

Resurrecting a forgotten artist

Gideon Ofrat curates a show of the works of Lea Grundig, who had been 'completely erased' from the country's artistic memory **By Michal Levertov**

CURATOR, ART historian and critic Gideon Ofrat tells an illuminating story about "New Horizons" (Ofakim Hadashim), the group of abstract artists that dominated the Israeli art scene in the 1950s.

In 1958, "The Decade Exhibition" was held at the newly built Binyanei Ha'uma convention center in Jerusalem, marking the State's 10th anniversary. New Horizons' artists, being so prominent, were invited by the organizers to express themselves at the monumental event. Their contribution to the event included painting murals for numerous governmental exhibits where the proclaimed achievements of national institutions were proudly displayed.

The main entrance to the center was graced by a huge painting by Yosef Zaritzky, founder and leader of New Horizons. It was a five-by-six meter oil on plywood abstract that Zaritzky had titled "Power."

"The evening before the exhibition's

opening," Ofrat relates the historical anecdote to *The Jerusalem Report*, "prime minister Ben-Gurion comes over to inspect the exhibits. He enters the main building, he sees Zaritzky's giant painting right there in front of him, and he murmurs something to himself." The prime minister's grumble was later cited by the media, Ofrat adds, as something like "can do with it, can do without it."

"Instantly," Ofrat continues, "Ben-Gurion's top aide" – it was Teddy Kollek, later the mayor of Jerusalem – "removes the painting and it is relegated to the rear of the exhibition." The abasement did not end there. "When the exhibition ends, Zaritzky destroys the painting," Ofrat remarks.

Ofrat brings up the story to demonstrate how wrong I was to imply, earlier in the conversation, that the group was bold enough to turn its back on the 1950s cultural convention of glorifying Zionist heroism

and collectivism.

His point is that the same artists I had hailed as valorous had actually aligned themselves with the establishment and with the public consensus. Their conduct, he contends underscored the vast distance between maintaining a strong pose within the artistic arena and influencing the political and social discourse in society.

"The group's stance was held in high esteem by a small circle of pretentious Tel Avivians, and only by them," he asserts. "And when a moment of truth arrives, what do they do? Provide national institutions with murals. And when Ben-Gurion said 'Remove!', Zaritzky demolished his work."

Yes, Ofrat – a self-described "aging avant-gardist" – an image the tall, slightly stooped Jerusalemite seems to be nurturing with John Lennonish round-rimmed glasses and distinctive white, semi-tousled hair – does not hesitate to question art's impact on



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political processes or public opinion.

At the same time, he is a prominent advocate of political art. In an interview with the Haaretz daily this summer, he denounced the country's young artists for what he described as "giving up on ideology." Already four years ago he published a book titled "Minor Art," where he launched his one-man crusade against what he sees as mediocrity in Israeli – and often in global – contemporary art.

"I'm afraid," he contends, "that there isn't much point to art unless some major mission is involved." Of the discrepancy between these two assertions – his demand that artists take a political position and his certainty that this position will hardly influence politics in Israel – he says he would choose "to be a part of a defeated minority that, by sticking to its beliefs, provides society with a gleam of hope rather than to cave in to a cynical sobriety."

"Otherwise," he adds, "what kind of humans are we exactly?"

