

Ivan Schwebel: FSP – Free-Standing Painting

Curators: Aya Lurie, Ori Drumer

By Ori Drumer, January 2023

More than a decade after Ivan Schwebel (1932–2011) passed away, this exhibition seeks to renew the acquaintance with the artist and his work. Through the vast archival material he left behind, and among the hundreds of his paintings, drawings, engravings and work journals, a total, febrile artist is revealed, for whom painting was an existential need and a refuge.

Schwebel was born in the United States. In 1963, after years of wandering – between Kyoto, Paris, New York, Athens, Cordova, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem – he settled in Ein Kerem, Jerusalem. His paintings featured in exhibitions at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, the Tel Aviv Museum, the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod, and more. While his talent was immediately recognized, his frustration mounted as he gradually found himself working increasingly outside the mainstream.

While researching the exhibition, we studied Schwebel's archive of works and documents, and particularly his work journals. These journals reflect his life much as a storyboard reflects a movie, at times like a graphic novel. Many of his paintings depict Old

Testament figures. These paintings, full of pathos, convey creative urgency. Etchings or landscapes (urban or natural) are used as a substrate for painting, much like an architectural film set, combined with drawings and laying of paint. All of these produce a staged event, edited in a non-linear manner - a painting space consisting of a mixture of techniques and layers, combining different times, spaces, sites, and places, past alongside present, and at times also alongside future.

In Schwebel's work there is a fundamental connection between the act of painting and the world of cinema, the photographed image and cinematic editing. The cinematic *cut* creates an utter and immediate transition from one field of view to another, a jump back and forth in time and space. Schwebel recounted that for him the canvas was like a cinematic screen that allows the impossible to happen. He often painted large curtains on either side of the canvas, as in an old movie theater, delimiting the imaginary space.

In Schwebel's mind, images of current affairs ran wild side by side with episodes from Jewish history. Thus, for example, his paintings show images from old documentaries and photographs from the Holocaust period – figures of humiliated Jews and Nazi soldiers –along with images representing the expulsion of the Jews from Spain through the grotesque figures of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella (possibly referencing Fellini, whose films he

admired); antisemitic iconography; various figures from the history of art; and American cultural and cinematic icons, highlighting his affinity with popular culture.

In his *FSP – Free-Standing Painting* project from the 1970s, Schwebel constructed walls and placed them at various sites in Israel. The *Free-Standing Painting* might also be seen as a representation of the painter himself –standing free and apart. The walls, which were supposed to serve as a support for landscape paintings, come across as drive-in screens that stand in isolation, at once rooted in the site and alien and distinct from it. Schwebel envisioned creating a similar project throughout New York City, as evident from a series of images he conceived with renditions of urban collages that combined photography and painting. These plans, which never came to fruition, bring to mind the rhetoric of billboards, and underline Schwebel's strong urge to link together art with everyday life and the street.