

## **Nir Hod: An Acrobat of Emotion in the Circus of Illusions**

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### **Prologue**

Nir Hod is a missionary of beauty. Fame and loneliness, heroism, youth, glamour and death are served up in his work in heaping doses. The heroes and heroines in his paintings – most of whom are cast in his own image – play parts in a grandiose, imaginary melodrama that belongs to the realms of eternity, mythology and fairy tales. The world depicted in his paintings appears as if it truly belongs to the young. His beautiful, glorified heroes never sweat or emit body odors. Nor will they ever grow old. Even in death, their beauty will remain pure, untouchable and untarnished. The glamour parcel that Hod presents to the viewer in a saccharine-sweet, ostentatious cellophane wrapper reveals itself to be a capsule filled with emotion, passion and death, which challenges ideas about beauty in the era after modernism.

### **The Series *Forever* – A Requiem to a Lost Youth**

In the painting *Lost Youth* (2002), Hod depicts a military funeral, an event often featured on the Israeli evening news. The scene, which captures this event with uncanny precision and formal restraint, is revealed from within an enormous wreath, and unfolds before the viewer's eyes in larger-than-life dimensions. On the left, two soldiers shown in profile salute the center of the composition. On the right stand four women soldiers, whose gestures and pained expressions articulate various degrees of heart-breaking torment and restraint. The body of the deceased and his family are not depicted in the painting. In the background, Hod inserted his own figure as a soldier in the Army of Peace. His frozen facial expression marks him as an outsider, an onlooker who is not quite there. In this image, Hod has masterfully encapsulated the body language of human pain, whose universal aspects extend far beyond the painting's local context.

*Lost Youth* was executed in New York, at a distance from Israeli current events; it was one of the first paintings in the series *Forever*, which has

crystallized in recent years (2002-2004) and is now featured at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Although different from other works in the series, this painting functions as a pivotal image in the exhibition. It embodies the essence of Hod's art, which revolves around the trinity of youth, love and death. It also represents the ambivalence inherent in his works from the very outset of his career, when he first began interweaving the local and the universal, the realistic and the fantastic, the real and the fictive with an invisible thread. "The funeral painting is beyond politics," says Hod. "It is a universal funeral that immortalizes all the young men and women, male and female soldiers, wherever they may be."<sup>1</sup> Like other works in the series, the funeral scene is also blown-up to monumental dimensions and painted in oil on canvas.

All the paintings in this series address extreme moments and "larger-than-life" aspects of childhood, youth, love, life and death, separation, memory and commemoration. In this respect, they epitomize the grand themes that have interested Hod since the beginning of his career. The paintings presented alongside the military funeral (*Lost Youth*, 2002) include a large memorial wreath (*Flowers*, 2003-2004); a young child wearing a dog tag laid out on a bed of flowers (*Forever*, 2002-2003); the head of a horizontally positioned male soldier (*David*, 2003); a woman soldier whose upper body is surrounded by giant flowers (*Elizabeth*, 2003); the heads of a mother and child whose eyes are shut in sleep or in death (*Mother and Child*, 2004); an adolescent girl kissing a boy's forehead (*Love will Keep Us Forever*, 2003); the head of a beautiful girl lying on her side with a melancholy expression on her face (*Stephanie*, 2004); and dead butterflies on a white sheet (*Butterflies*, 2004).

Although this series of paintings elevates most of the themes previously addressed by Hod to new heights, one can discern a different tone in it. The paintings' tight thematic focus, their neat compositional cropping, meticulously executed brush strokes, and monumental dimensions all contribute to the creation of a more mature, serious, dramatic and severe look. The result is an apotheosis of emotion intended to sweep the viewer to the threshold of a romantic, near-religious experience of transcendence.

Numerous texts have been written about the decisive change in artistic discourse in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks. Commentators have announced the end of the age of irony, cynicism and sophistication, which ruled the art world of the 1990s and conditioned its suspicious, hostile attitude toward anything associated with emotion and beauty. One could attribute this change to the so-called eternal pendulum of art history – oscillating endlessly between emotion and intellect – or to yet another shift in cultural trends. It is also possible, however, that the collapse of the World Trade Center marks a more profound shift in our cultural consciousness, the emergence of a yet-unnamed tendency that may reveal itself as a comforting return to humanistic values, and a reconnection with authentic and cathartic feelings. In recent years, one can discern a growing interest among artists in radical mental states and emotional themes. In video artist Bill Viola's series *Dialogues* (2004), for instance, detailed close-ups reveal a face gradually bursting into tears. In British artist Sam Taylor-Wood's exhibition *Crying Men* (2004), emotional authenticity is similarly explored through the documentation of various stages of crying.

In Hod's work as well, the *Forever* series of paintings marks a fundamental change. The humor, cynicism and irony that were typical of his paintings during the 1990s seem to have given way to a melancholy state of mind that truly seeks to reawaken authentic sentiment. Hod endeavors, as he phrases it, to reach out to people's hearts, and "to strike the dormant cord of love." He strives to reintroduce feeling into a cold and alienated world, to reawaken our sense of wonderment and to impart a feeling of comfort and solace (or, in his own words, "to show people the sun in the middle of the night"). Like Toto, the child-protagonist of the film *Cinema Paradiso*, he speaks longingly about love that is larger-than-life, about a utopian world of the imagination and of pure sentiment. In the past, Hod's strategy could be characterized as a type of defiance imbued with humor, irony and cynicism – as a form of "anti-pathos." Today, the pathos in his work has assumed a new meaning.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Return of Beauty and the Israeli Context**

It is impossible to fathom the distance covered by Nir Hod in the past thirteen

years without pausing to examine key moments in his biography and career, and without considering his otherness vis-à-vis the state of Israeli culture during those years. Born in Tel Aviv in 1970, Hod began his art studies at the WIZO-France High School of the Arts in Tel Aviv. He subsequently attended the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, and studied at New York's Cooper Union Academy of Art as part of a student-exchange program. Before long he stood out as a creator of glamorous, eccentric baroque art, dramatic and accessible to the general public.

In the early 1990s, after two decades dominated by a restrained, intentionally frugal aesthetic tradition and by the consecration of intellectual, anti-narrative values, Hod's appearance on the Israeli art scene was a refreshing and much-called-for change. The controversial and provocative nature of his work, as well as his glamorous beauty and his ambivalent gender appearance, positioned him as a rebellious outsider. As someone who refused to abide by the rules of the conservative, elitist canon dictated by the melancholic asceticism and material sparseness that constituted the dominant Israeli aesthetic, he was considered the *enfant terrible* of the local art scene. His narcissism, his glorification of beauty, his attraction to the twilight zones of kitsch and camp, and, of course, his penchant for publicity soon made him a hero of unprecedented scale in the Israeli art world. For many, Hod was an Israeli version of a "total artist" – an exhibitionist dandy à la Andy Warhol or Jeff Koons, a previously unfamiliar phenomenon in Israeli culture.