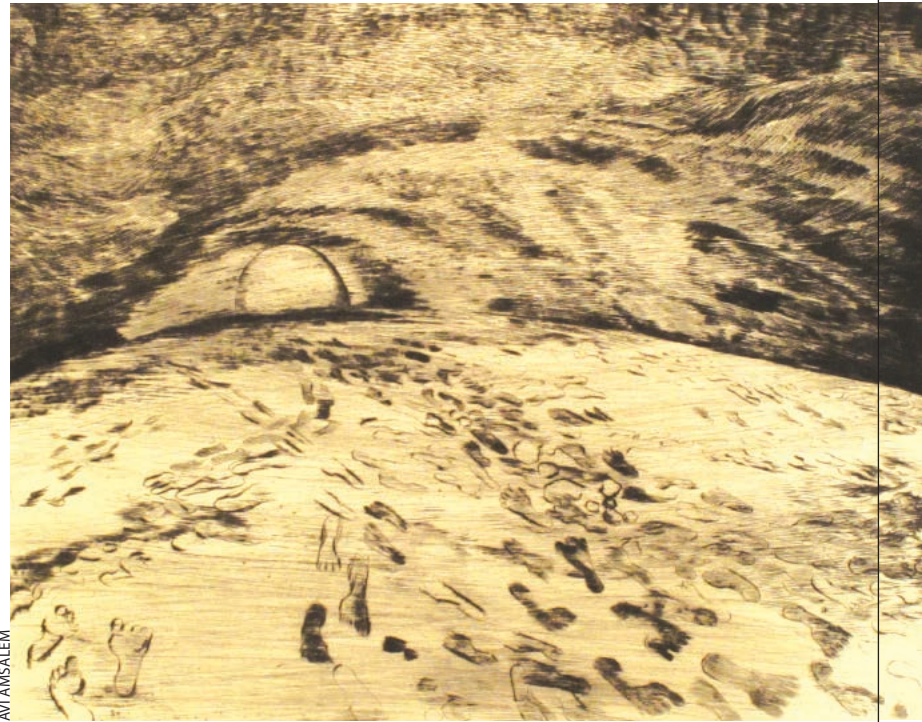
Ofrat, 69, was born in Tel Aviv to a middle-class family of Polish origins. In his blog "Gideon Ofrat's Storeroom," in which he posts a new Hebrew essay at least once a week, he describes how, as a youth, his father's stationery store provided the materials for his experiments in painting. He served in the IDF in an entertainment troupe and then studied theater and philosophy at Tel Aviv University eventually getting his doctorate on the definition of art from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Ofrat decided some years ago to retire from curating. However, when asked by Germany's Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and by collector and art dealer Igal Presler to curate an exhibition about the Jewish-German artist Lea Grundig, he consented, and the show opened in Tel Aviv in September.

Self-portrait by Lea Grundig, approximately 1945, ink on paper, Igal Presler Collection; (left) Gideon Ofrat in his home in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Abu Tor

He has been an avid collector of Israeli art since 1970. Four years ago, he decided to sell the collection, a body of 1,200 works reflecting the various permutations of the local art scene. The money earned, he relates, can now be channeled to his costly mission of publishing a book almost every year.

The big art sale was not, in his words, "an operatic farewell," however. Hundreds of paintings, prints, etchings and drawings still cover the stone walls of the big, steep and cleverly sunlit house he lives in with his wife, the photographer Aliza Auerbach, in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Abu Tor. The sale to an entrepreneur was conditional



on 350 works remaining with Ofrat as long as he lives.

Ofrat profoundly enjoys the mission of questioning Israel's cultural myths and conventions. One of his passions is bringing to light abandoned, marginalized Israeli artists. "Being Polish," he says, "I have always been drawn to the story of the country's forgotten artists.

It was this passion, then, that persuaded him to take on the Grundig exhibition, which is being shown at the Presler Private Museum – a four-story Bauhaus building in south Tel Aviv that Presler converted a couple of years ago into a small museum. The show presents a captivating artist who, despite spending almost a decade here, was, as Ofrat puts it, "completely erased" from the country's artistic and historical recollection.

Grundig, née Langer, was born in Dresden in 1906 to an Orthodox Jewish family of considerable wealth. As a teenager, she joined a Zionist youth movement and later, to the disapproval of her father, enrolled in Dresden's Art Academy, where she not only established herself as a committed artist, but also met the love of her life, fellow student Hans Grundig.

The young couple joined the German Communist Party in 1926, and in 1928 they married. Residing in a blue-collar district of the city, they invested themselves in their

art as much so as in the party's activities, making ends meet by maintaining Hans's father's small business of decorative painting. Wedding a non-Jew widened Grundig's rift with her father, while her communist principles drove her to reject her family's prosperity.

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In subsequent years, Lea and Hans became well-known artists in Germany. While Hans went mostly for oil painting, Lea elected an artistic path based on black-and-white drawings and printing.

In a symposium on her art, held by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation on the exhibition's opening day, references to Spanish artist Francisco Goya and his dark, socially and politically critical print series were made more than once.

Grundig's choice of techniques and of subjects – the grim life of workers in an urban, industrial environment and the extra

hardships endured by women and children in that society – signify the strong effect Kathe Kollwitz's work had on Grundig. Like Kollwitz, Grundig's depiction of the Weimar era is often a monochromatic, expressively piercing contemplation of current atrocities as much as a premonition of those yet to come.

With the rise of the Nazis, both wife and husband were persecuted for their artwork, as well as for their politics. Grundig's works from the 1930s displayed in the exhibition predict coming events. Among them are etchings from her 1935 series, "The Jew Is to Blame" and the apocalyptic scenes she drew in her 1937 series, "War Looms."

