

Artist in Focus: Abraham Kritzman

Abraham Kritzman works from within a wide spectrum of sources, or better yet, origins. These starting points could be personal narratives or timeless human imagery but mostly derive from his walking voyages, which usually follow pilgrim routes. These journeys, which Kritzman took in Japan, Spain and Romania, are not religious voyages for a holy purpose but rather opportunities for encounters that are linked to history, image making and the things one finds on a voyage to somewhere. In terms of time and place, some origins derive from fleeting, intimate moments, as well as from the artist's interpretations of more constant forms. Naturally, some places are far beyond the viewers' scope, while others may exist in our minds in some way or another. Through various techniques, Kritzman alters or even removes many of the original references of his creations, forming unexpected trajectories and offering new meanings.

Key techniques the artist works with are duplication, zooming, abstraction, flattening, layering, veiling and obscuring, as well as manipulating methods of display and the viewer's experience. The relationships between the works, forming a kind of "negative space", are most important. This working process, starting with diverse origins that are later combined with the artist's methodology, tropes, techniques and devices within the intensely creative environment of the studio, and finally incorporated into considered methods of display, amount to a certain kind of language that both breaks down its original context and rebuilds it into a new environment. It is a transformation process that exceeds mere representation, forming a creative arena for enhanced contemplation for both the artist and his spectator.

"Part of the artist's role, as a subject, is to encounter, to come face to face with things in the world. This brings a certain sort of gaze into the work and a specific process that ends up bringing singular forms in and out of it"

Kritzman's latest series of artworks, which Elizabeth Xi Bauer has taken on to represent, include the works 'Descent 1-8'. These were created for the project and overall exhibition titled 'Tuga' (2014) at the St Mary Aldermary Church in Central London. This remarkable space, which was reconstructed three times, such as following the Great Fire of London and the bombings of World War II, presented the artist with an important exhibiting opportunity - to create work that will be displayed inside a church. Until this moment objects in churches were part of his study, a world of inspiration and references, now was his chance to intervene with a place which previously was only available to him as a spectator. 'Tuga', which means deep sorrow, relates to the subject of death and takes on a special meaning within the context of a church. As previously discussed, the artist's work cannot be characterised as religious or carrying a religious message, but rather working with the *territory* as a space to be explored artistically. This series is a key example of the artist's use of fragmentation, which promotes the breaking down of religious associations that would otherwise be difficult to shake off.

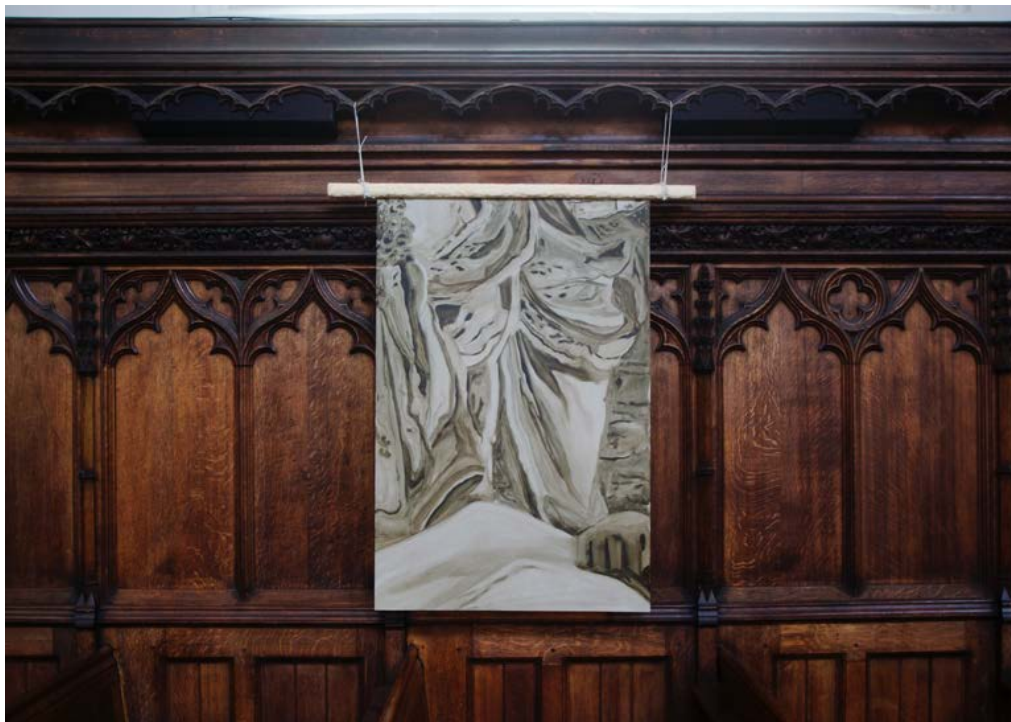
This specific work is influenced by the artist's journeys to Spain, where he encountered a public statue of Jesus descending into the grave. This powerful action of descending gave way to the title of the series. For his MA degree show at the Royal College of Art, which won him an acclaimed honourable mention, Kritzman created 22 oil on paper panels based on the