When he first showed his works in the 1993 exhibition *Antipathos*, Hod had already declared his desire to "create beauty snacks," to market art objects that people would not be unable to resist. He wanted people to shed tears upon viewing his works, to be as emotionally moved by them as by a movie or a rock concert. One of his wildest fantasies during those years was to preserve people at the peak of their beauty in jars of formaldehyde. The wax self-portrait *My Eyes Are Not the First to Cry* (1993) was to a large extent, an expression of that desire. Hod strove to bring beauty back to the forefront and to exploit its seductive powers to the fullest. His aspiration to sweep as large an audience as possible into the painful realms of "total" and "corrupt" beauty

has increasingly shaped his agenda over the years. In the early 1990s, against the backdrop of the emotional restraint that predominated in Israeli art, such an agenda was remarkably subversive and daring. Although many in Israel regarded his work as a post-modern version of kitsch, and failed to identify the discourse about kitsch in his works, Hod persisted in imbuing reality with imagined glamour, performing time and again the magic of painting. Totally faithful to himself and to his era, he felt committed to the project of glorifying beauty. He harnessed to it instances of beauty in all its manifestations – the sublime and the ridiculous, the romantic and the decadent, the naive and the virginal, the popish, the provocative and the corrupt.

One must bear in mind that in the late 1990s the notion of “beauty” had already returned to the core of contemporary art’s theoretical discourse. This shift was led by American art critic and theoretician Dave Hickey, who deemed beauty to be central to the rhetoric of visual affect and to be the ultimate iconography of desire.<sup>3</sup> American philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto also dedicated considerable attention to the notion of beauty as part of the ontological status of art.<sup>4</sup> In 1999, two key exhibitions in the United States shed light on the comeback of beauty. The first, *Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century*, was shown at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC. The second, *Ultralounge: The Return of Social Space with Cocktails* (curated by Hickey), was shown at the Tampa University Museum in South Florida.<sup>5</sup> In the aesthetic discourse of 1990s Israel, however, beauty and emotion were still considered explosive materials, and Hod’s aesthetic strategy was revolutionary in retrospect. Hod has often voiced his criticism of the way in which life in Israel suffocates the artistic imagination. The manner in which he stood out on the Israeli art scene attests mainly to Israeli culture’s intolerance toward materials that are not explicitly political. His use of beauty, his romantic formulae, and the artifice inherent in his work were incongruent with the local codes of political correctness.<sup>6</sup>

In the years before his move to New York, Hod drew his inspiration from diverse sources: alongside the Israeli political and military reality that provided

him with an endless reservoir of pathos-laden raw visual materials, Hod was drawn to the “hallucinatory” (as he calls it) air of naiveté and patriotism manifested in photographs and advertising images dating back to the first decades of the Israeli state. “Aesthetics was never the forte of Jewish tradition and culture,” he says. “This is why I always relied on the beauty and aesthetics of other, mainly Christian, traditions. I wanted to fuse a foreign aesthetic (that of Baroque and Rococo culture) with Israeli images and themes, possibly even religious ones. I wanted to introduce beauty, aesthetics and a lot of emotion into Jewish culture.” Indeed, from the very outset of his career the gap between different types of sources was conspicuous: the elitist classics of Western art history appear alongside images culled from “low,” popular art; local images appear alongside imported images, which are telling of the way in which American myths were naturalized in Israel. The list of his cultural heroes includes Oscar Wilde, Brooke Shields, Charlie Chaplin, Johnny Depp, Helmut Newton, Marilyn Monroe, Mohammad Ali, The Marx Brothers, Rod Stewart, Francis Bacon, Jackson Pollock, Nietzsche, Maimonides, Charles Baudelaire, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Gandhi, Kennedy, Tarzan, Yitzhak Rabin, Ben Gurion, Elton John, Steven Spielberg, and Roberto Benigni – all of whom appear in his work in an entirely nonhierarchical manner.

Hod’s art reveals the influence of artists such as Caravaggio, Delacroix and Raphael alongside influences from the fashion world and from MTV; The inspiration of Leonardo da Vinci and Théodore Géricault is apparent alongside that of painted Indian film posters; the legacy of Gerhard Richter, Andy Warhol and Richard Prince appears alongside kitschy images taken from dime-store novels. It is an artistic world view that easily appropriates anything within reach, as long as the objects of appropriation allow him to create the desired effects and to evoke emotional responses. In this respect Hod practices a typical post-modern strategy – one that relies on borrowing from an image-bank which draws without value distinctions from art, fashion, music, cinema, camp, and kitsch. Works such as the *Women Soldiers* triptych, *Love Story* and *I Swear!*, which represent peak moments in his work during the 1990s, best reflect this broad spectrum of influences.

### **The Apolitical Aspect**

Hod featured the *Women Soldiers* triptych for the first time as part of the exhibition *Meta-Sex 94*, where it was interpreted as offering a flexible model of identity that allows for the complete dissolution of boundaries and for full mobility between the masculine and the feminine. Hod inserted his own enticing portrait into the painting, where he appears as a woman soldier with a black ponytail and a cellular phone, proudly looking toward the horizon. Building on visual stereotypes extracted from Israeli culture's collective image bank, this soldier's image invokes the courageous female fighter that once decorated Jewish New Year and Israeli Independence Day greeting cards. In the early 1990s, one could not miss, in the playful engagement with gender politics, a reflection of the sociological and cultural transformations that have taken place in Israeli society in the post-Zionist context.

Hod's intention, however, was never political in the quintessential sense of the word. Even a painting such as *The Orthodox Suicide* (1995), in which he envisions assassin Yigal Amir hanging himself, or the photograph ostensibly reconstructing the dramatic moments of Prime Minister Rabin's assassination (*The Murder of Yitzhak Rabin*, 2001) – two works that referred specifically to one of the most traumatic events in Israeli collective memory – go beyond the immediate political context, appearing, to a greater extent, as climactic scenes in a fictive telenovela. The theatrical positioning of the extras in *The Murder of Yitzhak Rabin*, their exaggerated body language, the gloomy forest in the background – all these served the artist's desire to magnify the dramatic moment and lend it ritual qualities.

