

# I'VE GOT ME UNDER YOUR SKIN

In his most personal and revealing exhibition to date, Gal Wertman offers figures that create a shimmering twilight zone between the body and what's outside it

By **Ellie Armon Azoulay** / Photo by Uri Gershuni



Gal Wertman: "The paintings are like visions of a sculptor or of a blind photographer trying to take pictures."

Gal Wertman had his first solo exhibition seven years after the breakup of Aya & Gal, the artistic duo in which he was active during the 1990s. It has now been four years since his last show, an unusually long time for an artist of 45 like Wertman. And time itself is a pervasive theme in his work.

His new exhibition, which opened on September 8 at the Gordon Gallery in Tel Aviv, is probably Wertman's most personal and revealing to date. It takes its name, "Shiri in the Solar System," from the title of a particularly large work; a beautiful, erotic work made up of five elongated, attached canvases. Using multiple layers of latex, Wertman has created a screening effect: From each section of canvas a silhouette emerges in differing stages of visibility. In some cases the silhouette is complete and the body and its language are revealed – a hand resting on a thigh, a gentle spreading of the legs, a slight tilting of the head – while in others a thick, darker stain appears, seeming to bubble forth from the clear latex screen and merely hint at the body's presence. Along the length and breadth of the five parts of the work, small round stains appear, forming a dancing chain, like meteors cascading across the galaxy.

Shiri Wertman has been the artist's partner for the past eight years; they have two sons. Until about a year ago, Gal worked in a room in their home and her image entered his art in the most natural way. "I like working at home," he says. "There is something very right about it, because art and life are not separate. The works are very intimate."

About a year after his previous solo show, also held at the Gordon Gallery, Wertman, who is employed full-time as the chief graphic designer of Haaretz, was struck by the feeling that the pace of his artistic work was extremely slow. His partner, an accountant by profession, proposed that she take over the household and family chores for one day a week – Friday, which is his day off from the newspaper – to give him time to pursue his art. "That step made an opening in the cave through which light became visible, light that enabled concentration I had not been able to attain before," Wertman says.

"Shiri in the Solar System" was the first work he created on those Fridays, and it defines the character of the entire exhibition. "Shiri is actually a type of ideal from my point of view, but she is

also a kind of reflection of me," Wertman says, as he walks about in his studio, located in a municipal bomb shelter in east Tel Aviv. He turns over other works that will be part of the exhibition and exposes them to view.

All the works, which are of various sizes, are titled "Figure" and are composed of layers of latex on canvas. The generic title alludes to their anonymity and repetitiveness. At the same time, most of them also constitute self-portraits, both interior and exterior. "The paintings are like visions," Wertman explains, "visions of a sculptor or of a blind photographer trying to take pictures."

About working with latex, he says: "The material exposes the figures and the portraits the same way emulsion does in photography." During our conversation he invokes terms from other fields that are unrelated to painting. "I view the works as a type of sculpture," he says. "I don't actually paint, but construct." And, pointing to one of the figures: "I truly feel that I constructed this portrait."

## 'Point zero'

Latex connects Wertman's current art with the work he produced as part of the duo of Aya & Gal – Aya being Aya Frenkel, his ex-wife – which existed until 2001. The two graduated from the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in 1990, started to work together by chance and quickly created an impact in the art world. Intensive activity, an inclination toward the experimental and the subversive, curiosity and an interest in a range of fields were among the traits that set them apart on the local scene in the early 1990s.

One riveting feature of the couple's work was its quasi-bionic, science-fiction-like technological presence. They worked on Mac computers. For some time they walked around with earphones in a kind of mutual surveillance, listening to each other's conversations. Their 1994 exhibition took over every bit of available space at the Bograshov Gallery, from floor to ceiling. Sound was dominant and there were latex suits dangling from the ceiling, like sloughed-off skin.

As a couple, they created sculptures based on three archetypes: body builder, model and Wertman's own body. Using plaster casts of the three types, they forged skin-like latex envelopes. For years, Wertman says, he was fascinated by the seam line between objects, which he terms a "zero point – that place between the skin and the outside, be- ►



◀ tween the body and the skin, a kind of twilight zone that changes according to the skin and according to how you feel.”

Wertman explains that he would not have created what might be perceived as a “painting” were it not for the material. Nor would he have considered painting the works in oils. “Everything comes from the emulsion of the latex. I call it emulsion, because of the quality of the material, but also metaphorically: it brings to the surface what is inside me. Latex is a material that has everything. Its coloring is perfect, its connectivity, its reaction to the surroundings – to the sun, to light and to heat – is absolutely human, lifelike.” If in the past Wertman made use of his body, now the game is with the figures’ eyes. In some of the works there are dark stains, or small spots, evoking freckles or dimples in the latex, which were created by exposing the material to sunlight. The material’s natural qualities affect the works, which are in a constant process of change.

