



Where Have All the Rock Stars Gone?

The terror of one artist's glamour

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE

IN THE SUMMER OF 2009, Nir Hod flew to Buffalo, New York, for the preview of “Wall Rockets,” a group show featuring works in dialogue with the titular Ed Ruscha piece, at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Hod was there to introduce his now infamous painting, *The Night You Left*—four lines of cocaine painted in white oil atop a 44-by-60-inch obsidian mirror—which was also his first abstract work. After talks by other artists detailing color choices, shadowing, and exhaustive art history references, Hod wasn’t exactly sure what to say, so he decided to tell a simple, if heartbreaking, personal story.

With his throaty Israeli accent, Hod explained that in 2006 he had gotten engaged and traveled to Venice, Italy, with his fiancée to celebrate. Brimming with sappy romanticism, the couple chartered a late-afternoon boat ride in a vintage wooden Riva. Everything was impossibly idyllic until Anna fell off the boat—and drowned. “It took hours to

find her, until the middle of the night,” Hod said. “It was very hard for me to work after this. The painting here is called *The Night You Left* because it was one of the first works I made after I came back to my studio.” What might have initially come across as a shallow, too-slick-by-half showpiece appealing to debauched party types was suddenly a supercharged meditation on love and loss.

“They wanted to hug me. It was very emotional for them, almost like the work became something religious,” says Hod, who went on to tell the story numerous times to other audiences. “For me, this is the magic of the story of an artwork.”

Magic also implies a deviation from reality, a sleight of hand, a deception, which is exactly what it was. Hod concocted the entire story (from a loose narrative) on the spot, and he doesn’t regret it. To him, the tale is less about mendacity and provides insight into his process. “When I tell this story, I really feel like I miss somebody or like I really remember

the event,” he says. “The imagination takes over the reality, and I don’t feel like I’m lying, I don’t feel like I’m doing something wrong. It just makes everything the way it’s supposed to be.”

It’s the same reason Hod tells collectors and curators who visit his Meatpacking District studio that a large stone he found on vacation in Upstate New York is a remnant from the World Trade Center. “It’s amazing how differently people look at this stone in one second. All of a sudden, they act like it’s not OK to smoke next to it or breathe next to it,” he says, laughing, moments after fooling me with the same story in the studio this spring. “One element can completely change the rules.”

Breaking the rules has been Hod’s MO since he was a reckless Tel Aviv teenager who got kicked out of numerous schools and competed in BMX ramp competitions, living, as he puts it, the “life of the child from *Cinema Paradiso*.” His father, who owned a marble factory, and his homemaker mother were very lenient,

ABOVE:
Hod in his
New York
studio, 2014.

and Hod eventually found his calling at an art high school, where he read Goethe and watched David Lynch films and “adopted this Romantic kind of look,” he says. “I wanted almost to die in my studio from hunger and go to these coffeehouses and argue, to be a victim of all these stories and books and movies.” When he turned 18, Hod was drafted into an experimental artist unit of the Israeli army. “I came to them with canvases and books, thinking ‘I’m not going to do too much in the army,’” he says. “Five minutes later, they threw my easel and canvases into the garbage.” Less than a year after that the brass told him, “Go back to art school; this is not for you.”

Hod spent his early 20s at the Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem, battling against conceptualist students and expatriate Russian professors who brought dead animals into the classrooms, while he experimented with narcissistic videos and paintings that focused on beauty. On a student exchange at New York’s Cooper Union, he discovered daguerreotypes at a New Museum exhibition and later found a Russian master who helped him make prints in the medium from photos of friends’ children he had positioned to look dead. Hod printed 120 of the images on handkerchiefs he piled in an installation surrounded by videos of other children smoking, driving, and basically serving as precursors to his breakout series of “Genius” paintings. He followed this early work by making a wax sculpture of himself, self-portrait paintings as an army officer, and a printed canvas of himself saving Madonna—whose Girlie Show tour famously visited Tel Aviv in 1993—from an attempted suicide.

