

A surprising take on resilience

Atypical children’s art workshop harnesses ‘art as a weapon’ **JENNA ROMANO**



A classroom full of students evacuated from Kibbutz Or HaNer participate in a weekly painting workshop. (Photos: Sarah Lydia Singer & Elisheva Marciano)

Walking into the 19th-century building of the U. Nahon Museum of Italian Jewish Art (MOIJA), one is struck by the treasure trove located smack in the center of Jerusalem. With its collections of Judaica and artworks – some modern, others dating back centuries – the spot is not a typical setting for a children’s art workshop. It’s not a place where you’d expect to see an exhibition of children’s artworks, either.

But the group of young art students who were hosted here over the past four months were definitely not typical kids.

SLS Art Academy, a children’s painting workshop run by international artists Sarah Lydia Singer and Elisheva Marciano, was set to open at the MOIJA this past fall. After Oct. 7, their reality changed. Suddenly, there was an obvious need to offer this program for some of the displaced children hosted in Jerusalem.

Both Singer, who founded the art workshop, and Daniel Niv, director of MOIJA since 2020, were deeply in sync on not only continuing to run the program but doing it free of charge for evacuated children. Niv offered space within the museum, and thanks to funding from Targum Shlishi and other donations, SLS Art Academy was in full swing by November 2023 – providing lessons, transportation, and materials for 30 students who were evacuated from Kibbutz Or HaNer.

Over the next four months, Singer and Marciano taught their workshop to the children, who ranged in age from six to 13. “Art is a weapon,” says Singer. “For me, it is an intense word, but it is intended.” In this case, it’s a weapon of self-expression at a time when both collective and individual trauma make it more relevant than ever. They focused on passing down artistic tradition, teaching their students how to connect to the world through painting from masters like [French painter Claude] Monet and [Italian painter Giuseppe] Arcimboldo.

The results were surprising for everyone involved. “The kids have tremendous enthusiasm to paint, to create amazing artwork,” says Singer. “I am totally in awe.” Enthusiastic directors paired with a unique setting made it an empowering experience at a pertinent time – one they’ll likely never forget. “Now they can say they studied painting in a museum,” comments Niv.

At the end of each session, instead of looking at images of trauma, Niv, Singer, and Marciano found themselves impressed with the diversity of emotion shown. Although most of the displaced students were not victims or witnesses of the Oct. 7 massacre themselves, many of their friends or family members were. “I was surprised,” says Niv. “I thought we would find more dark things, see the trauma, but they

also really wanted to express good things, positive things.”

“There was a contrast between their trauma and what they expressed,” adds Marciano, who is also a certified photo-therapist. “You would think they’d express more anger, sadness – but they didn’t get stuck on that; they were more into productivity and learning.”

Starting next week, the public will have the chance to witness the power of art through the eyes of 30 young evacuees from Kibbutz Or HaNer. MOIJA will take part in The Jerusalem Biennale 2024, hosting three exhibitions that feature well-known international artists. Alongside these, a small show titled “Envelope Embrace” will exhibit a selection of creations by the students of SLS Art Academy.

During our conversation, the three directors were in the process of selecting which of the works would be hung in “Envelope Embrace.” A table in the

middle of the room was spread with a selection, and I couldn’t help but interpret them myself. Some were dark – I was taken aback by a series of black Magen Davids, and a cartoonish portrait of a headless child – but what they all had in common was a sense of confrontation, bravery, and above all, resilience.

“For the children, it must be exciting, and the parents are excited about it too,” says Niv, regarding the Biennale. But holding a proper exhibition is more than a symbolic gesture for the children; the artwork is an opportunity for visitors of all ages to observe and reflect. “When I look at those pictures, I think ‘They’re full of hope, joy and fun. And they’re aesthetically pleasing,’” says Niv. “It obviously relates to the current situation, but it’s the next stage – it’s the aftermath, the hope of what will come after. It’s amazing these are done by children. And I think all of us need it.” ■



SLS Art Academy classroom located in the historic MOIJA building.

Info

What: ‘Envelope Embrace’
Who: Organized by Sarah Lydia Singer, Elisheva Marciano, and Daniel Niv with The Jerusalem Biennale
Where: U. Nahon Museum of Italian Jewish Art (MOIJA), 25 Hillel St.
When: Through April 30
Why: Exhibition of paintings created by children evacuated from the South following Oct. 7