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 graced by a huge painting by Yosef Zaritzky, a five-by-six meter oil on plywood abstract that Zaritzky had titled “Power.”

He 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 Jerusalemitse seems to be nurturing with his distinctive white, semi-tousled hair – does not hesitate to question art’s impact on 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.”

“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 trope and then studied theater and philosophy at Tel Aviv University eventually getting his doctorate 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.

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. 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 Jerusalem Report

THE JERUSALEM REPORT NOVEMBER 3, 2014

NATI SHOHAT / FLASH 90

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.
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almost a decade here, was, as Ofrat puts it, “completely erased” from the country’s artistic and historical recollection.

Grundig, née Lange, was born in Dresden in 1906 to an Orthodox Jewish family of considerable wealth. As a teenager, she opened 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. Welcoming a non-Jew widened Grundig’s rift with her father, while her communist principles drove her to reject her family’s prosperity.

**OFRAT PROFOUNDLY ENJOYS THE MISSION OF QUESTIONING ISRAEL’S CULTURAL MYTHS AND CONVENTIONS**

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 presentation was not well received. Art critic Paul Landau slammed her “lack of imagination,” writing in the socialist daily newspaper Al HaMishmar that she was “incapable of exceeding the framework of reporting.”

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 fearful 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.

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 one. As much as Grundig was a passionate supporter of GDR’s policies and had a relatively strong position within its establishment, 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 fearful 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.

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