“It was a very bloody, very Hollywood reference to Jeff Koons and Cicciolina. The idea was to bring something very glamorous to a provincial place,” says Hod, who became a celebrity in Israel from the press surrounding these works. He parlayed this attention into a book of poems, *Forever*, followed by a spoken-word album, *Last Letters to Anna*, recorded with Israel’s top rockers. Copies of the album now fetch as much as \$300 on eBay and turned Hod into a veritable pop star. That fame helped him make the jump to New York, initially living in his current studio, where he made meticulous oversize paintings of floral bouquets, dead porn stars, drug paraphernalia, and himself in androgynous getups. At one point, he even developed a pilot with a Hollywood producer for an *Entourage*-like show with the Vincent Chase character modeled after himself.

Hod’s mischievous approach has played to his advantage. During his first decade



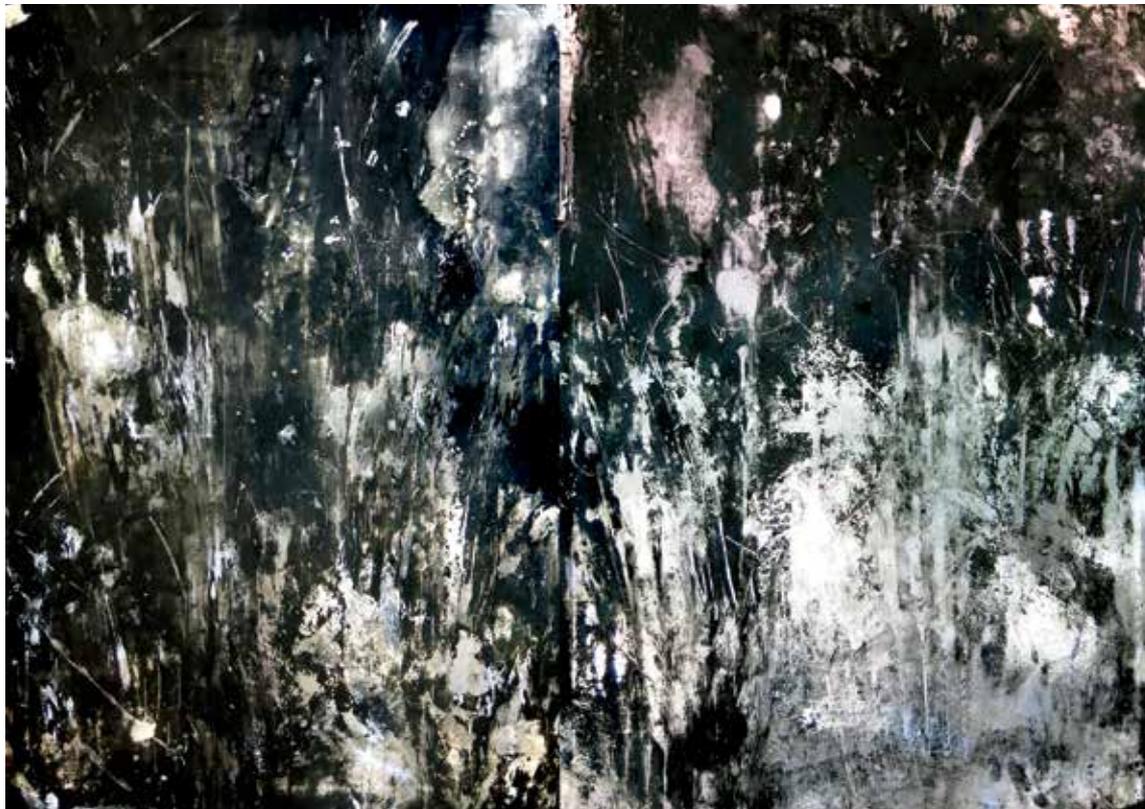
in New York, his large canvases rated a solo exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and a slot in Jack Shainman’s stable. While Shainman “didn’t get” the direction in which Hod was going with his “Genius” paintings, Paul Kasmin saw their potential and signed Hod in 2011. “Nir is incredibly ambitious, and he generates ideas at a remarkable rate,” says Kasmin. “I can only see his work growing conceptually and technically in our shows to come.”

