

120 Fingers | Matan Ben Tolila

Curator: Carmit Blumensohn

Wandering through Matan Ben Tolila's exhibition, one can feel a strong sense of creation, the making of a world and dedication to a painting practice that requires both patience and duration, which unfolds step by step, layer after layer. The paintings are comprised of countless layers. Each section is created as an accumulation, a gathering of shapes placed on top, alongside, and following one another. If we were to sort all paintings to ones that look outwards and those that look inwards, then we would have placed Ben Tolila's work in the second group without hesitation. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he is a painter of another reality – a different state of mind.

The paintings always start from his immediate world: family, close friends, beloved dog, a sight that left an impression. From there, he ventures into the infinite realms of the soul, with their ever-expanding ripples. Even when the central image is a shed, a boy at sea, the Moon, the Sun, or a window, it seems that it is really about the journey – an inward journey, a spiritual subterranean excursion into the unknown.

Matan Ben Tolila is a skillful and talented colorist, who masterfully choreographs brush and paint in perfect synchronicity, as a significant means of expression. This is a type of sincerity that requires the artist to see, feel, and even dance with the colors that burst forth from his palette, rather than limit or restrict them. His painting language is characterized by sensuality and totality that captivate the viewer, leading the eye along the trails of color through the terrain of the painting. The inner dynamic within each work and the affinities weaved between them generate movement that invites the viewer to come along and join him on his journey. *"I embarked on a journey deep inside me, into my inclinations, my limitations, my desires, and everything to do with sensuality. In fact, I used them as a mirror to many things that are me."*

Daylight paintings and nocturnal paintings are presented in the exhibition space side by side, as well as paintings devoid of specific time and place. The specificities of reality hold no meaning, on the contrary – everything fuses together to form a fantastical world that is greater than the sum of its parts. An exposed and honest world that is unique to Ben Tolila, which touches on questions of painting as well as emotional and personal questions. Indeed, that is the source of its power.

The painting *Self Portrait* is a concentrated punch of blues, which are anything but monochromatic. They flow, spread, swell, and ebb, holding glimmers of light and beauty. The swimmer is clearly visible between the splashes of water. The body's mass disintegrates and becomes one with the mass of the water and the air that surrounds them. Silence and concentration, depths and spirit are captured in the expanses of this bluer than blue. The image

of freestyle swimming offers an encoded self-reference to the act of painting itself – the goal, the concentration, the meditative repetition.

In the paintings *Naomi (With Her Back to Jerusalem)* and *A Still Small Voice*, the painted figures stand with their backs to the viewer, facing the faraway horizon in the depths of the sea. The children in both paintings stand alone in anticipation of the future to come. However, the “solitude” in Ben Tolila’s paintings is not loneliness; it is not an ominous, deserted, forlorn lonesomeness. It is an inviting, contemplative, quiet, inclusive, spiritual solitude.

Ben Tolila was born and raised in a religious family and town. While over the years he stopped wearing a yarmulke, the profound connection to spirituality is ever-present in his work and life. Like in Caspar David Friedrich’s formative painting *The Monk by the Sea*, this is not only man versus the forces of nature, but also a search for another frequency, one of spirituality, of calm, of a different energy. The thick silence summons a deeper observation. In the painting *Naomi*, the figure of the girl is surrounded by manmade sticks with colored ends, like yardsticks for measuring the water level, which surround and protect her, or perhaps show her the way, not abandoning her to face the forces of nature on her own. These are an extension of the artist’s hand, the caring father, who is trying to navigate his way as a parent, between liberation and support, between concern and a desire for his child to be independent. She stands and stares at the sea, her arms wrapped around herself, her fingers hugging her shoulders. No, she is not alone at all.

Alongside the colorful paintings, Ben Tolila also presents a series of drawings that came to be out of the circumstances of life. During his stay at an artist’s residency in Provence, Ben Tolila came down with Covid-19. The infirmity opened the possibility to draw with simple black markers on white paper, while following three basic principles: no planning, no correcting, no erasing. Since then, he has kept this practice a regular, almost everyday habit. End of the day drawings that capture small private moments and images, family interactions, books, a plant, a window. Everything that came across him and his drawing hand in the course of that day.

The exhibition’s title, *120 Fingers*, delineates wide avenues of thought. It represents the artist’s family of six, 120 fingers to take care of at any given moment. It suggests touch, warmth, tenderness, but also angst and concern. It is a sign of the “Finger of God,” it is the independence of “with my own ten fingers,” it is a measurement of both width and length, it can leave a fingerprint or mark a formative moment of unison (a unanimous vote of 120 fingers). The presence of the fingers is felt in Ben Tolila’s paintings even where they are not represented directly. They seem to hover above all the paintings, as though gathering them into a poetic statement on the human, personal, or universal state. The state of things in the world, above and below ground, and even high above us in heavens.