

# The curator of one of Israel's largest art collections still prefers London

Shany Littman

While local models, celebrities and businesspeople mingled last Saturday night sipping fine wine at the opening of the fifth exhibition of the Igal Ahouvi Art Collection at the Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery at Tel Aviv University, the curator of the exhibit, Matan Daube, actually preferred to stand outside, in the dark.

Daube admits that the occasion was strange and uncomfortable on his part, and he usually manages to avoid the openings of exhibitions. But this time he was asked to attend because after all, this was the first large exhibition he curated as part of the collection of real-estate tycoon and enthusiastic art collector Igal Ahouvi.

It is not easy to describe Daube's new status. He has worked with Ahouvi for three years, and was the right-hand man of Sarit Shapira, the collection's previous curator who left a year ago. He started working for the collection after completing his master's degree in curating art at the Royal College of Art in London. Since then he has continued to live in London, where Ahouvi stores his collection, Israel's largest private collection of contemporary art.

For now, Daube describes himself as "the professional artistic authority for the Igal Ahouvi Art Collection," but is not willing to describe himself as the curator of the collection, even though that was Shapira's title.

"We look at it differently," he explains. "There are regular checks we make, and I also write letters to artists, go to see works, do research on artists, meet with artists overseas and keep in touch with artists and galleries. And when we buy work then Igal and I discuss its significance, if it is worthwhile or not, and what is the future of the artist."

The new exhibition signals a very different line than the one taken by Shapira, even though it too is based on the same collection, which has some 1,500 works of art. Among the artists whose work is displayed this time one can find photographs from Richard Avedon, Robert Mapplethorpe, Irving Penn and Diane Arbus; an installation by Hans-Peter Feld-



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Tomer Appelbaum

mann; video work of Alex Prager; pictures by Marlene Dumas and Yigal Tumarkin; a portrait of Jackie Kennedy Onassis by Andy Warhol; as well as works by Dror Daum, Martin Kippenberger, William Kentridge and Gerhard Richter.

*How would you describe the difference between the approach in this exhibition and the previous exhibition from the collection?*

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"Maybe because I studied in London and not here [in Israel], I come from an approach that says it is possible in curating to be a few artists and mix things up too. This is what enabled me to combine different approaches of presentation alongside artists' different approaches to the question. One of the aspects most important to me in the exhibition is to leave things open for the viewer, not to burden them with texts. It was important to me that we approach a broad as possible audience, not only those of refined tastes. I am certain there will be criticism of the lack of refinement in certain things, but that doesn't seem important to me."

The ongoing change in

approach to the collection's exhibits were made consciously, says Daube. "Igal never had the intention of connecting only to the very few. From the beginning, we looked for a public space that is open for free and that as many people as possible will be exposed to it. The large museums in Israel, for all sorts of reasons, practical, political – it's hard to bring large exhibitions from overseas. But we can do it. Ahouvi can bring works that are not seen here a lot."

Daube, 36, started his career as an artist at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design. He graduated in art in 2006 and displayed his work at the Dvir Gallery, the Herzliya Biennial of Contemporary Art, the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art and others. At the same time he started working as the curator of Fresh Paint – Israeli Contemporary Art Fair, alongside its founders Yifat Gurion and Sharon Tillinger.

Daube says his studies at the Royal College of Art were characterized by clear practicality: "They taught us that as curators it was very important to avoid interpretive texts in order not to plant ideas in anyone's head. In the museum world in Britain the experience of the viewer is very important. Today, I try to implement this."

The new exhibition surveys the changing face of portraiture from the beginning of the last century to the present day through paintings, drawings, sculptures, installations and video works by leading international and Israeli artists.

The exhibition highlights artists' different approaches to portraiture.

It seems that Daube generally thinks that in London they have more respect for art, and this was a reason to remain there too. "To my regret, I don't feel I belong here, for political and personal reasons. In the profession of curation things are happening here, but I regret they are not backed by all the institutions. When people try to do things here then for everyone who tries there are 10 who object and interfere. London is a large place and there is room for everyone, and no one is jealous of the success of others. And it's a shame that such a small scene as Israel acts as

if it's important."

When he speaks about jealousy, Daube definitely includes the suspicions toward his boss: When it became known that Ahouvi had rented part of the university gallery, there was a large number of people who criticized Tel Aviv University for allowing a deal in which in practice it turned its gallery space into a private exhibition for Ahouvi. Now Ahouvi is considering whether to continue to rent the gallery from the university as the contract is about to run out.

Daube says the complaints about the gallery are petty. "It was a place whose future looked depressing and most people had never heard of it. Igal paid money to the university, and also finances every exhibition, and this involves very complicated logistics and insane budgets that the university could not have met by itself. If the choice was to give it to Igal or to turn it into an events hall or restaurant, or to just close it, then its existence is preferable to nonexistence. Ahouvi could have used his money to buy a helicopter or yacht. Instead he is willing to let people see art. I don't see anything wrong with that."

The exhibition "Prima Facie" runs at the Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery near the main entrance to the Tel Aviv University campus from Dec. 27, 2015 to April 1, 2016. Admission is free.