Over the past two years, Hod has generated three new bodies of work and translated *The Night You Left* into sets of coveted mirrored coasters, “perfectly executed trompe l’oeil objects,” says Kasmin—available in black, gold, pink

(for Valentine’s Day), and red (for Christmas)—which hipsters have gobbled up by the thousands at top boutiques and five-star hotels from Los Angeles to London. “There’s this purity that is so sublime in a great Van Gogh or Gerhard Richter, but there’s also something beautiful in making something powerful into something weak,” says the artist, who grew up loving the tchotchkes outside Israel’s religious destinations. “It makes it more spiritual.”

For Hod, the point of art is to tell a story that appeals to pop-culture vultures as well as art historians. His pieces scream glamour while whispering of terror just below their exotic surfaces. They partake of the nightclub-frequenting, drug-

I Want Always to be Remembered in Your Heart, 2013. Oil on canvas, 73½ x 94½ in.



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invoking Warhol’s Shadow Paintings. The shocking reveal came when visitors read a small plaque explaining that the mother, whom Hod “painted like a Louis Vuitton ad, so much about luxury, and fantasy, and decadence” was actually lifted from a well-known Holocaust image. She was the anonymous lady beside seven-year-old Tsvi Nussbaum in *Warsaw Ghetto Boy*. In his current show at Kasmin, “Once Everything Was Much Better Even the Future,” Hod, now a father himself, has abandoned his teasing, haunting figures for a series of abstract works.

mirror. The idea, he says, is to gesture at “the very narcissistic people with ridiculous collections of what, for other people, look strange.” For instance, “the collections of all these Arab dictators. It’s not about art; it’s about luxury objects, to build something over the top. When I close my eyes, sometimes I would really like to be like these kinds of people. It’s something about freedom which is connected to childhood, and it’s very important for me to keep this kind of feeling and point of view.”

The show also features a supersize snow-globe sculpture filled with oil and an operating derrick, as well as “The Back Room,” a series of two massive chrome canvases painted to match the fingernail scratches on the CBGB bathroom walls and the gas chambers of Auschwitz. “The most amazing things are created after major violent vandalism and death events, like after 9/11,” says Hod, who justifies his outrageous juxtapositions by pointing out that these days, people are forced to behave. “Everybody has become the same—there are no unique voices anymore. It’s almost like you can’t even be a rock star like there were in the ’70s or ’80s. There are no rock stars today.” MP

snorting, sex-abusing, terror-inducing, luxury-fiend atmosphere of Bret Easton Ellis novels. “Atmosphere is so important to me,” says Hod. “Reality can be very poor, but if you have the right atmosphere, it doesn’t matter.”

With Kasmin, Hod has concocted dazzling, if at times disturbing, atmospheres. In 2012 he placed the cigarette-smoking children of his “Genius” portraits—many modeled after dictators and rock stars—against Old Master-influenced backdrops. The children were followed, naturally enough, by “Mother,” a series of 10 identically painted images of an elegant woman seemingly rushing through a city, handbag hanging from her arm, each illuminated by colored halos

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *The Back Room*, 2014. Acrylic, oil, and paint remover on mirrored chrome on canvas, 32 x 24 in.

I Want Always to be Remembered in Your Heart, 2013. Oil on canvas, 73½ x 94½ in.

Broken Hearts, 1999. Digital print on cardboard, 79 x 112 in.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TWO IMAGES, NIR HOD AND PAUL KASMIN GALLERY; NIR HOD