

# Through the flames

Ma'ayan finds renewal in mourning with the paintbrush

• By ARIEL DOMINIQUE HENDELMAN

Ma'ayan is an artist who leaves everything on the canvas. Her raw subconscious, blood and tears come through the paint and whisper of universal pain and triumph like only truly great art can.

Raised in northern New Jersey, Ma'ayan started drawing at the age of five. "Not just little doodles, but serious drawing, believe it or not," she says. By the time she was eight, her parents sent her to art classes. She began taking oil-painting lessons, and after a few years her teacher saw the burgeoning talent for what it was, and advised Ma'ayan to pursue art. Her teacher suggested the Art Students League in New York City, which Ma'ayan promptly enrolled in at the age of 12. For more than 20 years, the Art Students League was her home.

It was during that time that Ma'ayan began doing a lot of figurative and still-life painting, working directly with the models. The deep connection that would inevitably develop with each model during the sessions, which totaled 40 to 50 hours for each painting, allowed her to experience the emotional journey that would become the hallmark of her creative expression.

"I really enjoyed getting to know the model, which comes across in my work," Ma'ayan says. "These strangers became good friends of mine. I spend a lot of time with the model, working on what the pose is going to be like, what their expressions are and what's going on in their mind. It really takes on much more of an experiential tone. I

cannot work from a photograph; they're too two-dimensional and impersonal. I need that sensory experience, whether it's with my figurative work or my abstract work."

The turning point for Ma'ayan as an artist occurred in 2000, when she decided to quit her job as an art director in the world of advertising and focus solely on painting. After a number of exhibitions where she received amazing feedback for her work, she was ready to take the leap of faith and try a career as a painter.

She received two major grants. The first was the highly prestigious McDowell Award, which sponsored her travels around Europe for five months, in order to experience art. The second afforded her the opportunity to study at an art school in Provence, France for six months. Working one-on-one with the school's director, Ma'ayan transitioned from being a student of art to finding her true, creative voice in the brush strokes.

"I hold him responsible for breaking me out of the academic art world," Ma'ayan says. "I believe that you need that background; you need to be schooled in the academic arts so that you can then bring that into the voice that you're meant to have. It's really important."

As her time in France was coming to a close, the director gave her a total critique review session. They looked at work that she had done before, and then throughout her time in Provence. Ma'ayan realized that she loved the new oil sketches, which were inspired by the beauty of Provence.

"I had these oils next to what I thought were my more finished paintings, and I realized there was something happening that was totally trans-



'Night creatures.'

formative," she recalls.

"My director asked me why they weren't finished art in my mind [just]

because they took only an hour to do. Just because I have 30 years of experience, [it] doesn't mean that a one-hour





Ma'ayan with a work: 'I don't name my paintings as I create, because it's all an emotional experience.'

(Photos: Courtesy)

painting isn't a good painting anymore. I realized that I bring all my experience into that one hour, which is a lesson I took with me back to New York and started applying to my figurative work."

When Ma'ayan returned to New York, it was clear that her work had irrevocably changed for the better. She decided it was time to leave the academic nest and find a studio. It was also during this time that she began learning more about her Jewish heritage. Having been raised Reform, she felt distant from her heritage.

"My grandmother kept Shabbat, but we didn't talk about it," Ma'ayan says. "She lived around the corner and we

would go to her for Friday night dinner; it wasn't called Shabbat. When I started to take classes at the 92nd Street Y about basic Judaism 101, I was like a sponge. I don't like calling myself Orthodox now because I don't like labels, but I'm a spiritual, traditional Jew."

Ma'ayan first came to Israel in 2007 for a friend's wedding. She felt a pull to stay longer, but her father was very sick, so she went back to New York. Her father died away in 2009, which led to an understandably tumultuous time, both personally and artistically.

"I couldn't really express what was going on inside of me," she relates. After the first month, she decided to take the rest of the 11 months of mourning for a parent and seclude herself in her studio space to create. This time of mourning yielded paintings with stunning emotional depth that springs forth from the canvas. The series born from that time is called "Zalman's Suite," after her father.

"I didn't consciously do this, but there is an amazing life force to the paintings and many have a green foundation," Ma'ayan says. "Green, for me, is the color of life, because of nature. I didn't have a concept in mind; I just did whatever was coming out of my heart. It was a very painful time, but there was a birthing that was happening which was incredible."

Ma'ayan began reading Psalms before painting, a practice she still does today. Sometimes, she would read from the Torah portion of the week as well, and then go to the canvas. When the paintings from Zalman's Suite were showcased in a solo exhibition, she realized that she needed to name them. It was then that she was able to step back and really see what she had created and how her newfound connection to Judaism infused her work with a spirituality that had not been palpable before.

"I don't name my paintings as I create, because it's all an emotional experience," she explains. "So I'm sitting with these paintings, thinking about what I'm trying to say because it's time to name them. I realized that all of my subconscious had manifested itself. My work is not about the words that appear in *Tehillim* [Psalms] or the Torah; it's not about the black and white. It's about the white space that lives between the black letters. It's about what Hashem [God] is trying to communicate through these words. What is the experiential feeling that is happening? That's what I'm trying to give over in my paintings."

During the solo exhibition of Zal-

man's Suite, Ma'ayan walked around and eavesdropped on what people were saying about her work. Much to her delight, she saw that Jews and non-Jews were equally drawn to her pieces, and that people spent a lot of time with her paintings, more than the typical gallery experience.

"You see a beautiful painting in a museum and you keep walking," she relates. "It doesn't stay with you; there's nothing that you are connecting with on a *neshama* [spiritual] level. But with these paintings, you are. It really is an experience that's universal to everybody."

Ma'ayan and her husband made aliya in 2014. She quickly found a studio in Talpiot and got to work on a new series, "Between Worlds," which was exhibited at Jerusalem's Marrache fine art gallery in 2014. All of the paintings in "Between Worlds" deal with pivotal moments in the Torah, which is evidenced by their names, while not always obvious to the casual observer due to their abstract nature.

Then tragedy struck. In the summer of 2014, a fire broke out in Ma'ayan's studio, destroying 26 paintings. As luck, or divine providence, would have

it, 27 paintings were saved because of her Marrache exhibition. Just as she went into a period of mourning after her father's death, Ma'ayan gave herself a grieving period after the fire. From that scorched place, she created again.

Her newest series, which is entirely black and white, emerged out of this second grieving period.

"The only way for me to express what I was feeling about that time was to have all these paintings be black and white, because the fire had turned my whole studio black," she says.

"My spiritual journey gave me the ability to handle these periods of mourning and added a depth and meaning to my work that was never there before. My work creates a sensory experience that expresses spiritual concepts through a non-figurative way, as the figure becomes too literal. Through my subconscious, where the emotions live, the inner becomes outer."

For more information on Ma'ayan's work and upcoming exhibitions: [www.ma-ayan.com](http://www.ma-ayan.com)

'Run!'

