

A Quick Introduction to Romantic Love

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In one of the final episodes of the TV series *Sex and the City*, the show's protagonist, Carrie Bradshaw, declares that we are no longer cut for grand gestures, a comment triggered by the old-fashioned, chivalrous courting style of her Russian lover, who invites her to dance in the plaza outside the Metropolitan Opera. This overdose of romance causes Carrie to pass out in his arms. Later, when she tells her girlfriends how he read poetry to her by the fireplace on a wintry night, the excessive stickiness and sentimentality make them nauseous. "Tell him he is not dating Anna Karenina," her friend Miranda says scornfully. At the end of the episode they are seen dancing, glamorously and stylishly, in a dingy McDonald's. The entire episode deals with the relevance of romance: Is there really nothing left of romantic aura? Has it been dried up entirely by contemporary cynicism?

It is beyond the scope of this introduction to describe the intensity of romantic love as an engine for creative inspiration in western culture as a whole, and in popular culture in particular. Quite surprisingly, however, contemporary visual art does not inundate us with representations of romantic love. Eroticism – yes; images of body and passion – plenty; but images of romantic love that highlight emotion are not so common. At least in part due to the anti-narrative quality inherent in visual art today, there are not many contemporary artists whose work touches explicitly upon love relations. Sophie Calle, Tracy Emin, Tim Nobel and Sue Webster, as well as Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons, and Pierre and Gilles are the exceptions. It seems impossible to address a highly charged theme such as love – one of the last resorts of authenticity – without considering its extensive treatment in popular culture and its appropriation by the leisure culture industry as an effective marketing tool.

The research of sociologist Prof. Eva Illouz, whose main ideas are included in this catalogue, considers the affinity between romantic sentiments, culture, and economy. It concludes that the powerful advertising industry and Hollywood's dream industry have enabled consumer capitalism to enhance and even reinvent

the cultural ideal of romantic love. The yearning for utopia at the heart of romantic love has replaced the religious experience; in the postmodern era in which the gap between culture and economy has been blurred, the state of romantic love reflects the values of the period.

The works of art featured in the show *Love is in the Air* articulate this critical approach, albeit not always intentionally. The romantic love they convey is certainly not one of grand gestures, and if they do contain such gestures, these are overstated to the point of absurdity. The majority of the works in the show deal with images and clichés of romantic love as mediated by the dream industry: the marketing networks, cinema, advertising and the media; they raise questions about the nature of romance in the digital age: Is romance really dead? What has remained? Have the symbols and icons marketed in the consumer world as “promises for happiness” indeed flattened the grand gestures, reducing them to short-lived advertising images? Has the cliché of romantic love now become a raw material used by artists to comment about love without romance, or does the very use of these hackneyed images embody the need to reinstate them with the aura of romanticism and furnish them with a new life?

These questions are reinforced vis-à-vis the emotional anorexia characterizing large sectors of Israeli art. Besides the countless pitfalls inherent in a highly-charged theme such as love, Israeli art had to steer clear of many additional homemade traps. The ascetic local ethos has excluded manifestations of emotion and love as loathsome. The standard requirements of the “artistic experience” and the boundaries of taste underlying canonical art in Israel have spanned the following combination of qualities: a tendency for restraint in expressing emotions; a preference for a distant, intellectual approach rather than a personal, confessional one; a skeptical attitude towards materiality; and shying away from artistic and other idealizations (Sarah Breitberg-Semel, *The Want of Matter*, p. 185). It seems that these values, derived from a socialist-communal ethos that negated individualism and adhered to the collective ideal, are still consecrated in certain sections of the local art world. In the name of restraint, rationalism and asceticism, any discussion of emotion has been pushed aside or wrapped in sophisticated camouflage nets, on account of being narrative,

narcissist, or too emotional. An “embarrassing” sentiment such as love is perceived as belonging to the private sphere, marked with the stamp of old-fashioned European manners, and at any rate – deemed a matter of no public interest. Thus the national ethos and the needs of the hour have taken their toll on art as well, while the political turmoil has silenced the humming of the private soul.