The numerous versions of male and female soldiers and police officers are thus an expression of Hod's fascination with exotic images characterized by high emotional conductivity. The political facet of these works has always been secondary. The soldiers in his fictive army function primarily as heroes. They do not belong to the Middle East, nor are they associated with political strife here or elsewhere. They bear military insignia of armies from various countries and wear farfetched uniforms, decorations, ranks and unit tags.

Their symbolic battlefield has never extended beyond the boundaries of fantasy. It is a glorified army basking in the light of myths of heroism and stardom. His woman soldier (whether made in his image or in the image of a famous model or a successful rock star) is always an archetype of femininity, a symbol of a Total Woman, a super-heroine whose military uniform adds to her sexy, kinky, and romantic appeal.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Transition to New York**

In the Israeli context, Hod's emergence as an artist is also a sociologically significant phenomenon that can serve to elucidate several aspects of post-Zionist iconography. It seems more natural, however, to anchor his work in a broader cultural context. In 1999, Hod moved to New York. This radical transition and culture shock is clearly discernible in his work, resulting in a new kind of spareness, renunciation, abstention and concentration. In a place where he had no childhood memories or history, Hod was able to relate more deeply to his childhood and cultural identity. Paradoxically, In New York he felt a yearning for nature and a spiritual, near-religious sense of tranquility. The first series he created about a year after his arrival in New York, *Paradise* (2000-2001), consisted of large-scale paintings of pastoral and biblical scenes. By unifying the stories of the Old Testament, of Christianity and of Pagan mythology, Hod managed to depict the story of Creation as if through a child's eyes. In these paintings, beautiful winged girls hover in the bosom of a bacchanalian, virginal nature, while wondrous hybrids such as a man-deer or a girl-swan emerge out of a backdrop of magical, paradisiacal vistas.

New York also accentuated and consolidated Hod's identity as a Jew ("much more than as an Israeli," he says). He began addressing biblical stories in paintings such as *Cain and Abel* (2001), where the two brothers are portrayed fighting each other against the backdrop of a Swiss landscape; *The Birth of Eve* (2000), where Eve is seen emerging from Adam's rib; and *The Golden Calf* (2001), a golden sculpture which constitutes the core work in this series. This thematic change paralleled an aesthetic shift noticeable mainly in terms of the transformed palette and dimensions of these works. "New York taught me to delve deeper and become more focused," says Hod. "As time passes I

become more 'minimalist.' New York infused my work with a chromatic intensity and sharpness that is extremely American and Hollywood-like: vibrant yellow, blazing red, pure white, shiny black and deep blue. In New York, unlike in Israel, I don't have to fight for colorful, larger-than-life art."

Hod's sources of inspiration have also changed accordingly. Artists such as James Rosenquist, Maurizio Cattelan, Bill Viola, Sam Taylor-Wood, Jenny Saville, and Franz Gertsch have taken their place alongside Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons, Pierre et Gilles, and Mariko Mori in the list of artists influencing him. Fashion and cinema have also become an integral part of his aesthetic world. "In Almodovar's films I have found the exact emotional and aesthetic tone befitting me, whereas the elegance and cleanness I owe to Valentino, Christian Dior, and Yves Saint Laurent," says Hod. In many respects Hod today embodies a contemporary version of American pop culture, a fusion of Warhol, Michael Jackson, Almodovar and Madonna.

### **The Artist as an Image-Maker**

The concepts of ambiguity and ambivalence are crucial to an understanding of Hod's work process. He perceives himself as an image-maker or, as he puts it: "I am neither a painter nor a photographer; the image is the most important thing for me. Painting and photography are but tools with which I construct the images and realize the fantasy." Virtually all of Hod's paintings are based on photographs that he carefully stages. In the first phase, he directs a scene and photographs it in collaboration with a crew that includes actors, a make-up artist, a photographer, a hairdresser, and sometimes a stylist. In the next phase, he digitally manipulates the photograph to construct the composition of the painting. He then enlarges the image and transfers it onto the canvas in one of two ways: by projecting it or by means of a grid technique. When the painting is complete, Hod arrives at the polishing and finishing stage, which he perceives as the most spiritual part in the work process. "At this point," he confesses, "I put on my best clothes and finish the work carefully and gently. It is a rare moment encapsulating the magic of creation. At this moment I am in love with my work, it drives me wild."

In this sense one may describe Hod's work process as a combination of production and direction, which he supervises down to the last detail ("I want to convey authenticity," he says). The finished painting is, in fact, a type of translation. The fact that each and every painting has a photographic "origin" (which sometimes remains as a final product) is highly significant. The tension between painting and photography is one of the keys for the ambiguous appeal of his paintings. This ambiguity is generated by the transition from pure photograph to manipulated photograph, from an image that is created "mechanically" to "virtuoso" realism, from reality to illusion. "The painting interests me as a photograph, while the photograph interests me as a painting," says Hod. "I am interested in deception and ambiguity. I want to arrive at a place that is beyond painting or photography, a locus of pure imagery. There is something profound about this process of transformation from photography to painting. While I believe in manual work and am certainly nostalgic in my practice, the work process is essentially ultra-modern and technological."

Hod's manual work process has become more sophisticated over the years. Whereas in the past he used craft materials such as shiny sequins combined with gilded backgrounds and dramatic lighting in addition to the oils and acrylic paints, the refinement of the paintings in his new series, *Forever*, builds upon accurate, informative brush work that eschews redundant expressive gestures. The bright palette that characterizes this series calls to mind the vivid color scale and digital qualities of films and glossy magazines, while the painting technique remains classical. The paintings are executed on the reverse side of the canvas, which contributes to a unique surface texture. From a distance, the images appear slick and polished, but a closer look reveals a crude, dry texture. The figures' skin is smoothed to the point that it conveys a plastic quality reminiscent of the texture of wax sculptures – an effect that elevates the figures to the status of superhuman icons.

According to Hod, his encounter with the work of three artists had an immediate impact on the formation of this monumental, painterly style: the first is the Swiss photo-realist artist Franz Gertsch, who had one painting featured

in a group exhibition at the Matthew Marks Gallery in 2001, followed by a solo exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in 2004; the second is British artist Jenny Saville, whose solo exhibition was also held at the Gagosian Gallery in 2002; and the third is James Rosenquist, whose retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum took place in 2003.

