

Exhibition Floor Talk : May 20, 2012 at the Glen Eira City Gallery by Victor Majzner.

This exhibition and publication titled *Painting the Song* a journey through the Song of Songs is a result of the collaboration between myself and Deborah Masel z'l that took place between 2008 and 2012. Debbie passed away in July 2011 but it took me until May 2012 to complete my paintings.

When I titled my exhibition in 2008, at the Jewish Museum of Australia *Painting the Torah* I was simply acknowledging what I was doing = I was painting the parshot of the Torah! The significance of that title only occurred to me a few months ago when I was brainstorming with Rabbi Genende, Doug Hermann and Alex Skovron about the title of the current book. After a number of days trying to come up with some clever or catchy titles, none of which were suitable, Alex suggested the current title as a replica of the idea from my Torah title.

It was the exact title for what this project was about *Painting the Song* = and it finally hit me!! I finally understood what I've been trying to do for the past 25 years – since I became involved in Jewish ideas in art and that is = to make Jewish ideas, Jewish sounds and Jewish words visual. We Jews are very good with words and sounds, we've been doing it for over 3000 years. Our greatest sages, rabbis and philosophers have spoken and written millions of words = no wonder we are called the people of the word. Sound is associated with words – we have to orally articulate words as we pray. Spoken words, silent words and written words are the stuff of Judaism. So it finally dawned on me that I HAVE BEEN TRYING TO GIVE VISUAL FORM TO OUR THOUGHTS AND WORDS!

When Debbie published her book *In the Cleft of the Rock*, in the copy that she gave me she inscribed; "to Victor who sees what I hear". What a wonderful inscription! I reciprocated by inscribing a copy of a book I collaborated on *The Mystery of You* "to Debbie who hears what I see". That was our relationship – I saw her sounds and she heard my images - so the title of this exhibition and publication is most appropriate = *Painting the Song* a journey through the Song of Songs.

Seeing sound – does that sound familiar? It should. There was another time when Jews saw sounds and heard images = at Mt Sinai! That whole spectacle was very dramatic. Amongst Mt Sinai trembling and on fire, surrounded by darkness and smoke, amidst very loud sound of the shofar God gave the Jewish nation (those that were present and the souls of all future generations) the Torah. All natural events were reversed. As the Midrash states; "the people saw the sound of words as they emerged from God's mouth and heard the images of these words". That is part of the content of the very first painting in this series 'I would have you mouth to mouth'.

The Godly utterances (seeing the sound) are represented by the 10 sign language signs for individual letters. Over the complete scene the Hebrew alphabet letter Peh (the mouth) = God 'speaking' is in outline, suggesting the open mouth coming towards a face (made up of Debbie's words) in profile, with an open mouth, intimating a kiss. As the Song of Songs stanza 1:2 suggests: "Kiss me, make me drunk with your kisses..." And Debbie's poetic response: "I would have you mouth to mouth..."

The Song of Songs encompasses a whole gamut of emotions and ideas. From a traditional, Jewish interpretation/point of view, it represents the love between God and the Jewish people. As we know, sometimes God's love can be stern and demanding, sometimes miraculously giving. From a more contemporary translation, it could be interpreted as a love poem of romantic love between a man and a woman. Debbie and I of course wanted to imbue our *Painting the Song* with all of these readings. For us this Song/poem was equally as earthy as spiritual, as erotically lustful as mystically contemplative, as literally sexual as metaphorically sublime.

This song/ poem comprises of two primary voices of 'the lovers' and some additional voices as they encounter them on their journey. The lovers are continuously seeking and longing for each other. Their travels take place at night, in a mythical, idyllic rural/garden setting. As the lovers journey in search of each other, they experience various obstacles, even violence. Not unlike the history of the Jewish people and the traumas we have endured. Debbie's words and my images reflect this, especially in one specific, perhaps the most challenging painting in this series, titled; *On the yearning point of prayer*. This is the only painting in this series that is representing an interior space, a concrete box, a gas chamber! Debbie's words are cascading down the painting as if coming out of the shower caps: "Yet there's a yearning in the light that's leaking through the dawn, trickling from its rivers to the oceans of our fears in a universe that's turning on the yearning point of prayer, and God is hidden there, inside the inside of His ever-changing world." The viewer's eye is led into the oven by the rail lines that terminate there – in the blackness, in death. Yet I intentionally placed a menorah inside the oven as a symbol of the Divine being there with the Jewish victims, even as they were being murdered. The plaque at the bottom of the painting, in the middle of the railway track, contains an image of the (indestructible) bone at the bottom of our spine, from which our mystics suggest all humans will be resurrected in the time of the Messiah. Even in the middle of our darkest times, we hung on to our hope of a better time. At a time when "God was hidden there..." we looked for him.