statue. On this particular occasion, they were hung from the ceiling bringing into the space a yellow hue and a feeling of a world of images hovering above pressuring down.



Descent. Our eyes met, looking at the sun, Oil on paper, 40x80 cm

In the 'Tuga' project, the artist realised that the works should increase in size, becoming more powerful and resolute. Thus, he took out the panels that are most identifiable and figurative in aspiration and scaled up in size. The artist continued to experiment with modes of display. In this case, the works were not hung from the ceiling, but from the delicately carved wooden interior of the church, creating a sense of respectful and delicate balance.



Descent 5, 2014, Oil on paper, 127x82 cm displayed in St Mary Aldermary Church



From left to right, *Descent 7, Descent 8, Descent 4*

Here, the hanging device developed as part of the artist's ongoing and constant questioning of the installation of works in space. Also included were a series of sculptures, accompanied by a ten-minute sound piece that resonated at a certain period of time within the church.

"Pre-existing things should surprise the artist. They already exist but through the creative process and their combinations they may leave their origins and embark on a new journey"

"Through my creative process, I want things to show up. Every studio session I want to encounter something...what drives me is my wish to be surprised by my works each time anew"

For Kritzman, the use of doubling is significant. If we examine his diptychs, for example, *'Arch and Veil Left and Right'*, we can see that the action of painting something twice allows the artist to focus on the process of painting itself. The canvasses are painted simultaneously so that the same gestures are performed twice, allowing a deep investigation of marks and focuses the movement on the elements that are most important for the artist. Thus, decisions about form, marks and colour become more decisive – one choice applies to all. Through this kind of focus, a unique kind of symmetry emerges with only slight variations in the 'foreground'. However, our sense of depth is disturbed, as the work appears flattened. This is achieved through the usage of a specific colour of red painted or primed onto the canvas. This is vermilion red, akin to the red on human lips. The dark paint absorbs colour and acts as a kind of obscuring veil. In order to show against this dark saturation, bright colours should be taken into extreme brightness.

In this body of work, the artist was influenced by methods used in church paintings in Romania from the 15th Century. These frescos were obscuring light by using a special painting tempera that would cover a white wall. Icons were painted on panels painted red, which enhanced the

gold leaf or gilding. This was very much different from the canon of 'Western' painting, which aimed to create an inner glow, using Chiaroscuro and the agenda of the highlight. Kritzman's works are concealing rather than promoting light, and rather than layers built up on top of each other, these paintings seem to be going the other way, their layers almost 'sinking' into the canvas.