One may say that Hod's painting technique itself has served him all along as part of the overall strategy and message of his paintings: "I like toying with the scope of painterly possibilities in order to convey different feelings: I can engage in refined oil painting to portray one theme, and use the kind of 'bad painting' you see in tacky Indian film posters to depict another subject," he says. Indeed, at times it is sufficient to identify the source of the painterly practice Hod engages with in order to understand the irony or playful allusion he creates regarding the depicted subject. Thus, for example, in the painting *Love Story* (1997), which depicts a pair of lovers in the midst of war (where the artist himself plays both partners), as well as in *Tears have No God* (2002) – an oil painting on canvas featuring a female Israeli officer leaning compassionately over the figure of an Arab man lying wounded at her feet – the quality of the brushstrokes alone is enough to grasp the painting's rhetoric: the technique of "bad painting" Hod employs here generates the saccharine-sweet, romantic atmosphere and the understanding that such a scene can occur only on canvas.

### **Photography, Painting and Death**

The bulk of Hod's works, especially those created in post-9/11 New York, transpire on the axis between life and death ("In order to talk about life, one has to talk about death," as he puts it.) His heroes are forever young, fresh and beautiful. Some are even young children or adolescent girls. *Love will Keep Us Forever* depicts the artist's head resting on a flowerbed, and a beautiful girl (his sister) kissing him goodbye on the forehead. The composition of the original photograph is based on photographs of *shahids* (Arabic for martyrs), "which I also wanted to beautify," says Hod. In all of his paintings death wears a young, glamorous, romantic mask. It is impeccable death, unsoiled by even a hint of feebleness, decay or degeneration. "Even

the blood in my works is not dirty; it is blood that emanates from a broken heart, from unrealized love, suffering and prohibition,” he says. “In the series *Forever* I wanted to convey a religious feeling similar to paintings of the Deposition. I wanted to illustrate the moment when the soul leaves the young body. The butterflies and flowers highlight the presence of death in a world of youth cut short.” The monumental dimensions of the paintings contribute to the experiential effect. “I wanted the viewer to be able to smell the figures, to listen to their last breaths, ”he says.

The fascination with death is discernible in Hod’s works from the very outset. In 1991, while still a student in Bezalel, he created a series of paintings based on photographs of physically and mentally ill figures. A year later, the motif of dead children began to emerge in his work in the context of an installation presented as part of his third year project in 1992. The installation was divided into a sequence of play corners: The “sports corner” consisted of an Olympic winners’ podium upon which medals were juxtaposed with a handkerchief bearing a realistically drawn charcoal portrait of a child at its center. The “clothing corner” featured children’s clothes, mainly school uniforms with a child’s portrait painted on the back of each shirt. In the “horror corner” Hod placed a statuette of Hitler atop a Star of David on a low bench covered with black velvet, alongside an elegant box of silver-plated razor blades with his name engraved on them. A wooden fixture with two drawers was installed in the “wish corner” – one was filled with his milk teeth, the other with fortune cookies. The major provocation was a pornographic film starring nine-year olds, which was screened in the “perverse corner.” In addition there were four paintings imitating late nineteenth century photographs of dead children. In this installation Hod created a cynical, cruel association between a saccharine, promise-filled childhood world and dark worlds of death, perversion and pornography. Paradoxically, it was precisely the image of the child, which represents life perhaps more than any other image, that served him as a carrier of morbid themes.

Although this was a slightly immature student project, one may nevertheless identify in it the origins of Hod’s preoccupation with aesthetics, eroticism and

death through increasingly sophisticated strategies of provocation and manipulation: the tension between painting and photography, the exploration of the margins of political correctness, and the insistence on ambiguity and ambivalence. Hod guided the child image along two thematic routes – pornography and the Holocaust – whose intersection, especially in the Israeli context, was shocking. In an essay I wrote about that project I divided the children types, both living and dead, into two kinds: the Aryan child sporting golden locks and the child with the ghetto look, the tattered hat and rueful gaze. In that context I wrote: “This deceptive ambiguity (the dead living – the living dead) runs through his works, charging them with an acute dialectical tension. He is interested in childhood as a signifier that can be emptied of the positive associations of innocence, hope and optimism usually associated with it, and infused with perverse, pornographic and necrophilic contents.”<sup>8</sup>

The four photographs of the dead children that were a part of that installation will serve as my point of departure for examining the triple affinity of photography, painting and death that is visible in virtually all of Hod’s work. It is a trinity that can shed light on one of the most conspicuous influences on his art – that of Andy Warhol. These photographs were part of the ritual commemoration of the dead, a Christian tradition that flourished in the late nineteenth century following the invention of photography.<sup>9</sup> The power of these photographs lies in their intrinsic paradox: Since they presented the deceased child as if it were alive, they constituted a denial of death. The children portrayed in them indeed looked as if they were photographed in their sleep, napping in their ornate armchairs. The preservation of the dead body and the blurring of the face emphasized the aestheticization of death to the point of depersonalizing the dead. A paradox was thus created whereby the photographic act, ostensibly intended to convey reality, in fact functioned here as a vehicle for concealing the truth. The contrast between these photographs and today’s media images reflects the change in society’s attitude to the representation of death over the past hundred years – as its sentimental glorification and denial has given way to the prosaic, indifferent approach that characterizes today’s television broadcasts.

One can locate Hod's attraction to these photographs in their expressive, intimate qualities and in their heroic and romantic portrayal of death. In order to glorify them even further, Hod translated them into smooth, polished and meticulously varnished paintings, transforming them into simulations of seductive realism à la Gerhard Richter.<sup>10</sup> The decision to create a photographic effect by painterly means, especially in order to depict death, creates a reversal in our habitual mode of reception, since it underscores the gap between the horrifying subject matter and the pleasure afforded by the image's aesthetic refinement. To this one should add the specific context of photography as a medium of "taxidermy," an attempt to freeze time, a type of "black magic" that strives to revive the dead by the very act of preserving life. This perception of photography relies on the writings of Roland Barthes, who maintained that every photograph contains within it an intimation of death, which is inherent in the very act of commemoration – so that each photograph is, in a way, a spirit photograph.<sup>11</sup>