Jewish insight into the darker side of this love song is the understanding of the unavoidable presence of the 'serpent in the Garden of Eden' or the idea of the beginning of light at the darkest point of night. This is not just life experience but our relation with God as well. As we seek Him we sometimes feel that we are not being seen/heard, at other times we feel the direct warm embrace of His generosity.

I'm interested in visualising the multiplicity of levels contained within Jewish ideas - from the surface/obvious level to the hidden/mystical one. Traversing these different levels is referred to as entering the mystical orchard or garden. I make reference to this garden in virtually every painting in this exhibition. What you see on first look is only the first layer of this 'garden'. The more you look and understand, the more these paintings will reveal themselves. The problem is that we don't have the vocabulary yet to deal with these Jewish images, symbols and metaphors but this is what makes Jewish art distinct. Writers, art critics and aestheticians are just starting to write and explore these Jewish ideas so hopefully in another few years these Jewish ideas will be as commonplace as Christian, Aboriginal or Buddhist ones. These other cultures have tremendous visual traditions. Judaism is one of the most visually inspiring religions and cultures yet we have very few images of any consequence. I have spent the past 25 years attempting to change that.

'Before Debbie and I started this project, we have already made the Torah our own = Debbie in her teaching of course and her book; In the Cleft of the Rock, a poetic take on the weekly parshot and I in my Painting the Torah a visual response. But this Song of all songs held a special fascination for both of us - an emotional attraction and a spiritual pull.

Virtually every Jewish text makes references to the Song of Songs. Jewish mystical texts are replete with it. From a traditional, Jewish perspective this song/poem is the ultimate expression of our collective, Jewish love for, in and with God. But of course for Debbie and me it was so much more as well.

From the Zohar, (the classic Jewish Kabbalistic text) Terumah 14 a & b: "...Rabbi Jose said: When the 1st Temple was erected and all the worlds, above and below had reached their perfect consummation, this song of King Solomon's, this hymn was revealed while the earth was perfect in all things, and therefore the song is holy of holies... When this Song was created God experienced such joy that He has not known since the creation of the world...this song comprises the whole Torah." And of course Rabbi Akiva said: "all the Writings are holy but the Song of Songs is holy of Holies". One reason why this Song of Songs is so revered is that it covers the complete spiritual/mystical history of the Jewish people from the Sinai experience all the way to the final Messianic revelation.

Painting the Song has been a labour of love for me and Debbie. We loved working together, we loved the ideas we were exploring and sharing and we loved the challenge of making this song of all songs resonate for us creatively. In our own way, separately and collaboratively Debbie and I were not satisfied with just illustrating this ancient Jewish text. We combined Jewish, mystical ideas of love with physical, erotic ones. The challenge we set ourselves was to match the depth of the Song of Songs but through our contemporary experience. I would like to think that we have created a personal, visual Midrash, a uniquely creative commentary around this ancient text – our own Song of Songs.

Although Jewish theologians, philosophers and rabbis have been creating their own Midrashim, commentaries for centuries, for artists this has become a relatively recent possibility. We talked about how vulnerable we both felt in our presumption that art can be as valuable to Judaism as rabbinic commentary or philosophical dissertation. In my opinion Jewish art should be regarded on exactly that same level but it also has the ability to communicate to a universal audience, beyond tribal boundaries. That is how Debbie and I saw our endeavour. It was important for us to begin with specifically Jewish ideas, symbols and metaphors but to address them to a global audience. All art starts out from a specific, narrow, cultural point but it contains universal ideas that have the potential to communicate to everyone. That's how art works.

To paraphrase our sages: "when art hits a nerve – it lights up the soul, the heart and the brain". We wanted our Painting the Song to hit the nerve of love. Ultimately it became for us the expression of love between man and the Divine. This is a love expressed in all types of love – after all, our damaged world could do with a little love. In fact when I had my first meeting with the designer of this beautiful book, Vanessa, I said to her that I wanted it to look like the ultimate 'love letter' to whoever would pick it up to read it because that was the spirit of our collaboration.