In the 1990s, this mindset underwent a transformation. Post-modernity in its Israeli version undermined the rigid canon, allowing other voices to be heard. ***Love is in the Air*** reflects this change, offering a playful, albeit not naive, refuge in the warm and familiar bosom of romance. The exhibition unfolds like a saccharine romantic plot: the first floor features “real life” representations – the trials and tribulations of love and the banality of conjugal life, and on the second floor – the fantasy of love and the dream of happiness. This narrative structure allows for a wide and variegated array of works based chiefly on romantic clichés in soap opera style: the blind date, courting, love at first sight, the love confession, the kiss, unrequited love, unconsummated love, yearning, fantasy, the wedding, the illusion of happiness, the honeymoon, conjugal troubles and the grief of infidelity and separation.

The show thus addresses the discourse of love and the imagery of romantic love as ingrained in our consciousness. The sentimental materials represented reflect virtually the whole spectrum of known expressions of love, from fantasies and expectations, through obsession and conflicts, to disappointments and suffering. Despite the stormy contents, most of the works are emotionally low-keyed. One will not find here heart-rending love confessions (except, perhaps, Yoram Kuperminz’s historical *I Love You*). If there are stormy emotions, in most cases they are translated into familiar visual and verbal media symbols, such as Ram Samocha’s pastel *Wedding Hearts*, Galia Yahav’s burnt heart-shaped cookies (*Everything Turns to Ashes*), Marilou Levin’s romantic sunset painting on a headboard (*Good Troubles*), or Hilla Lulu Lin’s burning heart (*Call Me, You Bastard*). The fire of love has apparently cooled down in the post-romantic era, and it is now served in a cool diet version.

Davina Feinberg's stylized color photographs offer depictions of contented couplehood in a nostalgic retro atmosphere: carefully staged and accessorized young couples based on wall decorations prevalent in 1970s teenage bedrooms. Images of famous couples in romantic poses extracted from paparazzi photographs are represented via line drawings in Shlomit Altman's installation *God, It's So Surreal!*, and same-sex couples in erotic scenes star in Ruti Helbitz Cohen's ink paintings: an embrace (two male soldiers), a kiss (two women), and a dance (a woman and her mirror reflection). The paint's absorption in the canvas allows for the blurring of boundaries between self and other, serving as a metaphor for a couple's symbiosis. Similarly, Atsmon Ganor's erotic animation film presents symbiotic images of same-sex love, but the ultimate version of "happy-ever-after" is offered by Rafi Perez's multi-hearted paintings from the series *Belated Young Love* that portray relaxed homosexual togetherness amidst the pots and pans in the kitchen and by the toilet in sweet, stylized pink tones.

One of the most worn-out symbols of love – the kiss – is represented in the show in a wide range of contexts: from Gil Shani's schematic line drawings that portray first love through an open window, through Meir Pichhadze's rueful paintings of a couple (the artist and his girlfriend) on a park bench, to Hanna Sahar's dark and melancholic photograph from the series *Princess Bingo*, portraying a prostitute and a client in a sleazy part of town. An investigative, nearly "scientific" account of a kiss as a type of fusion between two bodies is provided in Eden Ofra's video, *Our Two Lips*, featuring a monumental close-up of a pair of lips in action. More than an act of love, her kiss resembles a saliva-exchange ritual.

The most common romantic image is associated with the ritual of actualizing conjugal union. The wedding ceremony continues to nourish the fantasy of happiness, and it is represented in the show (on the fantasy floor, of course) as an emptied vision of religious worship. In her book *The Happiest Day of My Life or: Why We Are So Eager to Get Married*, Israeli author Ofra Riesenfeld traces the reasons for this great passion in 21st century Israel. Hypocrisy, pretense and deception are only some of the sentiments emerging from the testimonies she gathered from her interviewees about the wedding dream presented as a "tough, terrible and humiliating sales agreement," refined by "layers of romance, tulle and sequins, a band and catering." Gil Shachar's ringed fingers and Tal Amitai's

inscription “happiness”, made from a chain of hundreds of fake wedding rings, shed an ironic light on the false promise of happiness. The wedding night fantasy is also expressed in Anat Betzer’s bridal tapestries, and in the *Bridal Bouquet* thrown repeatedly in Dina Schupak’s video piece. Gil & Moti’s theatrical wedding project, recording their wedding at the Rotterdam City Hall, is presented in the “apse” on the second floor as the epitome of happiness in its alternative version. The vestiges of the ceremony (the grooms’ attire) are showcased as relics next to a painting documenting Princess Diana’s blessing for the newly-weds at Madame Tussaud’s in Amsterdam. The same-sex wedding is ironically portrayed here as an elegant and glamorous ceremony where the dream of a “prince for one day” comes true, exemplifying how the yearning for a romantic utopia has replaced the religious experience.

