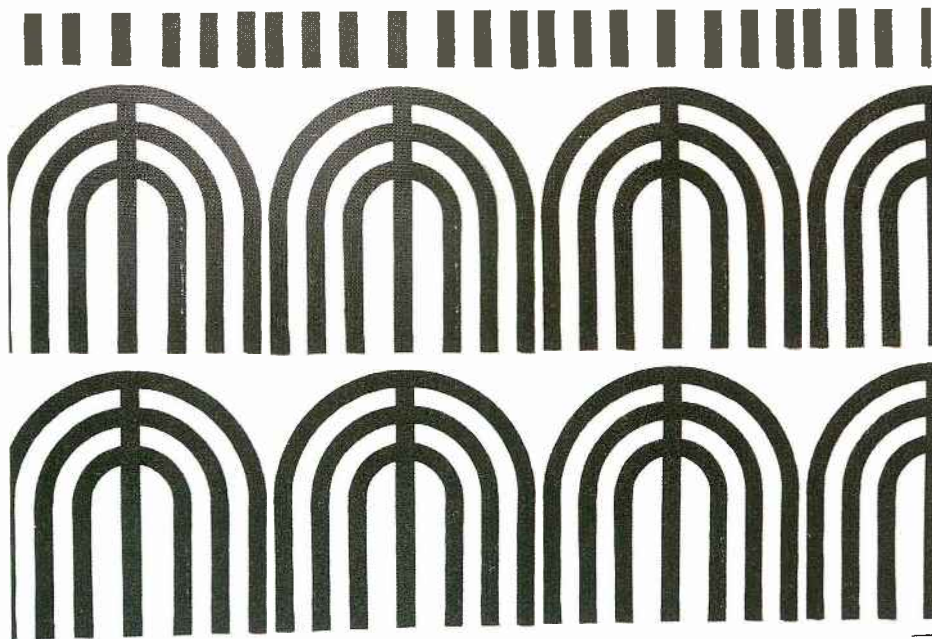
"This can be confusing," Segal admits. "As an artist, I wanted to hold a dialogue with art, but the process of returning to childhood and its influence is something that's outside of art. One is the process of a grown artist and the other is a process that's involved with personal history."

There's a sense of disorientation in this for Segal – when he goes back in his private life he also finds the history of art. It's impossible to separate the two.

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“My family also deals with these questions,” he adds. “Thinking of art as art is something that I’ve known my entire life.”

Segal had to ask himself whether these were merely preoccupations with his own memories and thoughts from childhood – or whether he was indeed delving into an artistic discussion about the dichotomy of local and non-local art. But this, too, brought him back to more difficult personal questions about what it means to grow up in Israel.

“As a child, being Israeli was something hard for me,” he says. “I was born in Amsterdam and my parents were from the Soviet Union. Things that were ‘Israeli’ were always a little tough, ugly, violent. And also outside of me.

“But I also feel that tons of Israelis feel this way. *Olim* and locals, both, can have a lot of issues with what they see happening here. The Israeli space is one that very few Israelis are actually comfortable with,” he contends.

Segal recalls that, in the years he was a child, all the great and beautiful things came from abroad. The gaze was always outward. In a way, with “Walkway” this is something he’s trying to correct.

“In these works, I start from this place – which was hard for me – and try to elevate it to a level that’s no less good than anything you can find abroad. It sounds prosaic, but I’m trying to make Israeli art.

The sources are the environment where I grew up, but I hope the works arrive at this higher plane of Israeli art – the kind I saw in museums in Israel as a child.

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Segal’s return to the ethos of Israeli art represents a personal artistic journey in which he first rejected its forms and ambitions. As a teenager, when he began studying figurative art and developing his painterly technique, he felt that modern and abstract art was inferior. It seemed too easy – like something any kindergartener could do. It took a long process for him to accept it on its own terms and to understand that he actually liked this kind of art.

“I never imagined I’d make large abstract artworks,” he admits. “I also ask

myself how much this is a choice and how much it’s something I don’t have control over.”

Over and over – from the beginning of his art studies at Jerusalem’s Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in 2000 until these recent months – he finds himself making a choice to do figurative work and not abstract works. And, still, he ends up in abstraction.