The philosophical complexity embodied in the affinity between photography, painting and death is also manifested in the work entitled *Dreams are My Reality*, created by Hod for the exhibition *Antipathos* at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem upon his graduation from art school in 1993. Hod placed three paintings representing the three major themes of art history – love, nature and death – within a glass cabinet where petals and living snakes functioned as a backdrop. In this instance too, the painting addressing "death" was drawn from the Christian tradition of death and pre-burial rituals. By the same token, his self-portrait immortalized as a wax sculpture, *My Eyes Are Not the First to Cry* (1993), which was featured in the that show, may also be read as a type of embalming, a Dorian Gray-style freezing of youth.<sup>12</sup> A decade later, one can clearly discern a connection between these early works and Hod's later, more mature paintings, which represent the cult of youth and death in a similar manner. In both cases, the glorification of death fully exploits its emotional potential. Now as then, Hod accentuates the contrast between the beautiful and the threatening and introduces an affinity between kitsch and death that has been explored by many artists in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the late 1990s, the quiet presence of death continued to simmer below the surface of Hod's paintings alongside his preoccupation with beauty, love, youth and cultural heroes. These works addressed illness, violence and the torments of drug addiction, as well as the glamour involved in it, the aesthetics of pain, and the magic inherent in challenging death: the injection scene in the work *Youth* (1998), for instance, where a drop of blood sparkles in the corner of the artist's eye, lending him a satanic look; the pallid complexion, melancholic expression and sterile air in both *Cocaine* and *Heroin* (1998); the artist's tormented figure, snorting cocaine and awash with a sickly blue light in *Dreams are My Reality II* (1997); even the work *Lovers* (1999), where love is represented by a pair of embracing skeletons embodying the morbidity inherent in the cliché of love until death<sup>13</sup> – all these convey a fragile cloak of decadence and saccharine beauty under which simmers a fear of death, based on the recognition that the flickering flame of splendor and youth is short-lived.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Glamour of Death**

Hod's preoccupation with the theme of death culminated, as mentioned before, following the traumatic collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, which he experienced first-hand. The spontaneous death rituals he witnessed in the ensuing days and weeks – the wreaths, candles and letters that piled up on the streets of New York – provided the inspiration for the series that preceded *Forever*, and which was partly based on photographs he took while wandering the stricken city. These sights – which he associated with similar images linked with commemoration rituals following the deaths of Yitzhak Rabin, Jim Morrison, and Princess Diana – were, to a large extent, the source of inspiration for his new paintings. The monumental paintings of flowers and candles (*Life*, 2002) took the preoccupation with death to new heroic heights. Death associated with violence and drugs was replaced by a glamorous “hero's death.” For Hod, the collective commemoration ceremonies acquired a meaning of *Vanitas*, with the withering beauty of the flowers symbolizing life's ephemerality like a *memento mori* created spontaneously by the public. His flower paintings

subsequently acquired a meditative meaning as an elegy for the passing of time and for the cycles of life, love and death.

Hod had thus found the most accurate context for his art: beauty's affinity with death and memory. "There was something about the American mourning rituals that touched me in the deepest sense," he confessed. "The flowers and the candles were a direct expression of emotion." This series also includes the 2002 pieces *Tears have No God*, depicting an Israeli woman soldier and a wounded Arab man; *Jerusalem*, where the bleeding Cain and Abel hover against the backdrop of the al-Aksa Mosque; *God*, a large-scale painting featuring the letters G-O-D smashed to pieces in the dark skies over a stormy sea; and *The Loneliness of Heaven*, depicting a pair of lovers (both made in the artist's image) embracing against a stormy sky and crashing airplanes.

As I mentioned earlier, I have chosen to associate Hod's attraction to mourning rituals and his romantic fascination with the "glamour" of death with the legacy of Andy Warhol, or rather with a specific aspect of Warhol's work which pertains to his obsessive preoccupation with death and which is closely linked to his treatment of the world of glamour and fame. In his extensive monograph on Warhol's art, Patrick Smith situated those contents that occupy the borderline between "the death of glamour" and the "glamour of death" at the heart of Warhol's iconography.<sup>15</sup> For Warhol, glamour was associated on the one hand with celebrity life and its theatricality; on the other hand, it was related to the notions of decline and demise. Death was related in his work to sensational, horrifying tragedies such as natural catastrophes, crashes, car accidents, suicides, and executions, as well as to the loss or fading glamour of the object of desire or adoration. Thus, for example, his *Marilyn* series was created a short while after Monroe's death, and Jacqueline Kennedy's portrait was created only after she became the tragic widow of the assassinated president.

Warhol's attraction to the stardom myth, to objects of desire and to icons of fame, glory and glamour, was almost always associated with death: his protagonists were selected in precise conjunction with their decline, when only

their iconic image remained etched in the collective consciousness. In fact, Warhol operated as an iconological diagnostician, an expert on the topology of stardom who followed the conquest of every possible summit and was attentive to the moment in between the conquest of the last summit and the ensuing fall. To a large extent, this is also true of Nir Hod. His aspiration to capture the dramatic moments in a star's life – Superman in a wheelchair; Elvis' loneliness; Madonna in the moment before an alleged suicide attempt; a pilot who embarks on a battle from which he won't return; motorcyclists who have crashed during a death wall ride; a pop star's collapse on stage – all these echo the same myth that intertwines fame and loneliness, heroism, glamour and death.

Photography, it appears, has had a special role in creating the association between glamour and death in both Warhol's and Hod's work. Fredric Jameson was the first to link photography and the photographic negative to Warhol's preoccupation with the theme of death. Jameson discussed Warhol's technique, which involved laying brushwork on the photographic print, as a combination that revolutionized the perception of death. Jameson noted the emergence of "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness" as one of the quintessential signs of postmodernism. "It is this, indeed, which confers its deathly quality to the Warhol image, whose glacéd X-ray elegance mortifies the reified eye of the viewer in a way that would seem to have nothing to do with death or the death obsession or the death anxiety on the level of content. [...]. Although this kind of death of the world of appearance becomes thematized in certain of Warhol's pieces, most notably the traffic accidents or the electric chair series, this is not, I think, a matter of content any longer but of some more fundamental mutation both in the object world itself – now become a set of texts or simulacra – and in the disposition of the subject."<sup>16</sup>

The "mutation" diagnosed by Jameson received extensive philosophical elaboration in recent years, notably in Slavoj Žižek's writings on the "the loss of the Real."<sup>17</sup> One may say that this postmodern flatness has become the crux of the matter in Hod's art. The affinity between the real and the fictive has been refuted and can no longer be reconstructed. It is hard to tell what came

first, and what the original image is: is it the staged scene which, in itself, relies on countless earlier images? Which is the “original” – the photograph or the painting? By combining photography and painting, supplemented (unlike Warhol’s work) by a host of effects possible by means of digital manipulation, Hod manages to create his entire range of fictive situations and various simulation games.

