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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

The Gaze Matters: Sara Benninga Solo Exhibits in Israel



Benninga, Blue Bushes, dry pastel and acrylic on canvas, 55x50 inches, 2023, photo by Shai Halevi

By JAN GARDEN CASTRO October 9, 2023

Sara Benninga's art mulls over the human condition. Are we kind or cruel? How do we discover life's meanings? Do we intentionally help or harm others? Are most people voyeurs? Do observers see truly or falsely? Plato, Socrates, Aristotle,

Lao Tzu, and philosophers, poets, and artists before and after them have pondered eternal questions in cultures worldwide.

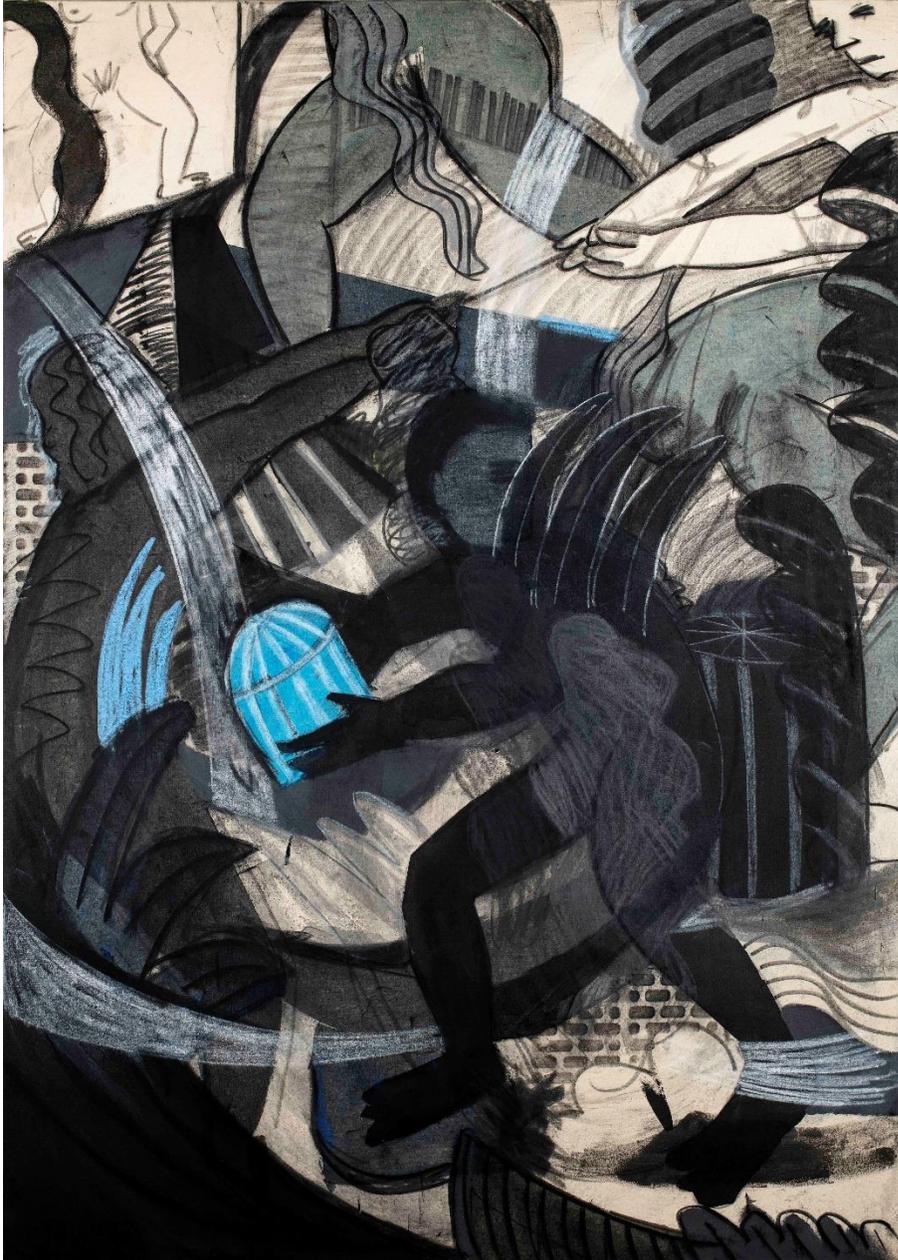
I'm in Israel partly to learn why Sara Benninga's art is surrounded by controversy. She's one of several younger artists I follow now just as I followed Pattie Cronin, Soo Sunny Park, Sanford Biggers, Duke Riley, and others decades ago—before their museum solo shows. I'm convinced that Benninga is doing something new that hasn't been written about. Does she use body parts to suggest either violent or sexual acts, or do viewers project (make up) what is happening on the canvas?