“I have no desire to make them permanent; on the contrary, the process is something I very much like,” Wertman says. “You don’t notice it on the day-to-day level, because the change is very slow and gradual, but the very thought that something is changing all the time, that it is not something fixed, restores it to the body and to life and to the transformations it undergoes.”

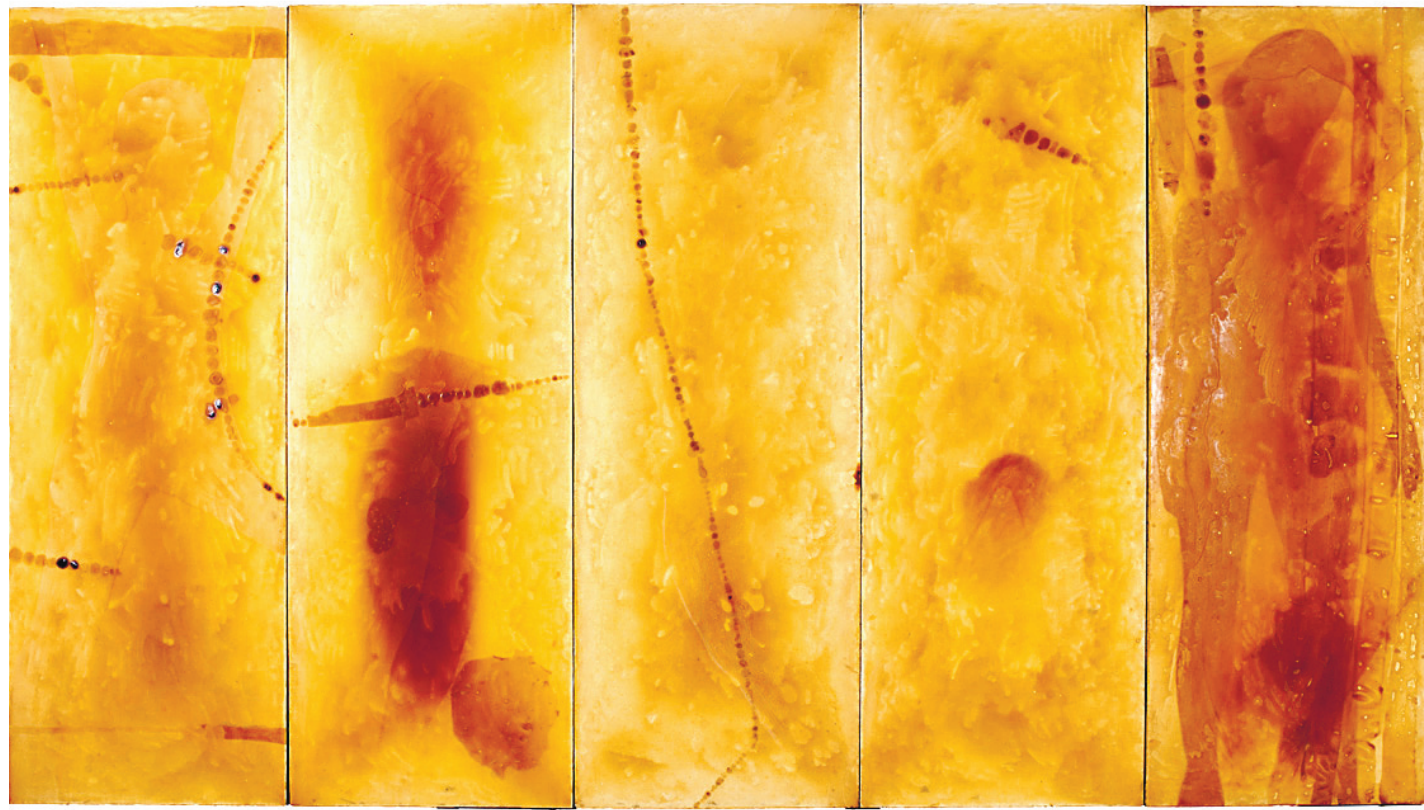
The very fact that time has no starting or ending point in these works reflects Wertman’s powerful attraction to the temporal dimension. As in his previous exhibition, “Time Machines, Time Traps,” any attempt now to ascribe his figures to a particular time is futile, and this is deliberate.