The principal difference between Hod and Warhol, however, lies in the stance from which their work stems: while in Warhol’s case the engagement with themes of decline, the loss of aura, death or disaster was part of his “aesthetics of indifference,” which revolved around monotony and repetition and which was entirely devoid of romantic or tragic sentimentality. In Hod’s case, it seems that despite the occasional ironic allusion, there is an addiction to emotion, sorrow, nostalgia, and a sense of loss.

### **The Artist’s Persona**

Warhol’s impact on Hod is apparent not only in terms of their common preoccupation with the “glamour of death.” He also served as a model for Hod’s conception of the total artist – an artist whose public persona is an integral part of his work. By blurring the distinction between life and art Warhol sowed the seeds for the kinds of eccentric phenomena now familiar in the art world – Jeff Koons marrying Cicciolina as part of an art project, Japanese artist Takashi Murakami inventing an animated double and creating his own brand name, or British artist Damien Hirst, who in addition to creating sensational art has also designed an upscale restaurant. Nir Hod belongs to this species of artists, and experiences himself as a cultural hero. From the very outset of his career he has fostered the image of a total artist – a visual artist, a poet, a singer,<sup>18</sup> a director, and even a writer<sup>19</sup> – and has created for himself a persona that draws on self-mythification to challenge the divide between art and life, artist and artwork, biography and myth. Like the “Andy products” manufactured in the latter’s “Factory,” Hod has also, at various times, marketed products such as souvenirs, chocolate, T-shirts, CDs, and plates. Most of these products bore his image as an icon, transforming his persona into a brand. This strategy of Hod’s has emerged in the many

interviews with him and publications about him that appeared in the Israeli press in recent years, and it resurfaced in my numerous conversations with Hod while preparing the current exhibition. The blurring of boundaries reaches such an extent, in his work, that it is sometimes no longer clear who feeds on what – the artist on his work or vice versa. At times it seems as though the artist is a victim of his art, a slave to his own imagination, an integral part of his own delusion.

### **The Rhetoric of Disguise: Imitation and Look-alike Games**

Hod's intricate perception of "self" also derives from his tactic of adopting different personas. Until recently, one of his distinctive identification marks was the incorporation of his self-portrait into his works. "I am the star of my art. I feel comfortable conveying each theme and experience through my own image," he says.<sup>20</sup> This "self" image is indeed a central factor in understanding his works from the 1990s, where the perception of "self" should be examined vis-à-vis the tactics of impersonation and of look-alike games. In works such as *The Legend of the Last Polaroid* (2000), the artist's portrait appears as a hazy icon on a shiny surface, in keeping with the tradition of Christian religious painting. The hazy, elusive portrait merges with the viewer's reflection on the lustrous surface, from which it bursts forth like a ghost. Many of the paintings in which his portrait appears were motivated by a desire to pinpoint the moment in which innocence and beauty transform into death. "The more I revive things, the more I kill them," says Hod. "When I freeze my image, I become alienated, a stranger... I endeavor to kill myself through the work of art. My life passes, so I freeze it. The wax sculpture and portraits are therefore moments of freezing."

Another aspect of the self-portraits pertains to the notion of look-alike and play. In most of his works, Hod simply enacts characters like an actor playing a part in a film – a child, an angel, a vampire, a woman soldier, a magician, a tiger trainer, a junkie, a male singer, a female singer, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, a nurse, a sitar player, Michael Jackson, an officer in the Army of Peace. This multiplicity of roles enables him to reinvent himself over and over again, while offering flexible options for sexual and cultural identities. Whether

playing the part of a stereotypical, fictitious character or that of a mythological pop or rock star, he is always performing a role created in his own painfully beautiful image in order to serve his own story, that nostalgic meta-narrative lamenting the dramatic extremes of human emotion – impossible love, the loss of romance and of childhood, life and death, loneliness and passion.

The expansion of the authentic “self” was part of the concept of identity explored by art theorists during the 1990s, particularly in terms of the rhetoric of disguise employed by artists such as Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura. The realization of the potential to create human beings in new cultural forms and its ensuing commercialization have triggered a theoretical discourse in the social sciences and the humanities concerning the relations between nature and culture and the boundaries of the authentic “self.”

Cloning, In vitro fertilization, plastic surgery and genetic interventions have raised questions about the possibility of selective cultural creation. The term “post-human,” coined by Jeffrey Deitch in the early 1990s, was congruent with the manifestations of this new “self”: “The search for the absolute ‘true’ self has been replaced by a constant scanning for new alternatives.”<sup>21</sup>

Artists such as Sherman and Morimura depicted themselves masquerading as different characters (in Sherman’s case, these were cultural stereotypes of female types; in Morimura’s case, they were well-known figures from the history of art) in order to formulate a cultural critique. Hod too made similar experiments in his artistic laboratory. Here, however, one should note Hod’s narcissistic singularity: while in the case of Sherman and Morimura the disguise was perfect and they were hardly identifiable amidst the proliferation of masks, in Hod’s mosaic of fabricated images identification is always immediate, without any attempt at camouflage. On the contrary, his image re-emerges repeatedly in its full melancholic force, which is unhindered by the artist’s changing attributes. In these works Hod has altered the traditional meaning of portraiture, feeding the notion of an authentic, differentiated human identity into the mechanism governing the production line of fantasies and consumerist seductions. The new model of a sophisticated, flexible “self” that gradually evolved through these experiments thus flickers as a multitude

of dimly illuminated identities, a series of copies without an original.

Amidst the myriad roles enacted by Hod his evasive sexual identity is especially conspicuous. It is hard to imagine what his art would have looked like without his glamorous beauty and dandyish appearance. Throughout the years, he has repeatedly masqueraded as a series of female heroines – the soldier, the policewoman, the Madonna with Child, the nurse, and the rock star. All exuded a fantastic quality, a combination of naiveté, beauty and decadence. In *Forever Young* (1997), for example, Hod starred as a glamorous rock singer, adorned with a halo of sparkly sequins against a shiny red backdrop. In *Love Story* (1997), which constitutes one of the peaks in the narcissistic drama that unfolds in his work, he played both figures – an Israeli officer and a female Red Cross nurse embracing as they are caught up in the Middle East's winds of war. In this instance as well, the conventional feminist/transgenderal terminology of gender politics has nothing to do with Hod's intention. "I absolutely love female beauty, and from the very position of ultimate manhood, I let myself accentuate my other side," he confesses.

The female option thus enables Hod to maintain a fluid identity and to constantly reinvent himself as if abiding by the rules of an elastic alter-ego, with no commitment to the binary male-female division. Hod has even given this alter-ego a romantic name – Dohrin – obtained by inverting the letters of the artist's full name, and serving as the title for some of the works where Hod stars as a female figure.