"I think that there was something extremely radical in the way they were painting - there is no going back or correcting, there is only so much light to have - it's an economy. They work in the opposite way to the Western tradition"

"When making paintings or sculptures, it changes the place I was in. It is creating something new, let's say the place I visited in Romania is now forever changed after making the work, it now has a new future and a new past"



Arch and Veil Left and Right, 2016, Oil on canvas, 120x90 cm each

The work is built up layer upon layer, giving a sense of energy and movement, a kind of vibration. But the permanence of the arched forms also creates something very fixed. Furthermore, this symmetry promotes a mirroring effect which is enhanced and taken further via the title. The words are of fascination to the artist; one defines form ('arch') and the other hides it ('veil'). In a sense, they can be interchangeable due to their basic shape, but they are the antithesis of one another. The third element following the doubling and the title is the negative space in between and around the works. This space does not only separate but also connects. This way of thinking was inspired by the artist's travels to Buddhist temples and his

observations of the formal qualities of the screens in these places. This work was shown in Elizabeth Xi Bauer's international group exhibition *'Coated in Pre-existence'*, which was a significant show for the artist. The exhibition was a vessel for him to explore the notion of pre-existence, both the meaning of the phrase as well as what already existed within his work, and how it translates within his creative process. You can read more about the exhibition on our website.

Another work that was displayed at the exhibition is *'Overhead'*, which was influenced by the artist's travels to Japan, and specifically by the wealth of flowers and decorations hung over entrances and exits in all kinds of buildings. A more Western example would be hanging mistletoe. In this case, the artist was playing with perspective as well as flattening. He positioned an object that would usually be looked at from below on a vertical plane. The artist used a very definite technique, much like in his doubling process, as due to the use of a certain kind of priming, once a mark had been made it could not be undone.

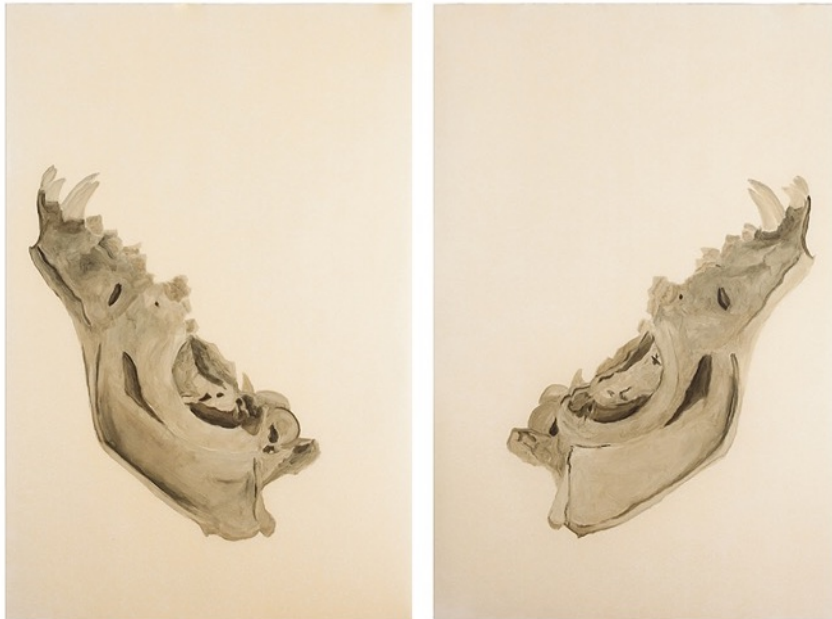
"I cannot erase, every gesture leaves a mark on the fabric. I enjoy this tension and the risk it involves"



Overhead, 2016, Oil on canvas, 85x85 cm

The diptych *'Canine'*, which was the artist's first work in oil on paper, and *'Canine Skull'* were inspired by Kritzman's movements around the Hills of Goral (Destiny) in the Israeli desert. This land was a training ground for the military and it is where he encountered strange, almost undefinable animal skulls. They were difficult to attach to a certain species because he always found one jaw. The doubling technique was a way of mirroring the second half, thus creating

a whole and in a sense a bite through the perceived action of closing. The teeth are bare and exposed, but possess the potential to cause much damage – a hint at the violent nature of the previous owners. They also resemble human hands and suggest a gesture – that of open or closed hands.



