



'Jerusalem Purple and Green.' (Photos: Courtesy)

Beyond black and white

Painter Ora Nissim creates worlds of color

• By ARIEL DOMINIQUE HENDELMAN

I have an interesting story that combines religion and life," Ora Nissim says, sitting in the Heichal Shlomo entrance gallery, where her exhibition "Inspiration and Fantasy: Art Meets Soul" is currently on display.

Nissim was born in Mea She'arim to a family of 12 children. Her father studied Torah and her mother was a preschool teacher. They had absolutely no idea about art. The way that they related to art was through Torah. To them, Torah was the only form of art that merited mentioning. Nissim's teachers and rabbis shared this view.

When Nissim was seven, she had a terrible sore throat and neither of her parents could take her to the doctor, so her sister took her. "She gave me crayons to color with, because there was a very long line," Nissim recalls. "Afterwards, she was so impressed with what I had done that she showed my parents. They signed me up for a drawing class. It was a classic, standard art class. It helped me therapeutically, because we lived in a one-and-a-half-room apartment with 12 kids. My father would say that each tile on our floor was enough space for one child, and because there were 42 tiles, we were lucky to have so much space."

She attended a Bais Yaakov school, where the only option for young women was to become a teacher. She had no interest in being a teacher; she knew that she wanted to be an artist.

"My father said there was no money in that, like everyone says," she says. "But I was stubborn and kept insisting, so he decided to help me find a place where I could learn art."

The options in Israel for art school at the time were Bezalel and Shenkar. There were no art schools for religious women. Nissim's father called her former drawing teacher, who told him that she had studied in France. He thought it was better for Nissim to study among non-Jews than secular Jews; at least among goyim, she would not forget she was different. Nissim went to study in France, without knowing English or French.

"I spoke every night with my father on the phone," she explains. "I was

shocked by all the nudity in class. When my father would ask what I learned that day, I would say that I learned to draw a man or a woman. He would respond that that was good. I couldn't tell him the truth that the models were naked!"

In class, Nissim did not understand the teacher's instructions, which resulted in her doing the opposite of what the rest of the class was doing. This made her stand out from the pack and only served to help her artistic growth. "I did what I wanted; whatever I felt like doing," she states. "Eventually, I found my own place and voice."

After the first semester, her father sent her older sister to visit and check up on her. Immediately, the two of them were on a plane back to Mea She'arim.

Her parents found her a match when she was 19 and she was married. She stresses that he was a nice man, just not a good match for her. As excited as she was to get out of the house and be independent, the marriage was not a good one.

Art was her escape, the only place where she could fully express herself with no rules and no one imposing himself on her. She began to teach drawing to women in Mea She'arim, women like herself who felt constricted by their circumstances. She was able to teach these women how to find freedom through art.

After five years, her marriage ended. She then married a second time, with her current husband, Ilan. This time, it was her choice.

"Ilan has an open mind," she says. "He doesn't impose limitations on me. He allows me to create my art, while he takes care of a lot of the household duties. Until today, it is that way. In the morning, I focus on painting; and at night, I teach art to a diverse group of women. Sometimes my classes have up to 80 students. The idea is to look at things from a fresh perspective, not to copy."

Nissim is quite successful, selling paintings to big buyers all over the world. She attributes her success to the courage that was required to express herself and describe her experiences through art. She currently has paintings in New York, Canada and in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in Jerusalem.

Her "Inspiration and Fantasy" exhibition at Heichal Shlomo has been extended beyond the intended November 7 closing, because of the overwhelmingly



The 'Inspiration and Fantasy: Art Meets Soul' exhibition at Heichal Shlomo has been extended due to viewers' positive response.



'In my art I create new worlds, worlds that I want to live in': Ora Nissim with 'Hassidim' (inset). (Ariel Dominique Hendelman)

positive response it has received.

"In my art, I create new worlds, worlds that I want to live in," Nissim adds. "For example, with my paintings of the colorful hassidim, the white background symbolizes Hashem [God]; and all the colors of the hassidim represent not the Judaism that I grew up with, the black and white, but the colorful, progressive Judaism that you see today, the multicolored experience that is open to all Jews. I don't like labels. I practice Judaism today in a much more real way. I don't look at things as haredi or secular. I found my own path, and you can see it in my artwork. I don't focus on the fearful aspect of Judaism, which is what I knew growing up. I practice out of joy and love, which is what you see in my paintings."

To Nissim, Judaism is multifaceted. Her paintings of Jerusalem are full of color, whimsy, vibrancy and heart. She references a teaching that the Jerusalem of gold represents *Mashiah*, the future redemption. All of the colors coming together on the canvas are to her all the different types of Jews and residents of Jerusalem, including Muslims and Christians, who are all moving forward toward this future.

The colors match and work together well, but the challenge for her as a painter is to never enter the realm of kitsch. "My life has been so colorful, like my art. I had to have courage to go my own way and be an innovator. My art is really symbolic of that journey. I paint Judaica art, but not in the standard way that reflects Judaism of the past. I wanted to paint Judaism today and in the future. I don't think about what I'm going to paint beforehand; there is no plan. I feel."

Most of Nissim's paintings are not done with brushes; she prefers to use knives or her hands and body. In this way, painting becomes a full experience. She feels disconnected when using a brush.

Sometimes, she will look at her art and see that it is not her own, but, rather, God creating through her like prophecy. There is no set plan or amount of time per painting; they come as they come.

She also writes poetry, which often accompanies her paintings, expounding upon themes in her work.

For Nissim, it's not about quantity; it is always the quality of the work. Therefore, her art is an extension of herself, the highs and lows, every shade. It's nearly impossible to pinpoint exactly who she is, other than a culmination of all of her myriad experiences and a deep believer in the power of creative expression, as well as in the potential of the Jewish people.

Looking at her, you would never think she came from the most religious neighborhood in Jerusalem. She does not cover her hair. Her husband wears a kippa, but does not have a long beard.

She dresses modestly – a long skirt and a simple blouse. The only time her modesty is tossed aside is in her paintings. Her art displays her time line: from Mea She'arim to France and back again to Israel with a wider lens.

"Everyone relates to my art in their own way," she says. "I can't plan what someone will relate to; I never know. I have a lot of fantasies, which you see in my paintings. I want to create a reality of hope through my art; not the exiled nation, but the hopeful nation. My paintings are a world of color and unity. You don't have to be Jewish to appreciate them. The idea is that it's open and progressive; the beauty is available to anyone. It is said that there are 70 faces of the Torah, and this is one of them."

But not all of Nissim's paintings are joyful. One day in 2014, she was in her studio with the radio on, as usual, when she heard about the terrorist attack in Har Nof. She began painting a religious man with somber colors: grays and dark, earth tones. She used a knife to create the work and couldn't help but think of the deaths by stabbing that had only just happened. In this way, as with all of her paintings, out of tumult and difficulty, something beautiful and lasting was born.

"I'm 38 years old," Nissim states. "Just as it is written in the Passover Haggada, 'I'm like a 70-year-old,' I feel that describes me. People aren't measured by their age, [but,] rather, by their memories. I have experienced a lot.

"Still, I feel I have much more to give to the world, and art is my way. The world is a varied and radiant place. Most importantly, you can make money from art!"