Her paintings are not fleshed out like their historical antecedents such as Peter Paul Rubens' *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1635-40), Fragonard's pleasure garden paintings, and Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas* (1570-76). Why are subjects that were realistically depicted over 400 years ago dangerous today? How does the art address universal subjects in art and life? Benninga's Ph.D. dissertation was on Peter Paul Rubens' women; she teaches in the Tel Aviv University Art History Department and lectures at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem. Her great aunt was a Dutch painter. This year, she was chosen to show in the Fresh Paint Art Fair and also exhibited at Museum on the Seam, Jerusalem. Why is her art so historically aimed, and, at the same time, so disarmingly new?

Contemporary art spaces are often half-hidden in Israel. Tel Aviv's Litvak Contemporary Gallery overlooks a wide swath of half-empty industrial buildings, a popular cafe that roasts its own coffee, and a busy street where a construction crew is installing a new light rail system.

Inside the gallery, blue paintings with varied gazes take over. After admiring this work on Instagram ([sarabenninga_painting](#)) for about two years, the physicality of the large scale works up to six and a half feet tall or seven and a third feet wide envelopes me. The scenes have multiple perspectives. Benninga's solo show at

Litvak through November 24 is curated by Hadas Glazer. It features fourteen large paintings on canvas stretchers; they're moderately priced, and three are sold. She has a second solo show in Jerusalem through November 4 that is curated by Meydad Eliyahu. The artist kindly told me:



Benninga, Everyman, dry pastel, acrylic and oil on canvas, 79x57 inches, 2023, photo by Shai Halevi

Jan Castro: What's going on in *Blue Bushes*? A blue figure clutches a female reaching up; some figures behind her either embrace or attack each other. It's blue in a unique way.

Sara Benninga: I love this painting. Basically, it makes no sense. It surprised me. It has many different hues of blue which make it full although it's only one color, which is interesting for me. Like you said, the narrative here is questionable. Is it a kind of orgy or an attack and rape? Nothing is specified. It's on the verge like that figure who's grasping the nude in the foreground. If you look at it, you see the other hand is a different color and not from the same figure. It works because of the colors and shapes. The story kind of disintegrates if you start looking at it. The figure who is being caressed or attacked is holding a mask.

What are you seeing? How do you give it meaning? I play with volume and flatness, different angles of the face, patterns, depth, and meaning. Enjoying looking at it is also very important—if it moves your eye and makes you active as a viewer, that's good and pleasurable.

Castro: Maybe it's cautionary, too. This one, *Marsyas*, features a satyr whose sin was hubris?

Benninga: Right. He agreed to take on Apollo in a music competition and played more beautifully than Apollo, and Apollo had his skin stripped. It's been painted many times in art history. The late Titian version is very painterly, full of brush strokes. I liked the idea of a man hanging in the opposite orientation to the rest of the figures. Baselitz based many of his paintings on that. There's something about changing the orientation, to see things differently.

This is one of my questions: when you talk about composition, you can speak about and create the composition based on narrative, but you can also think about

major paintings in art history working because of the different formal elements in them. It's interesting to have people in different orientations in the same frame.

Of course, Titian's *Marsyas* doesn't look the same. I've added figures from my vocabulary of figures: that bending figure in the background I paint a lot for different reasons. That figure in white in the foreground is sitting with her back toward us; you see her hair and her legs. She's taken from a model I was working with. There is a hand grasping the leg of one figure in the foreground. There is also a figure from the canvas itself. I like the contradiction between the painted Marsyas and the canvas figure, who is nothing but is totally there. I was using a pastel that is almost the color of the canvas itself, and it came out.

Castro: It's a subtle kind of bronze. The bending figure's features are beautiful.

Benninga: Her whole body fits into a rectangular shape that has a kind of potency. Sometimes I'll paint this figure searching on top of a different figure. It connotes someone looking for something but not at the major thing that's going on. This is another tension that comes out. No one is really looking at what's going on.

Castro: Like Bruegel's *Icarus*: the other figures don't see the winged one falling from the sky.

Benninga: Marsyas is the only one actually looking out at us, so he creates that relation with us.



Benninga, Flashlight,

dry pastel, acrylic and oil on muslin, 86x59 inches, 2023, photo by Shai Halevi

We move on to Artist's House, Jerusalem, a stone academy built in 1890 during Ottoman rule to house the Bezalel Academy and the origin of the collection now at the Israel Museum. These paintings are darker and mostly in black to white hues.