In 1938, the Grundigs were arrested and sent to concentration camps. A year later, Lea managed either to get released or flee – the circumstances, Ofrat notes, are unclear – and she escaped to Palestine on board a refugee ship.

THE JOURNEY had a tragic ending. Intercepted by the British navy, the hapless passengers were moved to another vessel, the SS Patria, and were set to be deported to British detention camps in Mauritius.

In an attempt to prevent the deportation, the Jewish underground force, the Hagana, sabotaged the Patria, causing damage far beyond what was intended. On November 25,

1940, the ship sank in Haifa port claiming the lives of more than 200 refugees and 50 British troops. The survivors, Grundig among them, were sent to confinement camps in Atlit, near Haifa, which was where Grundig spent her first year in Palestine.

During her eight years in the country – after her release from Atlit she first stayed with her sister in Haifa before moving to live with art collector and industrialist Nahum Eitan in Tel Aviv – Grundig created a diverse body of works.

Diverging from her focus on politicized social topics, Ofrat relates, she created a broad range of portraits, nude drawings of women, landscapes, kibbutz life, laborers, caricatures about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and even a rare multi-colored cartoon about the zincographic printing plant owned by her lover Eitan.

Grundig also partly abandoned her abstinence from color. In Atlit, for instance, during a tuberculosis epidemic, she painted colorful aquarelles portraying the fantasies of children who suffered from fever induced by the disease. The TB fantasies series was also the anchor of the first of the six exhibitions she held during her time in the country. A large part of her artistic activity in this period was illustrating children books, an occupation that also became her source of income.

"Apart from her focus on the subject of the Holocaust, the general impression is that Lea Grundig got slightly lost as an artist during her Eretz Israel period," Ofrat writes in his blog, speculating that it was probably due to "the tension of the contrasts between her gratitude to the Zionism, which saved her life and her inclination to internationalism, as well as the tension between the monstrous events in Europe and her new life and landscape in Palestine that seems to have destabilized Grundig's artistic world."

But, if Grundig temporarily set aside some of her fervor for hard-core, strictly political art-making, and experimented with other types of artistic destinations, she still put her entire heart and talent into one, utterly political subject. "She was among the first Israeli artists – perhaps she was even the first one – to directly address the Holocaust in her work," Ofrat notes. "And she did so in such a sharp and direct manner."

Already in 1943 Grundig began a series of ink drawings based on the news from Europe. A year later, this cycle, titled "In the Valley of Slaughter," was published as an album. Her 1946 solo exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum included these drawings alongside other works on the same subject, as well as sketches of kibbutz life. This presentation was not well received. Art critic Paul Landau slammed her "lack of

(From left) Lea Grundig – The Fall, 1937, etching, Ghetto Fighters' House Museum collection; This is how it will be! 1936, etching, Ghetto Fighters' House Museum collection; Buy Volks gas masks! 1936, etching, Ghetto Fighters' House Museum collection

imagination," writing in the socialist daily newspaper *Al HaMishmar* that she was "incapable of exceeding the framework of reportage."

In 1948, after learning that Hans was alive, Grundig left Israel – and Eitan – to reunite with her husband in their hometown of Dresden. There were ideological reasons for her decision – she was still an avowed communist. She was also profoundly critical of the Zionist State's nationalistic characteristics and of the manner with which the Palestinians' claims were dealt. But, according to her autobiography and her nephew Yoram Shifman's account of the tearful farewell between Grundig and her sister (his mother) in Haifa, it was Lea's love for Hans that drew his aunt back to Germany.

Ofrat, whose first encounter with Grundig's work occurred in the late 1980s when he scavenged through old files in a veteran Jerusalem gallery, thinks that an additional explanation for her decision could be her rejection by the Israeli art world and her contempt for the trends that dominated the young country's art scene.

Whatever the reasons for her return to East Germany, Lea Grundig enjoyed in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) the success and reverence she had not experienced in Israel. She was the first woman to be appointed to a full professorship in Dresden's Art Academy and served as president of the GDR Artists Association.

And, despite constant deviations from the Communist Party line – she insisted, for instance, on portraying the hardships endured by GDR blue-collar workers – she was deeply appreciated as an artist. Grundig, who died in 1977 during a cruise in the Mediterranean, was a passionate supporter of GDR's policies and had a relatively strong position within its establishment.

How does Ofrat explain that Grundig, whose art was so humanistic in nature and whose record as an artist proved that she did not shy away from struggle, aligned herself with the totalitarian GDR regime?

"This," Ofrat says, "is indeed a tough question." ■