

Fantastic voyage

Surrealist paintings take artist to many festivals — and transport her back to her native Israel

by Rebecca Wallace

When Ora Tamir emigrated to California in 1980, she brought Israel with her. The expanses of desert she remembered from her native country became the stark, open backgrounds in her Surrealist paintings.

Tamir also brought her own language of symbols. René Magritte had his pipes, his bowler hats, his floating baguettes. Tamir often sets chessboards, apples and a beguiling little girl against her pale landscapes.

"In my native language, Hebrew, I love to write," Tamir said in a phone interview from her home near Thousand Oaks. Rather than continuing that art in English, "I've chosen to tell stories with paintings."

Next weekend, Tamir will be among about 300 artists telling their stories to passers-by at the 29th annual Palo Alto Festival of the Arts downtown. With its annual offerings of fine art, live music and food and drink, the street fair happens from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Aug. 28 and Aug. 29.

Meanwhile, Tamir is also in another Palo Alto event that's very much linked to the figures in her paintings. On Aug. 28, the Vino Locale wine bar hosts an Art and Wine for Autism evening, with music by the Jazz Improv Combo and art for sale by Tamir and fellow artists Pavel Chudnovsky, Yoel Pizano-Zuniga and Annmargaret Andazola. Proceeds benefit the College of Adaptive Arts in San Jose.

The connection for Tamir is personal. A child who often appears in her art is her 6-year-old granddaughter, who is autistic and lived with Tamir for a time. In Tamir's recent painting "Forever," about the connection between a caregiver and a child, the big-eyed girl sits atop a giant apple, with a "heart-string" linking her to a woman's soft face watching her from the sky. "She's absolutely the love of my life," Tamir said.

While the artist sells many limited-edition prints of her paintings as well as the oil canvases, the "Forever" painting isn't for sale. "I keep the original for my granddaughter, for when she's 18."

For Tamir, an apple "represents everything you like in life." A chessboard "is like life, the game of chess." But symbols in Surrealism, of course, are always open to new interpretations. And sometimes Tamir herself isn't sure where these images in her paintings come from, thanks to her intuitive approach.

"When I paint, I do it in layers. I have a vague idea of what I want to do," she said. First comes the desert-like background. Once that's dry, Tamir adds figures that might come from her sketches. "Only when I'm completely finished with the piece, I realize what it's trying to tell me."

Tamir added: "It's fun. I always say that it's like going to a psychiatrist, but the public pays me. It's magical because people come up and ask me, 'What does it mean?' I might say, 'You tell me.'"

Besides "Forever," Tamir's new paintings also include "Set It Free," in which a woman with feathery legs holds a bird on her outstretched arm. In the back is an empty birdcage. Older works include "Passage," which was on the cover of the Art Business News magazine in 2002. It features a maze-like structure and an eerie moon or planet hanging in the orange-yellow-blue sky.

Collectors of Tamir's work include East Bay residents Denise and Patrick Cavanagh, who have five of her pieces in their Dublin home. Patrick first met Tamir at an art festival in Tucson in 1997, buying a lithograph called "Moonshine."

In California, the couple discovered Tamir again and started buying more of her prints, including "Essence of a Woman," which depicts a nude and two faces flanking it.

"It just spoke to me," Denise Cavanagh said. "I used to lie in bed and just stare at it, couldn't get enough of its beauty. The red, the oranges are just amazing in that piece. I still love it to this day; it's displayed on my side of the bed."



Ora Tamir



Ora Tamir's oil painting "Forever" is about the connection between a caregiver and a child.

Cavanagh and other collectors have compared Tamir's work to Salvador Dalí's, and indeed the pioneering Spanish Surrealist was an early influence. Tamir had been painting since childhood in various styles when she walked into the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and saw a Dalí. Both the technique, "finished to the hilt," and the subject matter astonished her.

"I said to myself: 'Wow. You are allowed to do something like this?'" Tamir said with a laugh. "I was young. I was 21. I didn't realize that you could do your dreams in paintings. I wasn't exposed to it before."

The next night, Tamir had a vivid dream about her parents' divorce when she was young, and awoke to sketch a scene with a lonely landscape and a child holding a balloon.

"That was my first Surrealism. I haven't done anything else since then," she said.

Tamir became an established artist in Israel, took a hiatus from exhibiting while raising three children in California, and then returned to art more seriously in 1997. Her husband, Eli, became her business manager, and helps her promote her art.

Making high-quality, limited-edition lithographs and giclee prints of her oil paintings is a major part of the enterprise, Tamir said. Prints on paper and canvas are more affordable, and also make it easier for her to earn a living. "If I produce five originals a year, how can I survive?" she said.

She's also been regularly traveling the festival circuit for the past 12 years, including attending the Palo Alto fair five or six times.

The prospect of sitting at a booth and answering questions about her art used to make her uncomfortable, but now Tamir enjoys it.

"When I work, I work very much in solitude. I don't listen to anything. It's just me and the painting." Going to the fairs, she said with a laugh, "is like an actor going on stage and getting applause." ■

What: Palo Alto Festival of the Arts, with fine art and crafts, music, food and children's activities

Where: University Avenue, downtown Palo Alto

When: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Aug. 28-29

Cost: Free

Info: Go to mlaproductions.com or call 650-324-3121. For more about Ora Tamir, go to orasart.com.

The Art and Wine for Autism event is set for Aug. 28 from 7 to 9 p.m. at Vino Locale at 431 Kipling St. in downtown Palo Alto. Admission is \$20. For more information, go to artandwineforautism.eventbrite.com or call the wine bar at 650-328-0450.