Canine, 2014, Oil on paper, 127×82 cm each



Canine Skull, 2014, Oil on paper, 127×82 cm

'Two Before' is an example of how the artist juxtaposes paintings with sculptures while encouraging the viewer to look over the sculptures, and into the paintings. In a sense, one is mounting over them in order to gaze into the painting. An exterior factor changes the way you perceive what is inside the painting. This device was partly influenced by the artist's observations of churches and the religious devices and actions occurring within them.

"The dramatisation that religious institutes are interested in is definitely in my work and in their positioning. The work resonates through how one perceives the space".

Each painting in the diptych depicts a young tree, which is hiding or obscuring the background. They are also covered in a coating – a vermillion glaze, which this time is placed on top of the existing painting – thus acting like an obscuring screen. Therefore, the paintings include a system of elements obscuring and repeating an introduction or preface. It was strongly influenced by the Japanese habit of placing two potted plants at the entrances of cemeteries and shrines, which the artist encountered in Japan. The sculptures are akin to the pots that hold the plants; the bases that weigh and hold the entire composition together.



Two Before, 2015, Oil on canvas and plaster, canvas 70×60 cm each, sculpture 30x15x10 cm each

In the series 'Noters', the artist obscures and disrupts the viewer's normal field of vision. He builds up layers of darkness, turning the scene into a nightscape. Not seeing becomes an element in the work, and a way to force one's imagination onto the work. The actions of veiling, obscuring and darkening asks the viewer to take a second look and almost holds them in suspense. These figures are caught on the verge of our sight, just before daybreak, when there is only the slightest visibility.

"I wanted the ability of not seeing to become an element in the work"



Noter, 2013, Oil on canvas, 130×160 cm each

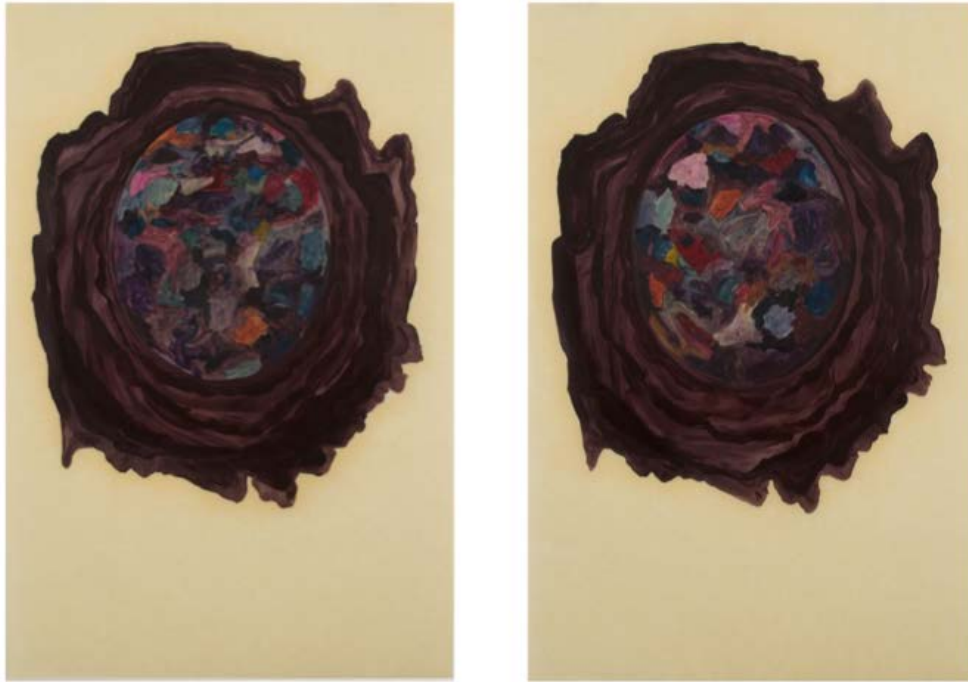
The Noters, or originally the 'Notrim', were a kind of guard or police force set up by the British in pre-Israel Palestine. They were given permission to use arms to protect their settlements but were really more of an in-between solution. In the paintings, these figures whom we could conclude are guarding are also dangerous as they are armed and ready to attack. One can think of this position in terms of perhaps Doberman or Rottweiler dogs.