The big bang of romance images was set in motion by the Hollywood film industry, with ricochets reaching into all departments of the consumer world. Over the years, hundreds of Hollywood films and television series have fostered the ideal of conjugal life as the realization of the yearning for love. Countless variations on the Cinderella fairytale and the fantasy of a prince on a white horse are marketed in the cinema as the fulfillment of happiness. Anat Ben Shaul and Uzi Katzav draw their images directly from the fictive cinematic reality. Ben Shaul's paintings selected for the show were based on romantic scenes extracted from American films (*Fatal Attraction*, *Gilda*, *Seven Year Itch*, and *Flash and the Devil*). In *Falling in Love Again* Uzi Katzav presents a close-up of the moment before the kiss modeled after Bergman’s *Through a Glass Darkly*. Orly Maiberg does not quote a specific film, but her mysterious romantic scenes, which transpire in dark bedrooms, resonate with the myth of the somber *film noir*. Tal Shochat’s photographs, depicting a sensuous man in a white undershirt behind a rose bush and a beautiful woman on horseback, are also imbued with fantasy, yearning, and dark melancholy. The melancholic magic of the romance is presented as an optical illusion in Miri Segal’s video installation *Still Life in Cucumber Season*. It features the reflection of a couple kissing, while the song *Besame Mucho* plays in the background, rendering the viewer a part of the sensual vision.

A more up-to-date version of romance is reflected in Meirav Heiman's color photographs from the series *Sister of Mercy*, documenting her blind dates with people she met in chat rooms on the net. Heiman presents a virtual intimacy, an experience that is only conceivable in the present era where one can send ready-made love messages by SMS, play a love song by pressing an asterisk, and select Internet ideas for original marriage proposals. Amiram Sarel's work *Made in Japan* also addresses the romance generated by the computer screen: the sweet icon of the crying Japanese downloaded from one of the numerous love sites offers instant emoticons to express a wide range of sentiments.

Scientists maintain that love is a chemical reaction to compounds secreted by the brain, and lasts only three years approximately. In a video work based on etchings by Gustave Doré, Dina Shenhav and Doron Solomons present *Adam and Eve* – the first couple from whom all the tribulations of conjugal life have derived. The disasters of love, the tortures of the heart, its agonies and disappointments are represented by Nir Hod's *Lovers*, which portrays a pair of skeletons in an embrace. These are Israeli pop star Aviv Gefen and his (ex-) girlfriend Ilana Berkowitz as x-rayed in a magnetic resonance image (MRI). The tension between the torments of love and its pleasures is represented in Motti Mizrachi's *Elevation*, which features a beautiful blue rose surrounded by whips and lashes. Banal representations of conjugal life are discernible in Vered Adir's photographs of couples waking up in the morning, and in Elinor Carucci's photographs representing three generations in intimate domestic scenes.

Two works that stand out in the show by taking us back to the public sphere of political strife are Merav Sudaey's *Female Suicide Bombers for Male Suicide Bombers* and Nir Hod's *Tears Have No God*. Despite all the efforts, one cannot render romantic themes impervious to reality; the political conflict infiltrates even the most escapist of realms, albeit well-concealed under sweet romantic rhetoric. Nir Hod's painting portrays a female IDF officer compassionately bending over the figure of a wounded Arab man lying at her feet, whereas Merav Sudaey's glass piece is based on elements of erotic temptation derived from late 19th century *art nouveau*, in the context of Palestinian propaganda that promises a romantic prize as a strategy for recruitment of male and female suicide bombers.

The works on display thus exhibit a range of attempts to confront the discourse of romance in a decidedly unromantic time and place. At the same time, they comment on the artificial way in which “intellect” and “emotion,” “reason” and “beauty” have been separated. These works offer a myriad of strategies for discussing romantic love from various angles – through the Israeli, global, private and public channels. In this respect, they may be regarded as a sequence of incessant attempts to deny the dichotomization of sentiment and intellect, creation and consumption, kitsch and beauty, while at the same time reinforcing the tension between them.