



OPHIR AGASSI

Ophir Agassi

One to the Next

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Curated by Karen Wilkin

Essay by Christina Kee

THE PAINTING CENTER

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Radiate: Ophir Agassi's Recent Works

Ophir Agassi represents something rare: a contemporary painter delving into sacred iconography without either ironic detachment or conventional adherence. Instead, Agassi's recent works ground themselves squarely in the modern formalist tradition to incisively explore age-old representations intended to inspire the faithful. His interpretations of familiar iconography are unexpected and improvisational, without, however, departing in intention or effect from the nature of the subject. It can be sensed that a search toward greater understanding of the archetypes he treats underlies this surprising and insightful collection of paintings. Bridging distinct and possibly conflicting sensibilities, Agassi uses the physicality and open-endedness possible through the painted medium to get closer to what are, after all, images of very human, embodied, examples of lived experience – even within the possibility of a divine context.

Agassi treats only a select few motifs in this exhibition, but together their thematic range is immense. *One to the Next* shows an agonizing moment of judgement, of a child no less, by figure of father and king. *Emerald Embrace* and *Dawn* recall the drama, both physical and psychological, of Jacob wrestling the Angel. Agassi returns also, in multiple iterations, to the subject of the *Virgin and Child*. The pairing is sometimes cradled within the arcs of a shaped canvas as in *Family Portrait (First Love Second)* and sometimes held aloft in a more hierarchical composition with a host of attending angels. The single figure of *Radiate* who re-appears in a series of works evokes the timeless and cross-cultural idea of the isolated spiritual figure fully absorbed in a state of meditation or prayer. It is not hyperbolic to say that this selection of paintings, none much larger than easel-sized, is dealing directly with

concepts of judgement, justice, personal devotion, spiritual adherence and divine love. The human subjects that enact the themes are likewise archetypally all-encompassing: mothers, fathers, children, kings and sages.

Handled less thoughtfully, these paintings could conceivably buckle under their own weight, so to speak. Nowhere, however, is there a hint of bombast or feigned gravity in Agassi's paintings, only nuanced suggestions of a painterly process of approach and retreat, search and discovery. The quality of humility in relation to the subject that can be sensed in these works is as important an ingredient as any other. It is not simply an arguably desirable quality in itself, but helps to create a thematic framework in the handling of overtly religious material. There is a kind of "space" in these paintings – visual, cognitive and conceptual – in which they may be viewed and received. Agassi's re-iterated delineating line, for example, is sometimes forceful, as with the wrestlers, and sometimes softly blurred as in the *Family Portraits*, but always takes into account the possibility of movement of his living subjects. The feeling of the mark's slight hesitation in these cases feels somehow respectful, even reverent. Agassi's immersive color sense is similarly complex and spatial. In *Blue Embrace* a distinctive "sky-or-water" blue envelops and supports the figures within a richly ambiguous setting reminiscent of Matisse's ever-open planes. There is everywhere in these paintings room for a rhythmic visual reading of the forms akin to breathing.

The strongest, most forceful lines and colors in these works tend to be reserved for passages where the geometric underpinnings of the works are emphasized, as with the sienna brushstrokes

in *Dawn*, moving strongly through and around the figures. It is almost as though certainty is reserved in Agassi's work for the abstractions inherent to pictorial depiction, whereas its human subjects – and the implications of their lives and personal narratives – are suspended in a situation of “not-quite-knowingness”.

The artist's own complex relationship to his subject matter, and to a frame of reference of a codified religious upbringing, is in many senses directly relevant to the work. Agassi was born in Israel and moved to the United States when he was still in infancy, and was raised in an observant Jewish Orthodox home. He attended a yeshiva high school before he extended his studies in college to explore a range of ethno-cultural and religious traditions. He is as genuinely knowledgeable of Kabbalah as he is of ancient Hindu dating systems, and speaks with ease of the saints and disciples who people the works of masters, from Giotto and Cimabue to Titian and Raphael, who have had such direct influence on his current paintings.

