

“Unseen Terrain” represents a series of new work by Ella Benami, which also includes paintings from other series, such as “Stems and Strains” (2014-2015), “Temperature” (2011-2013) and “Dreamscapes” (2009-2010). Assembled for her first exhibition in the UK, these works collectively convey a vision of her artistic practice and development of a visual language deeply rooted in abstraction. Abstraction, as a form of expression, exists between material reality and the visionary. And while human experience is inextricable from the world we inhabit, it is the possibility of engaging with a metaphysical experience of that world which has so often inspired the creation of new vocabularies to express the space where they collide and fuse with one another. With this exhibition, Benami firmly situates herself amongst artists who are regarded as “inventors of new worlds,” which exist between representation and abstraction, opening up an alternate space in which consciousness can be articulated.



Through a layering of paint and fluidity of gesture, she constructs and speaks within a visual nexus where line and organic forms dissolve and are remade – driven by what she describes as a “need to understand, know and apprehend the immaterial.” To experience her work is, at one moment, to look close, as if observing cells and plants through a microscope, and in the next, to view from a distance, as if surveying a landscape or peering at the nebula of the sky through a telescope. Benami conceives of “mental landscapes” as spaces in which perception and psychology are located just as geophysical landscapes are, to address the reality, yet obscurity, of the elusive world of the psyche. The space she conjures is a liminal one – where boundaries between polarities are blurred – female and male, near and far, material and ethereal, physical and psychic. This is a space without boundaries, indefinable as it exists between definitions, and outside the realm of order. Benami’s works suspend the limits of physical and psychological reality, introducing us to a visual world which defies a rational search for ‘order’ and dares to engage with the potential ‘chaos’ of abstraction and the transcendental realm.

Born and raised in Israel, and having lived in India as well as the United States, Benami regards herself as inhabiting a similarly liminal realm. Both Eastern concepts of the metaphysical and Western traditions of Abstraction have had an influence on her approach to exploring questions such as ‘where does psychic life exist?’ and ‘how is it made visible?’ through her work.

In Benami’s paintings, amorphous forms both occupy and resist the limits of the canvas, as layers of paint bleed into and fuse with one another, resulting in a sense of flowing movement that defies polarities such as opaque and transparent, solid and liquid, real and imagined. In this regard, if the ‘present’ can be considered as a space between the ‘past’ and ‘future’, the titles of works such as *Back Then* and *Coming Forward* speak to a sense of temporality that is visually manifest in the ethereal qualities of the surface of the works themselves.

Benami’s use of mnemonics to title other works signals their existence between her own psychic world and the physical world in which the materiality of her paintings reside. Mnemonics is a system of memory devices using associations with signs, pictures or places. Each of the mnemonic codes she uses (such as *GORA*, *PROB*) represent an association that she has with each work, or is based on a word in Hebrew – which she identifies as still the most natural language through which she speaks. Just as memory exists both spatially and temporally, between perception of the world and consciousness, so Benami’s works exist in an “Unseen Terrain”, that emerges within the artist’s desire to grasp the immaterial – perceptible and yet elusive.

Dr. Amy Mechowski, Head of the Learning Academy at the V&A, 2017.