One of Hod's favorite personas is that of the male or female rock star. In *Forever Young*, a glamorous female rocker appears on stage in front of a microphone. In *Broken Hearts* (1999), he appears against the background of an applauding audience, wearing a white suit and stylish sunglasses. "I love the intensity of the stage experience – the lighting, the raging audience, the flickering flashes. I construct these images from memory," Hod says. In an earlier video piece, *Sometimes I Wonder* (1995), he impersonated a series of popular singers from the 1970s and 1980s, in homage to the music of his childhood and youth.<sup>22</sup> Imitating his admired pop stars, he interpreted for the

camera scenes that appeared in their original video clips. He thus “translated” images from the original Abba video, an Elvis Presley performance, and one of John Travolta’s scenes in *Grease* into a local Israeli idiom. Hod addressed the term “look-alike” at the time, attempting to carry each gesture to the extreme, and to refine it into the most accurate, expression of a specific period and musical genre. Inspired by the aesthetic strategy employed by David Lynch in *Blue Velvet* and even in his later film *Mulholland Drive*, as well as by 1970s Las Vegas performances, Hod created a scene in this series that begins with the dramatic appearance of a singer in a white suit against a red backdrop, and ends with the singer’s tragic death, his body bleeding in the bushes.<sup>23</sup>

### **Circus Heroes and the Las Vegas Aesthetic**

The rock stars and singers, like the acrobats, magicians, jugglers and tiger tamers, all belong to the series *Heroes’ Tears*, where they have gradually accumulated over the years alongside Superman and other cultural heroes such as Elvis, Madonna, and Michael Jackson. Hod is especially attracted to the circus genre and to its particular aesthetic sensibility. The popular virtuosity, the exaggerated luster, the tawdriness and abject glamour inherent in the circus cliché captivate him time and again. One of his earliest childhood memories is linked to a scene of motorcyclists riding a death wall. He has often recounted his fantasy of living with an itinerant circus. One of the first works he created in New York was a monumental photograph, *Happy Birthday Mr. Hod* (1999), in which he depicted himself wearing a “weeping clown” mask and wandering alone in New York’s Times Square holding a red balloon. In a later photograph, *Bravo* (2002), he poses as a circus tiger tamer, carrying a terrifying tiger on his shoulders.

One can understand Hod’s fascination with the aesthetics of the show – the spectacular effects, the acrobatics, and the grand gestures typical of the production line of circus illusions. Like the Las Vegas aesthetic and the aesthetic of the wax museums he is so fond of, the visual clichés and manipulations that characterize circus performances touch upon the most basic human emotions. Las Vegas performances, the circus, and the wax

museum are all genres of visual display that declare themselves a-priori as illusions; there is nothing fraudulent about them, because they announce the fraud themselves. This is perhaps the ultimate link between naiveté and disguise. Hod's desire to live in a circus is a desire to live eternally in a "real" place, a place where there is a permanent, radical recognition of the authenticity of masquerading.

Above all, however, the circus appears in Hod's work as an allegory; he perceives acrobatics as a way of life, and Las Vegas as a longed-for ideal. Like an acrobat of emotion in a circus of illusions, he walks a tightrope between art and life, stage and reality, conveying the intuition of tragedy that overshadows any dream by infusing it with an awareness of its ephemerality. The spectacle of glamour and the splendid, majestic effects in the mythological scenes that Hod creates always already contain a premonition of decline, a cynical acknowledgement of the fraud and the illusion, and a mature, disillusioned understanding of the cruelty and loneliness involved in fame. This is the core of the *Vanitas* sensibility underlying Hod's work. His narcissistic character and numerous young heroes are presented as dramatic icons of beauty, repeatedly striving to reaffirm their perishable splendor. This existential ambivalence accompanies every potential reading of his works. The most romantic articulation may be interpreted as a mannerism or an empty gesture, while what appears accessible and superficial may turn out to be sophisticated and highly complex.

### **Epilogue**

Two small drawings based on photographs from Hod's private family album serve as a parenthesis for this book. The first, *Nueba* (1999), which appears at the beginning of the catalogue, depicts Nir as a beautiful four-year-old, standing barefoot on a stretch of soft sand and wearing an expression of innocence and wonderment. The second, *Me and My Mother* (2003), which appears at the end of the catalogue, portrays Nir once again, this time dressed in a mottled brown and white Bambi costume as he sprawls on the grass, joyously cuddling in his mother's arms. Between these two drawings – the deeply stirred solitude and the manifestation of great happiness in the

mother's arms – unfurls his entire inventory of creative images. "Through my art," Hod has confessed to me, "I wish to prove my love for my mother. Like a child who comes home from school, I want to impress her with what I can do." Indeed, one cannot disregard the childlike presence throbbing in virtually all of his works. The endless yearning to please his mother and prove his love to her is deeply rooted in the psychological makeup of his personality. This figure of the innocent child who wants to please his mother is the core, the motivating force, the "self" that spawns his entire art. In this context, the two drawings mentioned above introduce a possible reading of Hod's entire *oeuvre* as stemming from the point of view of a child observing the grown-up world with wonder, and at the end of the day going back home to tell his mom.

### **[Nir's quotes]**

"Mommy, I want to be a kid again. I want to be back in kindergarten, with you coming to pick me up before lunchtime. We'll go to the grocery store and to the toy shop, so you can buy me my daily present. I want to play with my friends at home and on the neighborhood lawn in the afternoon. I want to ride my bike all day long, and sweep the streets with a toy broom. I want to sit with you and your friends in cafés, to walk along the wide boulevards with all the beautiful shops. I want once more to be afraid of sirens, and run off to the bomb shelter. I want you to hug me again. I would give anything to go back to school, to the breaks, to the games, to all the beautiful girls, the wacky field trips from which I used to come back on my own because of my bad behavior. I want to go back to all the punishments and pranks, the thefts, the fights, the street, the skateboard, the sea, the surfboard, and the atmosphere of summer vacations. I miss adolescence, the confusion, the naiveté, all the symbols I used to etch into my hand with a knife, the first cigarettes, the beers that would get me instantly drunk. I miss the male and female soldiers that appeared so grown-up, the parties, the songs, the first emotions. I miss the freedom I had to do so many things, and all the misdeeds for which I was later forgiven. I miss the naive, clean thoughts about life, I miss my curiosity, the things I finally saw after longing to see them. I miss so many people and periods, the children's theater, matinee films, the television that used to

broadcast the best shows in black-and-white. I miss the clothes I had and the weird little shoes, the old stores and all the elderly salesmen I liked to annoy. I miss the zoo animals that are now dead like the zoo itself, like the narrow streets that have disappeared, like the railway tracks that have remained orphaned, like the old cars that have vanished. Gone like that amazing atmosphere which is no longer to be found, gone like myself.”