While Agassi's life now differs in many aspects from the formal religious environment in which he was raised, he describes his relationship to the dogma of religion as internally על-פי הלכה (al pi halakhah, in accord with the law) meaning even in non-observance there is an awareness of the laws being transgressed. This personal context was relevant to Agassi's art training, when he worked from the live model and sketched directly from works in cathedrals, and continues to add a rich dimension to his paintings. Agassi, for example, would be very much aware of the strict prohibition of graven imagery in Judaism.

Although painting itself might not have been explicitly prohibited, he continues to take to his work a highly conscious deliberation into the “how and why” of his images, an abiding question as to their purpose and function in the world.

The small scale of many of these recent works, and particularly the shaped canvases, alludes to the history of paintings used as personal devotional objects, intended to assist the viewer with focusing towards contemplation or meditation. Alternatively, they may function like a talisman, to protect, guide or inspire the viewer through association with the subject it depicts. The characters x x, the artist's initials in Hebrew, additionally hint at a spiritual dimension to the artist's process and echo the practice of the ancient scribes in which the act of marking an empty page is approached with care and intention, with an opening invocation and concluding aspiration.

The paintings of the *Virgin and Child* will for some observant viewers carry the charged aura of a transgressive act, given the history of antisemitism in the Church. It becomes clear through the multiple variations the artist has chosen to do, as well as the treatment of the images, that these works represent a sincere engagement with one of Christianity's most revered and recognizable motifs. Combined with the Hebrew initials these paintings present a question: why is Agassi making these works? The answer is perhaps best accessed indirectly via the more general line of questioning posed by the artist's work, namely what is the nature of the figures of sacred texts, and what is to be gained by painting them?

Agassi's paintings make the case that we may fruitfully approach these imposing figures, and he joins the long tradition of artists who have pressed imaginatively into the physical aspects of their lives. The endeavor may serve to didactically elucidate aspects of their stories, but perhaps more importantly gives weight, and makes more concrete, the shared common ground of real and material human life. Agassi's lifelong immersion into this thematic material is palpable, and it might be ventured that there are facets of "self-portraiture" running like a sub-theme in the subjects the artist has chosen: in the child facing the father, in the human being caught in the struggle of doubt and adversity, and certainly in the solitary figure. It is in the works of this figure, absorbed in meditation, that the artist most powerfully equates intense color modulations with states of mind, suggesting the possibility of meaningful symbiosis between artistic and transcendent experience.

As for the *Virgin and Child* paintings, they were begun following the birth of the artist's first child and continued after the birth of his second. While aware of the layered implications of working with the imagery, Agassi gravitated towards the subject as an indirect family portrait, as referenced by the titles. Few will be those with children who will not relate to at least one aspect of the two-fold nature of the imagery – as age-old symbolism but also as a universal image of the protective and pure nature of maternal love, whether earthly or divine.

Christina Kee, 2020

"Ophir Agassi consistently confounds our expectations. He first captures our attention with familiar, literally iconic images from the history of art – a Madonna and Child, for example – but then compels us to ignore what we have recognized and concentrate, instead, on the Platonic, archetypal structures underlying even the most explicit narrative. The result is to destabilize meaning and assert the presence of the artist, provoking us to consider the fictive nature of art."

Karen Wilkin, 2020

Emerald Embrace, 2019
Acrylic on panel
20" x 16"



Dawn, 2019
Acrylic on canvas
20" x 16"



Intertwined, 2019
Acrylic on canvas
24" x 30"



One to the Next, 2019
Acrylic on panel
30" x 40"



Blue Embrace, 2019
Acrylic on panel
30" x 40"



(First Born) Embrace & Shield, 2019
Acrylic on panel
36" x 36"



(First Born) Advance & Retreat, 2019
Acrylic on panel
36" x 36"



(First Born) Contain & Protect, 2019
Ink and acrylic over linoleum block print on paper
15" x 15"



(First Born) Envelop & Suspend, 2019
Ink, acrylic, and red chalk over linoleum block print on paper
15" x 15"