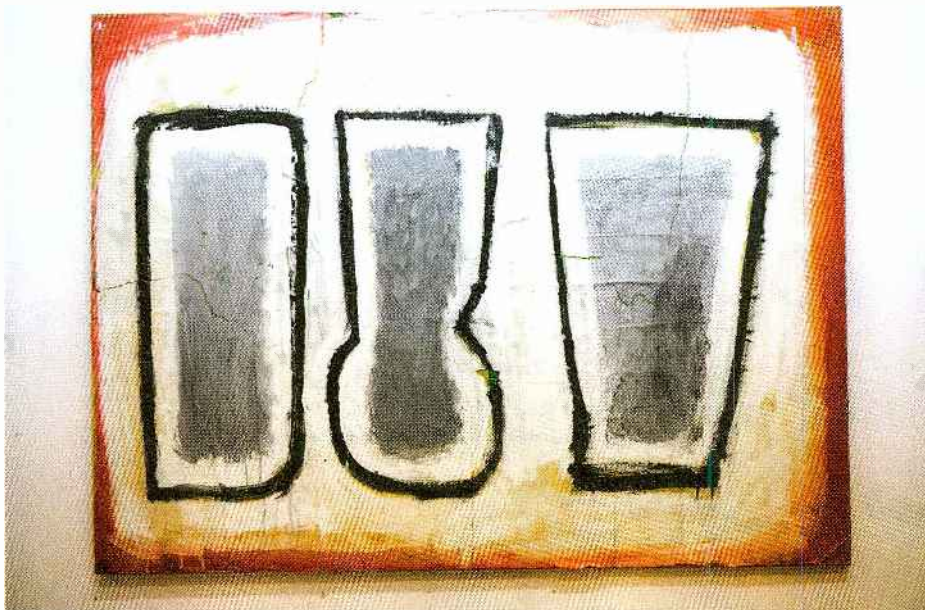
“It’s usually hard for me to reach a point where I’m satisfied with a work,” he says. “And yet in these large abstract works, I reached some sense of satisfaction. It felt right.”

PART OF the problem he encountered repeatedly in figurative painting was the issue of subject matter. For several years, he created paintings of flowers and guitars in a style that mixed modernism with expressionism, works that were exhibited in 2009 at the Florentin 45 Gallery in Tel Aviv.

He later created large works in a graphic minimalist style that bore resemblance to shapes in the real world – whether the coil of a snail or a primitive landscape. These three-dimensional works, exhibited at Tel Aviv’s Feinberg Projects in 2012, straddled the border between painting and sculpture.

They also presented his first approach toward monumentalism – an effect achieved by covering styrofoam with ce-

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ment and giving the works the heavy appearance of reinforced concrete. It seems these extremes left Segal searching for a language that would be both simpler and lighter – something he achieved with his next exhibition at Kibbutz Kabri's Atelier Yehiel Shemi in 2013.

Through it all, Segal says he arrived at a distinction for himself between narrative art – which he considers to be a cousin of literature and most obvious in figurative painting – and art that's closer to what he considers to be design.

"This might be hard for some people to accept," he admits, "but contemporary art is very close to design. Not in the bad sense, but in the sense of thinking about how you build something."

He adds that the minute you stop trying to tell a narrative story and the "story" comes from the material, form, and shape – from how an artwork is made and not *what* you see – you're dealing with design issues.

"Size, proportion, how one material sits on another material, how light falls on a surface – these are all questions of design. The difference between 'design' in the low sense and art is that the object has a function and the design tries to make it pretty. But if the object's function is to give you an experience and nothing else, then it's art – which doesn't give you anything except the chance to experience it."

Segal acknowledges that this problem

has always existed. Artists who did abstract work – or "designy" works – were always asking themselves where the "art" was in their work. One symptom of this, he contends, is the blatant heroism of early abstract painters.

"They gave their works names that take you to high places like 'No. 3' as if it was a question of some big achievement. You see this with Israeli artists like Shemi, Dani Karavan, and Ezra Orion. The work itself seems simple, but the conceptual places to which it directed itself were very high – from Jacob's Ladder to the Stars. It deals with the building blocks of human consciousness."

What Segal is trying to do in his current works is similar, but to arrive at a place that's more personal. He wants it to be big – but not a symphony.

In his opinion, abstract work today is able to focus on specific experiences, becoming less self-satisfied and heroic, and more individual.

"**ART DOESN'T** exist in a vacuum," Segal insists. "You have to work the materials from which you come to make something from what's around you. This is true on all levels – both concrete and abstract. With every idea I'll have, even if it's a foreign idea, I'll still have to go to a local store and work with the materials they have to offer. The same with thinking. Ideas are

(Above) Emergency Room (2010), acrylic on newspaper and canvas; (far left) Mea She'arim (2015), spray paint on polygal; (middle) Hamsa Wall (2015), concrete

not limitless – you have to work with the mental materials you have in your head. You can't go shopping around in other people's heads."

The same goes for subject matter, which Segal is now taking from what he sees around him and what he remembers from childhood – even if this environment can sometimes be alienating.

"There's value in taking this and making it into something beautiful," he says. "Maybe there's something Zionist about this. Maybe it's an attempt to gloss over the reality. Or maybe it's an attempt to create the transcendental experience of walking into a gallery and seeing good art."

He suggests that this brings us to the essence of art, which takes us out of reality and into a better place. He describes this as a kind of trampoline to another place – which will not suddenly feel completely strange, but rather both foreign and familiar.

"If in this 'better place' you recognize something from the place you came from – that's really great. It's not a different place. It's *your* place. There's a kind of purification in this."