Benninga: This series of paintings is about discovering the world. You cannot find out things without digging in them and mulling them around. They don't just present themselves to you.

That's called *Flashlight*. She's holding a flashlight. There are a lot of flashlights in my paintings. People are trying to look, and they can't see. It's an allegory. She's flashing a light on a figure. Here you see his legs and penis and an arm and stuff. A lot of times, I'll have a figure lying in the bushes. The way I work is to add a figure and another figure, and they go on top of each other and mess up the story. In the end, you have to make it out for yourself.

I turned the canvas around a few times. It's not so much about the figures but trying to make out what's going on. There won't be a coherent story.

Castro: Did you start with the center figure?

Benninga: No. I started when the canvas was horizontal. There's a pipe of Pan flute and a donkey head from mythology, and it sat around for a while; at some point, I turned it to vertical. I added gestures from a model I'm working with. They're made in different ways: with acrylic marker or dry pastels, which I seal into the canvas with an acrylic binder.

Castro: What are the other materials?

Benninga: Acrylic paint, charcoal, and oil—those bluish twirls are oil. It brings in more variety and highlights seeing and creating these differences. I like to play with unification and disintegration.

Whatever you see, you are projecting yourself onto this, so it doesn't matter what I tell you. People perceive these paintings as being very sexual even though there is no sexual action going on here whatsoever. I think they're just feeling the

physicality of painting because of all these differences. Maybe they're feeling the sensuality of painting itself.

Castro: Is that a breast? It's very abstract.

Benninga: Yes. I abstract the figure as well. Here are the male's sexual organs. The marks are like a child's.

This painting is *Everyman*. I took an impression from Bruegel's sixteenth century print, an allegory about the simple person who goes searching in the dark with a lantern but is only searching to fulfill his own needs—trying to find his way in a simple manner. There are all of these philosophies but none really give an answer to what is life. Bruegel's print is also based on the philosophy of Diogenes, who was said to be crazy and who used to walk around with a lantern in broad daylight.

Castro: This turquoise is the lantern?

Benninga: Yes, or it's a geometric object which plays with volume and flatness. He was a huge black figure in the center of the canvas, and he took too much tension, so I covered him up with this bush, leaves, and other figures, some related to the print and some not. Two women are fighting over a piece of rope. The figure in the window is looking onto the painting, which is a take on painting opening a window into reality according to Alberti in Renaissance thought. Obviously, it's a reflection of whoever is looking at it, so it's an anti-window to reality—another space in the space. All of these things could be taken further...



Benninga, The Acrobat, acrylic on paper, 73x51 inches, 2023, photo by the artist

A visit to the artist's large, light-filled studio in Jerusalem shows ample quality art materials, from wood to shape into stretchers for the canvas to chinks, paints, and art supplies. Many large, neatly stored finished paintings are near the entrance; many more are in progress are in the rest of the space. One painting of a lady doing a handstand on a horse's back is near a window.

Benninga: The title is *The Acrobat* -- someone who does tricks on a horse. This one led to the long one (*Swimmers*) in Tel Aviv. My paintings are born from other paintings. The process is ongoing and important—this painting couldn't have happened without the painting before it.

Sara Benninga's work freshly deconstructs the dominant male gaze in art history and adds new dimensions to art's stories, histories, materials, and processes. Her art reminds us that Manet's *Olympia*, 1863, now at The Met Museum for a once-in-a-lifetime visit, greatly upset viewers in Manet's day due to this model's direct gaze and atypical face.

Sara Benninga's shapes and symbols —flashlights, bushes, bodies in motion— are states of being unlike any other. Her art mirrors something Toni Morrison said (I'm paraphrasing): if a book you want to read hasn't been written yet, you must write it.

As a footnote, at Jerusalem's Israel Museum, the main contemporary exhibitions are all by men: sculpture by Israeli artist Zohar Gotesman, African-American Rashid Johnson, and Thomas Demand's mega-show of large scale photos of constructed settings. Walter Benjamin's "Little History of Photography," an exhibit on Persian art, and the permanent collection together include a handful of works by women. A famous older male artist, Tsibi Geva, has a smaller solo show inspired by Ocean Vuong at Parterre, a Tel Aviv gallery accessed through an alleyway and not evident at street level. I'm sure Israel's art scene offers more that I had time to discover. **WM**



JAN GARDEN CASTRO (www.jancastro.com) is author/editor of six books, including *The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe*, Contributing Editor for *Sculpture Magazine*, and contributor for *American Book Review*. She has a major essay in a new edition of *The Handmaid's Tale* (www.suntup.press/Atwood).