“Art is intellectual, but it is also sensual and sexy. It stimulates the brain, but it should also be sexually stimulating. It is a powerful combination of intelligence and sexuality, understanding and loss.”

“In the portraits I paint I especially like to paint lips, eyebrows and eyes. When I paint eyes, I can weep with excitement, especially when they are finished and you can note the expression. It enchants me, like magic. When I paint lips, I feel like having sex. Painting fleshy, sensuous pink and brown lips arouses me, it makes me feel horny.”

“Sometimes I want someone to scream: ‘Enough.’ I want this film to end; I want the music to be turned off, to have some peace and quiet... I want to breathe fresh air, to take off my clothes and all this stupid stuff wrapped around my body. I want everything to go backwards and start differently from scratch. I’m tired of fighting, of standing sadly in front of the mirror, of seeking the beauty and youth that have long seeped out of my life.”

## Notes

1. All of the artist’s quotes are based on conversations we held during the preparation of the exhibition and the catalogue.
2. Hod was the youngest among the participating artists in the exhibition *Antipathos: Black Humor, Irony and Cynicism in Contemporary Israeli Art*, which I curated at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 1993.
3. The most important collection of Hickey’s articles on this theme has

been compiled under the title: Hickey, D., *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993).

4. Danto, A. C., *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003).
5. Viso, O. M., Benezra, N., (eds.), *Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution (Washington DC: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 1999); Hickey, D. *Ultralounge: The Return of Social Space with Cocktails* (Tampa: The University of South Florida, 1999).
6. Only in recent years can one note a change in the character of Israeli art. More and more young artists appropriate themes of beauty, romance and dream into their work. Two exhibitions I curated – *OverCraft: Obsession, Decoration and Biting Beauty* (2003) at the Art Gallery, University of Haifa and *Love is in the Air: Images of Romantic Love in Contemporary Israeli Art* (2004) at the Tel Aviv art center Time for Art – set out to reflect this fundamental change.
7. The artist has often referred to the *Women Soldiers* as a local version of his much admired childhood heroes, *Charlie's Angels*,
8. Tami Katz-Freiman, "It is not a Child, only a Child's Image," *Mishkafayim*, December 1992 [Hebrew].
9. The original daguerreotypes were presented a year earlier (1991) in the exhibition *The Interrupted Life* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.
10. In his work Gerhard Richter addressed the affinity between aesthetics, eroticism and death. I am referring specifically here to the *Bader-Meinhof* cycle (1988) which depicted the bodies of the Bader-Meinhof activists in a painting that imitates photograph and eliminates the artist's personal gestural

imprint.

11. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998). The work of French artist Christian Boltanski and his preoccupation with the memory of the Holocaust reflect a Barthe's perception of photography.

12. The portrait of the artist as a beautiful narcissist was executed over a period of one year, in 1993, by the professional team members of the Tel Aviv Wax Museum, who at the same time were working on the sculptures of Yitzhak Rabin and Bill Clinton.

13. *Lovers* is a work based on an MRI scan of the embraced figures of two Israeli cultural heroes.

14. In his adolescence Hod referred to the age of twenty-seven as the age when his life would end. He would admiringly mention Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, and James Dean who ended their lives around that age. In this spirit one may understand his nostalgic approach to mythological youth movies such as Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, *Rumble Fish* and *The Outsiders*.

15. Smith, Patrick S., *Andy Warhol's Art and Films* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986).

16. The association between photography and death in Andy Warhol's work was discussed in Jameson's *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke UP, 1991), p. 9. This theme was discussed at length in my essay about Warhol: Tami Katz-Freiman, "Andy Warhol: The Death of Glamour / The Glamour of Death," *Studio Art Magazine*, 36, 1992 [Hebrew].

17. Žižek, S., *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London & New York: Verso, 2002).

18. A CD of Hod performing his songs, titled *Last Letters to Anna*, in

collaboration with the musician Yaron Bachar, was released in 2000 by the Israeli music label Helicon.

19. The book *Forever*, combining images and texts by Hod was published in Hebrew in 1997 by the Israeli publishing house Keter.

20. This strategy seems to have become exhausted only recently, in the series *Forever*, making room for new figures.

21. Jeffrey Deitch, *Post Human*, FEA Musée d'Art Contemporain, Pully/Lausanne; Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli, Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens; Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Hamburg, 1992, p. 37.

22. A year earlier, in 1994, as part of the *ArtFocus* project, Hod installed at Tel Aviv's New Central Bus Station a room-installation with a simulation of a club, a 1980s-style party space with balloons and posters of the cultural heroes of his childhood. One could identify Brooke Shields next to a collection of "weeping children." The artist still keeps a "collection of singers" with posters of his childhood heroes.

23. These tragic manifestations (such as "the fainting singer") belong in the sentimental Las Vegas-style genre. The pianist Liberace, for example, used to throw tissues at the audience who would cry along with him.

ILLUSIONS. The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah. Richard Bach. author of Jonathan Livingston Seagull. That's how I met Illusions. There in the Midwest, even, I'd lie on my back practicing cloud-vaporizing, and I couldn't get the story out of my mind what if somebody came along who was really good at this, who could teach me how my world works and how to control it? What if I could meet a super-advanced what if a Siddhartha or a Jesus came into our time, with power over the illusions of the world because he knew the reality behind them? I went once with a vesper circus, and for a moment it was that kind of busy feeling one plane lifting off with passengers while another lands. We touched the ground with a gentle rumbling crash and rolled to the far end of the hay, by the road. Masters of Illusions book. Read 9 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. In an historical novel based on the 1944 Barnum & Bailey's circus... If you want to read a fine work about the Circus Fire which honors those who were there and died that day, choose instead Stewart O'Nan's The Circus Fire: A True Story of an American Tragedy it's nonfiction, but reads like the masterfully-written novel I had hoped to find in Masters of Illusion. ...more. flag Like · see review. Jan 24, 2012 Joanne rated it really liked it. Based on the 1944 circus fire in Hartford, CT. This is the story of Charlie (a firefighter who is obsessed with the fire) and Margie who was just an infant when she went to the fire with her mother (who did not survive).