The figures are not taken from a specific Notrim but are a more universal watch force – the archetype of a guard but with the potentiality to become something more sinister. The title '*Noters*' is a word play of the word 'notes', hinting to both taking note and taking notice. These actions could again be taken as sinister actions disguised as protective – a kind of all-seeing and all-knowing watch force.



Noters, 2014, Oil on canvas, 150×185 cm

In the 'Mirr' works, the artist is working with a number of elements. 'Mirr' could refer to a mirror, thus the inner image in the paintings becoming a kind of reflection; a reflection of gestural shapes, marks and colours. The artist described this inner image as a kind of 'dreaming stone' – something that one can contemplate on. The overall shape itself is inspired from the outline of a puddle in a forest that the artist observed, but also here the form is rendered vertically rather than horizontally as it originally appeared.



Mirr Alex, 2014, Oil on paper, 127×82 cm each



Mirr S, 2014, Oil on paper, 127×82 cm each

In a similar manner to 'Noters', the work 'O.L.E.G' is not taken from a specific source, but from that which pre-existed in the world and evolved in the mind of the artist. In 2003 in Israel, an IDF soldier went missing, and the artist was part of the search party. Whilst spending a week searching, the artist developed a kind of fantasy about the young man, speculating the various scenarios that could have occurred. Conscripted to the Israeli army, the artist identified with the missing soldier, he was dreaming of his escape thinking of how to run away too.



O.L.E.G., 2013, Oil on paper, 59×41.5 cm each

Could the *Noters* be the heroes, the ones searching for someone at the break of dawn, or rather the villain? Were they to do with his disappearance? After the artist had finished the search, the missing soldier was eventually found dead in a well after being abducted and murdered in what was later referred to as a terror attack.

The work is a profile, depicting the missing soldier as what he might have looked like in the mind of the artist. On his searches for the man, the artist was accompanied by four other people, who become part of his fantasy. The work was created a decade after the event, which proves how long the imaginary image of the missing man lingered with Kritzman. In fact, these searches were for him entangled with the same experience that influenced '*Canines*' and '*Mirr*'. Indeed, the desert and forest are places very much associated with death and dreariness yet intense creativity.

Abraham Kritzman's practice spans painting, drawing, photography, sculpture and installation. After studying at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem, he completed his Master's Degree in Painting at the Royal College of Art, London in 2014. He lives between Israel and London and is currently a Tutor at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design. He has exhibited solo and duo shows at Danielle Arnaud Gallery, London; News of the World Gallery, London; Saint Mary Aldermary, London; Atelier 35, Bucharest and The Artists House, Tel Aviv, among others. Selected group exhibitions include with Elizabeth Xi Bauer, London; Graduate Prize Show, London; Blyth Gallery, London; Arebyte Gallery, London; Barbur Gallery, Jerusalem; Alfred Gallery, Tel Aviv; Benjamin Gallery, Tel Aviv; The Negev Museum of Art, Beer Sheva and The Artists House, Tel Aviv. Kritzman is the recipient of several awards and scholarships and his artworks exist in major foundations and institutions.

Abraham Kritzman exhibited in Elizabeth Xi Bauer's group exhibition *Coated in Pre-existence* in September 2016 and was in conversation with Edward Sheldrick.