

'Floating': Alon Kedem's works incorporate different textures and perspectives. (Photos: Dalia Kedem Gottlieb)



Seen by engagement

• By BARRY DAVIS

Alon Kedem takes a pretty sober look at life around. Mind you, that isn't immediately apparent from the works in his "Touch Me" exhibition currently on display at the Uri Rosenbach Gallery on King David Street.

The paintings offer a kaleidoscope of color, and plenty of dynamic action to boot. Take, for example, *Into the Green*, which, for those of us who remember cartoon strips such as Peanuts or Andy Capp, is somewhat reminiscent of a cartoon portrayal of an almighty brawl. Various limbs—primarily legs—protrude unexpectedly and higgledy-piggledy from the more-or-less rotund polychromatic central mass, giving the impression of some hidden centrifugal force at work.

"I see these works as having a lot of movement in them," Kedem says, adding that he wants his spectators to invest some gray matter in his output too.

"And not just movement of the body. I see these paintings as conveying brain activity, too."

Kedem also pays a great deal of attention to texture. Quite a few of the pictures have a flat painted base on which the artist has applied some thick dabs of oil, thereby creating an intriguingly stratified item.

"I am very much engaged in the plasticity of paint," says the artist.

"I look a lot at the optic dimension vis-à-vis the physical dimension. I am very interested in the relationship between sight and the body."

That is something that crops up repeatedly in "Touch Me."

"That's why I gave the name to the exhibition," Kedem explains.

"I am very curious about how we can touch something. The virtual world projects that question. That is something that has been raised throughout the history of painting. Before there was the digital screen, and before TV and before photography, there was painting.

Today, it is far more extreme. Someone can sit in Talbiyeh and watch a screen and feel as if he is in France, without doing anything at all. In that regard things have become scrambled—reality and non-reality."

In truth, there's not a dull moment in the whole shebang, and the more you consider a particular work, the more you consciously discern. Faces suddenly emerge from what initially seemed to be just a mass of color, and other definable forms gradually surface. And it is not just about high energy momentum either. *Do You Like Me* features a joint-the-dots bearded face which, according to Kedem, packs more than meets the eye. The same could be said about *Peeking*, which comprises four minimalist faces that seem to be peering out from behind curtains. The textural essence of the work has been deftly produced, and the work evokes a subtle sense of layering.

Kedem clearly has a penchant for playing around with motion. There are fre-

netically paced scenes, and others that appear placid and invite the observer to dig into the scene to work out some subtext. That is totally premeditated.

"There is movement of images, whereby the spectator tries to understand what he or she is seeing," the artist notes, admitting that his work also keeps him gainfully engaged.

"I also ask myself all sorts of questions about what I might expect to see in these pictures."

That sounds like a healthy position to be in. If an artist's curiosity is piqued, there is a good chance that the members of the public will also be persuaded to spend some time with the creations on offer.

"You get a painting that seems to be simple, yet it isn't at all," Kedem declares.

Then again, there are works that invite expectations of some kind of development—of a natural sequence of events—yet that is not the case. The wildly colorful *Scanning Machine* is a prime example of that. The inspiration for the picture comes from Kedem's earlier "Scrambles" series, in which seemingly randomly positioned shapes and objects trundle along a conveyor belt, and appear to be heading for an X-ray apparatus. You half expect the items to pass through the scanning device and come out different-



'Into the Green': Dynamism and polychromatics combine to keep the eye and mind engaged.

'Scanning Machine': Expect the unexpected.

"I want the observer to tell the story of the work. The work is a sort of proposal for him, for him to get into the work and to discover all sorts of things."

That has clearly been achieved with "Touch Me."

"I don't want to spoon-feed the public, whereby they are given a clear message, they get it, and then they go home for a cup of coffee and relax," Kedem asserts.

"I want there to be engagement. That's how I relate to life, and that's how I approach my attempts to create paintings. It's a sort of engagement for me too, to try to understand what I want from the painting in question, and what it wants from me."

It's an exploratory experience for all concerned.

"Things pop up and you have to respond to them. You never know what's going to happen."

Kedem is a Jerusalem artist. He lives in Talbiyeh, a stone's throw from the Uri Rosenbach Gallery, and his work also feeds off the human landscape he encounters on a daily basis.

"Look at this character," he says referring to the bearded visage in *Do You Like Me*.

"There are a lot of people with beards in Jerusalem. They could be religious men from some religion—Christians, Muslims or Jews. And there's the hipster character you have these days, who is someone who sort of plays around with his identity, and he normally has a beard."

The name of the painting is a subtle, but clinical, play on words.

"I meant 'Do you like me?' in the sense of me being agreeable to you, but also 'Are you like me?'"

The issue of identity is very much a part of Kedem's personal makeup.

"My grandmother was a religious Jewish woman who came from Iraq. She was an Arab, although not a Muslim. She spoke Arabic and thought in Arabic, and identified with Arabic culture. These kinds of things really engage me."

Kedem also manages to engage his spectators, too.

"Touch Me" closes on May 15. For more information: rosenbach.co.il

ly on the other side. But that doesn't happen. The painting is also a carefully devised combination of very busy areas and others that give the impression of being dormant and completely flat. A similarly beguiling optical result is achieved in *Floating*, in which it is not at all certain whether the rug-like platform could be a float on a sea surface, or hovering in the air.

The show's visual conundrum aspect peaks in *Image after Image*, which is the result of several stages of application.

"For me, this painting left me all sorts of possibilities for continued development," says Kedem.

"This is from a series of pictures which, in fact, are color gradients in which all sorts of things happen. But here there were a number of sessions, and there was a layer upon layer, which left afterimages."

At this point Kedem refers to memory and automatic data retention.

"An afterimage is what remains imprinted on our brain after we see something. It is a sort of interplay between what I call the optic surfaces and the more plastic dimension, and the less structured elements. It is an attempt to incorporate both together."

Kedem wants to get us on board. He doesn't want to have the public come in and spend a passive few minutes with the fruits of his creative labors.

"I want people to be engaged," he declares.