

# Review | This Painter Is the Purest Voice in Israeli Art

Vulnerable and yet brave, do not miss Yudith Levin's voice – as reflected in her show on display at Tel Aviv's Dvir Gallery through this Saturday

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Artist Yudith Levin in 2003. Credit: Avraham Hai



**Ouzi Zur**

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Yudith Levin is the purest and truest voice in Israeli art, and yet hers is a humble and self-questioning voice, never arrogant, vulnerable but powerful and, in her own way, brave – and all that is in addition to her rare skill in the plastic arts. Her voice is also very local (Levin lives and creates in Moshav Ein Vered, where

she was born in 1949), and incomparably sensitive to the world around her, with all its flaws and beauty.

The curating of her current exhibit, “Really and Truly,” [at Tel Aviv’s Dvir Gallery](#), is of an ascetic nature, forging various connections in an industrial space, leaving welcome breathing space around each work – and it’s also quite surprising: Levin’s paintings hang side by side, at times one above the other, as in the artist’s studio when she tries to take stock of what she’s created in a given time frame.

It’s evident that curator Dvir Intrator has taken certain liberties this time and accommodated Levin’s desire to display as much as possible, even in violation of proper curatorial etiquette. Perhaps so as to present a partial summary of her work in the past few decades; perhaps as a reflection on the life the paintings will have after she’s gone. The works, being shown here for the first time, are missing pieces from Levin’s well-known series.



**Yudith Levin, untitled. 1998. Credit: Ouzi Zur**

For people unfamiliar with Levin, particularly those in the younger generation, this exhibit is an opportunity to become acquainted with her oeuvre of recent decades, which constitutes an essential part of the Israeli art scene. The show features 27 large paintings and a photographic documentation of an installation.

In “Untitled” (2019), Levin paints in red on the bleached space of the canvas a sort of titanic, disintegrated, smeared doll-like girl’s head. With dry, thin strokes she seems to strike and at the same time dissolve the head, whose very essence is pain exposed. There is a snake-like neck, and the facial space seems to contain two remote, crushed eyeballs. In a completely covert manner, Levin mixes the bright redness of the head with a bit of base white, thickening and blurring simultaneously, creating a mirage between the thinness of the color that defines the painted subject and the whiteness of the base – a motif recurring in many of her paintings.

“Hawara Checkpoint” (2008) is one of a series of paintings in which the personal and the political, the abstract and the figurative, the “is” and the “is not,” color and body – all blend in with one another to forge an exemplary essence that exceeds the boundaries of art to achieve a rare human creation, devoid of any propagandist elements. In the barren navel of the

painting's wasteland, forged in fire and blood, Levin creates the profile of a man whose hands are cuffed and eyes are bound. The whiteness of the flannel strip grips the tortured, agonizing lump of flesh, kneeling in a humiliating forced prayer pose, while at the same time it seems to break out of the boundaries of the flesh, slightly elevated above the invisible ground. High in the air above the figure's back, as though on a thin layer of ice, a little daughter's feet tread miraculously, a detail defining him as a father. With her black shoe soles, her legs and the blue hem of her dress, airy and watery, she appears to dance in the sky, hovering like a little saint. Is she emerging from the father's suffering, or actually present at the checkpoint, witnessing her father's humiliation?



Yudit Levin, *Hawara Checkpoint*, 2008. Credit: Ouzi Zur

In “Little Red Riding Hood. The Wolf” (2017), a wolf passes through the frozen tundra of the canvas in a diagonal angle from above. It looks like an abstract ghost, made of spare, snarling brush strokes, ever so faintly depicting the animal’s silent movement. There is a smudge of male-masculine hirsuteness here. On the lower left, the vegetation is aflame like a burning bush, and the fire setting the implied branches alight is melting their blackness, in a poetic contrast of fire turning to water, or water turning to fire.

Next to this hangs “Untitled” (2008), in a proximity that imbues this work with another symbolic layer. The little girl from Hawara Checkpoint walks like a heavenly angel in the sky above, her feet on a transparent covering while her ethereal body is lifted up in a baroque shorthand; we observe her from below like worshipers looking at seraphs on cathedral ceilings. From the lower left-hand corner emerges the vulpine entity from another fairy tale, not hers, chasing her, plotting to devour the elusiveness of her being. The contrast Levin creates in this space between the diagonal of the wolf and the opposing diagonal of the girl is powerful, enhancing their dreamy essence.

Along the entire northern wall of the gallery hangs one of the most wonderful series of paintings in Israeli art. Female figures, each on her own canvas, as though



**Yudith Levin, untitled, 1998.** Credit: Ouzi Zur

becoming corporeal after evolving from the marrow of the history of art and matter – and then evaporating before our eyes like ancient frescoes suddenly exposed to the light of a modern day. They are powerful and potent, preserving a bit of the vital sensuality that celebrates each figure's independence, with no need for a man, like goddesses of blood and spirit. Did Levin create them as different reflections of herself, or as dream-objects?

One of the images – of a naked redhead – reminds one a little of the erotic asceticism of Egon Schiele's figures: the vibration of her brilliantly colored short hair and the warmth of the elongated body, amassed along the legs, with the whiteness of the base hiding more and more of the paleness of her limbs, while the sexuality of this Jane Doe remains very present.

“Yellow” (2002) depicts a pair of women made of, and dissolving into, the very matter of light, a mirage of yellow and white, creating and annulling itself at the same time. As their dresses cling to the yellowness of summer, their heads and arms have melted into the white backdrop. Levin's play between translucence and whiteness in these paintings is genius.



The photo documentation of the installation “Wings” (1974) is a stand-alone. It is an elongated photo taken from above, showing a young Levin lying on her back in a rocky field, arms spread out. Each arm extends and morphs into the long wing of a flying glider plane. She is like Icarus a moment before girding his loins to soar into the sun, in this gesture of grief for the artist’s brother Zvika, who was killed at a young age in a flying accident.

The exhibit at Dvir presents an exciting window into the Levin’s soul and world – the “really and truly” that has been her guiding light from her earliest days.

*Yudith Levin, “Really and Truly”; Curator: Dvir  
Intrator. At the Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv, through July 10*