There is something basic and primary about latex figures. This impression is intensified by a visit to Wertman’s studio and the sight of rolled sheets of latex in different sizes, and huge late x paddles. Wertman seems bent on creating objects all of which possess the same form of existence. Their layered essence also lends them an archaeological dimension.

His figures are in an interim state, or a “state of transition,” in the words of the art critic and poet Yaara Shehori. What is not clear is the point in time: Do they exist after having been shaped and their facial features fully defined, or are they going through a process of distortion that will change their faces?

“Does time go forward or backward?” Wertman wonders. “I am very much disturbed by the notion of time. I have thought about it ceaselessly for decades, but without being able to solve the question. How is time quantified? What is time? I think this is the most significant thing in relation to the works. It is also similar in character to the zero point of the body that I mentioned earlier. I love the instant at which the skin dissolves into the material. There is something erotic and alluring about these works. There is an aura of mystery about them which I don’t yet entirely know how to decipher, but to which I am drawn.”

Amon Yariv, director of the Gordon Gallery and curator of the exhibition, views the show as a continuation of its predecessor of four years ago. “In that exhibition there were a few works made entirely of latex, which looked like heads or signs of life that appear in ultrasound examinations. What was a seed in that show evolved into a whole body of work



“Shiri in the Solar System,” 2009

in the present one,” he says.

Yariv finds an affinity between Wertman’s slightly abstract portraits and figures in the new exhibition, and portraits by the artist Gabi Klezmer. Even though the works are large in scale, Yariv notes, Wertman manages to preserve a sense of intimacy between them and the viewer. “When you stand near to them you feel a face-to-face closeness. That feeling is generated by the close resemblance of the skin-like latex to the human face, so much so that you think you hear something; but the voice and what is said come from a different time.”

## Unsettled account

Some of the preparatory drawings in the studio are inscribed with the words “Europe” and “Arbeit Macht Frei” in German and other languages – clear allusions to the Second World War and the Holocaust. Tattooed on Wertman’s arm is a number: the last number the Nazis branded on the arms of a Jew in the camps.

He is the son of Israel Wertman, a veteran Haifa-based artist and a Holocaust survivor. He had the tattoo done four years ago, in conjunction with the previous show. However, he says, it was a private family act. “I do not consider it a work of art. I did not document it and I did not make a work out of it.” More delicate and indirect expressions of this theme could be identified in the 2007 exhibition, in the form of structures that thrust underground, like shelters for the soul.

The drawings are the major direct expression of the historical unease that he and many of his generation – the second generation of Holocaust survivors – feel. “I think every day about my whole family that perished,” Wertman says with palpable grief. “Whenever I attend funerals – and I try not to attend them – they immediately become a collective funeral for the family I never knew. In

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this way I conduct more and more funerals for them.”

He discerns a highly charged expressiveness in his father’s paintings. Of the difference between the two generations he says, “The parents’ generation wants to forget; my generation and the generations that will follow, will never forget. As far as I am concerned, the account with Germany has not yet been settled. I am very angry at the Israeli governments of that period, which did nothing significant or drastic after the war. Maybe this is a pathetic thing to say, but what I find lack-

ing is revenge. It is not by chance that one of the only words found in the crematoria, written in blood, was ‘revenge.’”

His father, he relates, spent four years with his mother and his brother in the forests. “My father was a year old when the war started. My uncle, who is also an artist and was five at the start of the war, was more badly hurt. He made amazing paintings and went to Bezalel, but only lasted about three months there. When I went to Bezalel, it was like the closing of a circle for me.”

Wertman grew up in his father’s studio and imbibed the secrets of the profession from infancy. “My father is an ideal for me, as an artist and as a human being,” he says. “He is a rare personality. For decades he has gotten up in the morning and gone to the studio. It is work and discipline. Something total. I inherited that totality and discipline from him and I use them every day in the studio and at work.”

Still, as a student and a young artist, Wertman quickly set boundaries of medium, social class and behavior. While walking in Haifa one day, he found dozens of rusting wind instruments – trumpets, trombones and more – that were no longer usable. He stuffed them into a car and took them straight to Bezalel, where he hung them on the walls and to each one attached the name of a teacher in the department. At the end of the day, he and his friends went outside and gave a rusty concert. In another case, Wertman shut himself in a room in the department for 24 hours and carried out experimental activities. And there was a night on which he blocked the door to the department’s building with cinder blocks.

It was in this period that he first became involved with the press. As a student at Bezalel he bought and mastered a Mac computer and was hired as a graphic artist by the local Jerusalem weekly Yerushalayim. After a while, he started to write about art in the paper, together with Aya Frenkel.

