



Gilad Efrat, *Ping Pong 4, Cave*, 2021, oil on canvas, 60 x 108 x 2 in (152.4 x 274.3 x 5.1 cm)

Gilad Efrat / Ping-Pong

The visual culture of the West knows two concepts of depth in art. When we refer to an artwork as "deep" we mean one of two things: either it is stratified in terms of content; or it triggers deep emotional reactions through the use of gestures and matter. In the former case, the signs, symbols, metaphors and representations of worldly details weaves a broad network of contexts, associations and meanings. We may think of examples such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Diego Velasquez's *Las Meninas*, on its puzzles, maze of mirrors, painting of paintings, exposure of the back of the painting and the red Santiago de Compostela cross. In the latter case, the painting is referred to as "deep" because the paint's behavior on the canvas echoes the depths of the viewer's mind, in a manner akin to the depth of a haiku: what speaks therein are not its signs, but its constitutive materials, structure and meter. These function as staging instructions for the reader – how to imitate the poet's breaths. A late Rembrandt self-portrait operates in the same manner; what is at work are not its signs, but its matter, bespeaking the body, old age, the dread of death and life's inconsequentiality set against the grandeur of the soul.

From my viewpoint, Gilad Efrat's journey as a painter traces a transition from the first concept of depth to the second. Like a man taking off in a hot-air balloon, in order to ascend he throws away signs, worldly representations and metaphors. In this sense, Efrat is an abstract painter against his own better judgment. Working with worldly representations comes naturally to him. But even when he worked with aerial photographs or the contours of archeological sites, his genuine experience as an artist led him to let the medium convey the paintings' depth. I have

written before about his ape portraits as the true heirs to the portraiture tradition of past centuries. Like the portrait masterpieces of Rembrandt or Anthony Van Dyke, in Efrat's works the visual contour of the specific model is made redundant by the uncovering of its essence – exposed not by the image – but by the paint's behavior on the canvas. Like the grand masters, Efrat's use of the medium guides the viewer to introspection. His transition to abstract painting was therefore the inevitable outcome of his artistic evolution.

In a sense, the difference between the two concepts of depth discussed here reflects the well-known difference between talking about X and being X. Efrat's artworks do not attempt to talk about love as much as *being* a painting in love. They do not talk about the political, economic, social, philosophical, and mental – as much as *being* them. When I sat in Gilad's studio and looked at these paintings, I was reminded of a laughing child, painted on a round format, by Frans Hals, which I once saw at the Mauritshuis in The Hague. My impression at the time was that Hals did not paint a laughing child, but that his canvas is laughing. The brushstrokes are laughing. The format is laughing.

The series of paintings here offers a perfect manifestation of this gesture. The double canvases, apropos echoing the structure of the ever-ruptured soul, are Rorschachian, or perhaps recall Narcissus gazing at the lake, or the reverberation of Echo's call, call-and-response. Ping-Pong.

This duality problematizes the artwork's most fundamental notion: its singularity, a luminous object in the Benjaminian aura of its inimitability. As the painting, Efrat tells us, so is the painter, and so is the viewer. The one who is two. Lacan articulated it well in his description of the mirror stage: the child experiences herself as a polymorphic plurality and sees her luminous and capturable bi-dimensional reflection and calls it the I. From this moment on she will always be two; the internal, fractured experience of self, and the external entity that is a model of coherence, elegantly cruising through the reality principle, called the "I."

Gilad's painting is to a large degree action painting. It requires attunement and attention to the materials and their makeup, respiration, pace of work, rapid drying process and viscosity. It recalls the race against time with which renaissance fresco painters had to contend. Efrat lays paint in order to remove it. He lays one wet layer over another. The painting takes shape as an inward-looking process. Like carving in stone. The removal of paint reveals, exposes, disrupts and enlivens the layer underneath it.

My suggested interpretation is the following: we should understand the painter's act, the paint's behavior, and the dual format, as echoing life, the soul's structure, the sense of urgency, life's brevity, the striving to remove redundancies and obstructions, the exposure of the core of our being, respiration, smearing, plastering, removal, exhaling, self-genesis, self-discovery, being two, being one. Gilad Efrat is the Frans Hals of the 21st century. His paintings dwell in being rather than indicate at it.

-Jonathan Hirschfeld, February 2022
(translated from Hebrew by Orr Sharf)