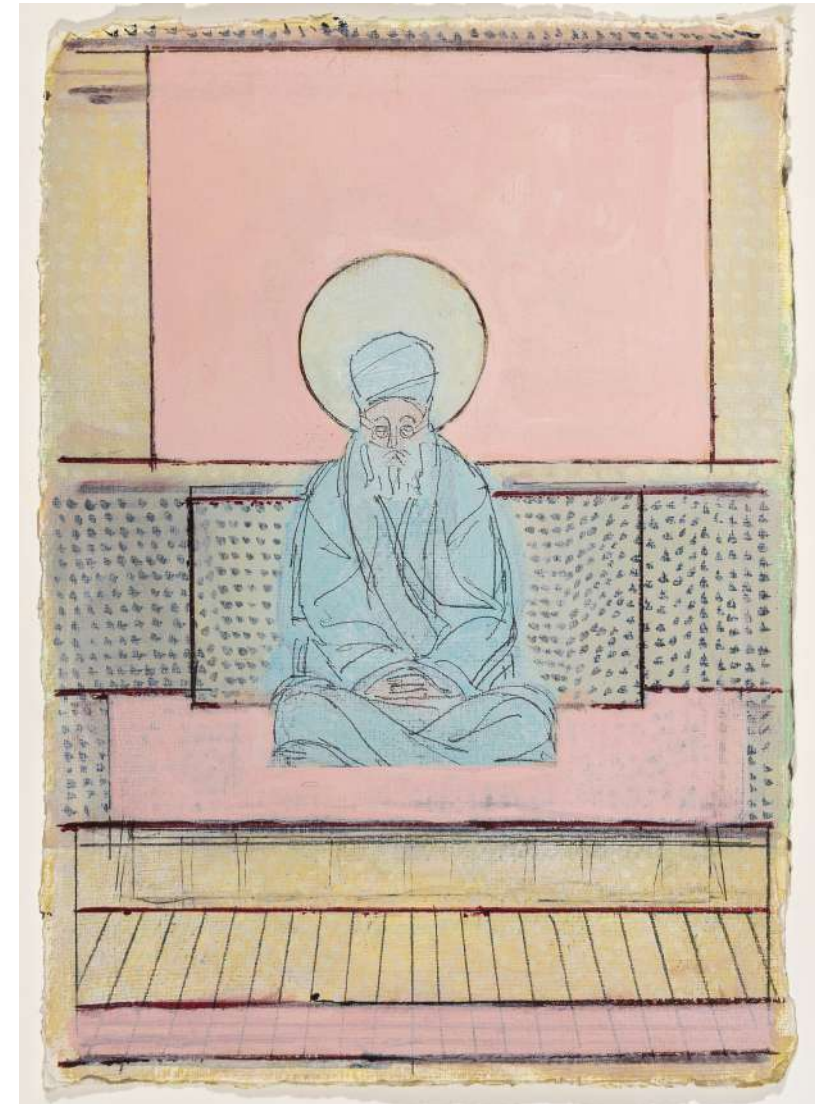
Family Portrait (First Love Second), 2020
Charcoal, red chalk, and acrylic on canvas mounted on wood
14.75" x 14.75"



Family Portrait (Brooklyn Love), 2020
Charcoal, red chalk, and acrylic on canvas mounted on wood
22.25" x 17.5"



Circumscribe, 2017
Acrylic on handmade paper
18" x 12"



Swim, 2017
Acrylic on handmade paper
18" x 12"



Radiate, 2017
Acrylic on handmade paper
18" x 12"



Ophir Agassi

Ophir Agassi was born in Haifa, Israel and raised in Brooklyn, New York. He earned a B.A. from Yale University and an MFA from the New York Studio School. Agassi has exhibited at The Painting Center, Bowery Gallery and First Street Gallery in New York City; Parker's Box, Sideshow, Storefront Ten Eyck and David & Schweitzer in Brooklyn; La Vigie-Art Contemporain in Nîmes, France and HMC in Budapest, Hungary. He has been an artist-in-residence in New York City at Chashama, Triangle Artists' Workshop, and Cross Path Culture; nationally at the Vermont Studio Center, UCross Foundation, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Hambidge Center and I-Park; and internationally at the Royal Drawing School's Dumfries House Estate in East Ayrshire, United Kingdom. Agassi's work has been reviewed in The Hudson Review, The New Criterion, American Artist and Concept magazine. The artist lives and works in Brooklyn, NY and Bethlehem, PA.

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