“In that period a young artist was



Wertman’s previous exhibition at the Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv – even the floor was covered with latex.

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one who had already turned 40, that was the youngest age,” he says. “Before reaching that age, you could call yourself an artist but no one considered you one and you couldn’t exhibit anywhere. Aya and I made double-page spreads for every student who did some nonsense anywhere – we turned him into a deity.” In large measure, the two opened the door to young art in the Israeli press. In 1995, they and Yaron Tan-Brink launched the first Internet newspaper in Israel.

Like his approach to his art, Wertman views his work at Haaretz not as graphic design but as sculpture. “When I work on the pages of the newspaper I do not design them – I quarry them. When I look at a newspaper page I see the white and through it I quarry the text and the images.”

Even though the two worlds are radically different, Wertman navigates between them easily. The main difference, he says, again lies in the perception of the concept of time. “In the newspaper time is very fast,” he says. “Every minute at the paper is like hours in the studio.”

## Revolutionary decade

Jerusalem was a way station for Wertman between Haifa, where he was born, and Tel Aviv, where he lives today. He never liked Jerusalem, he says, even though he lived there at a tranquil time, before the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. “There was a euphoria of peace, people were certain that this was it, that it’s just around the corner,” he recalls. “After the assassination, Jerusalem changed completely and became violent from every direction.”

On the other hand, the years were artistically thrilling. He describes a productive scene in a Jerusalem villa that became an art center under the curatorship of Yona Fischer. Wertman and Aya Frenkel also hosted artists from abroad. “It was a never-ending celebration of art.”

When they moved to Tel Aviv, it was not exactly boring. In terms of the period, the Aya & Gal duo had an unprecedented number of solo and group shows in Israel and abroad. Their first show was in a group exhibition in 1993, “Third Person,” at the Bograshov Gallery (curated by Michal Heiman and Ariella Azoulay). Their work was also exhibited at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and they took part in the important photographic group show “90-70-90” at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (curator: Rona Sela), in the sculpture biennale “Tel Hai 94” at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art and in Art Focus events.

In 1997, they had a solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp and in the same year were invited, along with other Israeli artists, to

Docu in Kassel, Germany – an exhibition of contemporary art held every five years – where they showed “Naturalize / Local Observation Point, Kassel,” an ambitious interactive computer and postcards project (curator: Catherine David). “Naturalize” was one of the couple’s riveting themes.

Wertman speaks of the concept with pride and passion: “It refers to people who have no affiliation and no passport and cannot move about in the world. The idea was that from every point you reached, you could reach any point in the world. We wanted to annul the hierarchies.” The two built a motorized cart containing a two-camera closed-circuit system that broadcast the world outside to the cart on two small screens. Users navigated by means of the onscreen data. Another screen in the cart showed a short film made by the couple in which many people are being “naturalized” in latex suits. This was probably their most

radical project, and they developed it constantly until they separated. The version shown in Documenta was an impressive espionage work. They photographed the most sensitive area in Jerusalem – the residences of the president and the prime minister – with Wertman in a car wearing a suit and the camera mounted on the steering wheel and turning along with it as they documented the area. The result was that viewers in Kassel could navigate this area of Jerusalem. A site containing a dictionary of terms for the project (where it is called “Neturalize”) still exists on the Internet, along with many images documenting the complex work. (www.gaga.co.il/neturliize/100me.html).

Along with “Naturalize” they also took part in a Documenta event called “100 Days” which included a live video and Internet broadcast. “I think it was one of the first Internet video broadcasts in the world,” Wertman recalls emotionally. The 1990s were revolutionary, he maintains, a claim shared by many who began to work in that decade. “People were radical both in their thinking and in their art,” he says. “They did not compromise on anything. Our activity was genuinely avant-garde.”

*What has changed?*

“I don’t know. It’s a different period. I look at the current social protest, and it’s not pleasant for me to say this, because I am very much for them, but when all is said and done I think they have to operate very differently: to set the country on fire, block streets and bring everything to a halt.”

*What, in your view, is the essential difference between your joint work with Aya and your independent work in recent years?*

“We worked from a pure concept. Many of the ideas that came up then continue to occupy me, and I am realizing them all along my professional road in art and with the newspaper. With many compromises, of course. I am also in a different phase because of the reality I live in. I don’t say that with regret – there is a lot more quiet today. If in the past I was nourished by my surroundings, in this exhibition and the previous one the surroundings are actually me. There is something more intimate in the works, something private.” ■



The artist Israel Wertman, fellow artist and father of Gal. “My father is an ideal for me, as an artist and as a human being,” says Gal.