

'To be honest, art has been done to death.' In the hours they spend talking, painter SHAY KUN gives Katya Tylevich an insight into his artworks' mass-cultural influences as well as his own deeply personal ones.

## HOLOCAUST TOYS

By Katya Tylevich

Standing in his Chelsea studio, a loft overlooking a noisy New York City avenue, Shay Kun tells me he's not a tongue-in-cheek kind of artist. At first glance, his paintings — at once sublime and subversive — do seem to be a set-up for a kind of laughter, however mordant. Modern intruders and their material garbage move with absurd entitlement in the majestic landscapes that Kun paints for them. But his works reveal an underlying disappointment and a heaviness, as well, for instance in the image of a hot-air balloon floating 'face down' in the dark waters of a cavern. With great awareness, Kun, an artist who says he does nothing but work, can trace the lines of nature and nurture from which these scenes develop.

— *What is your background in art?* Both of my parents are high-end commercial painters. My mom [Heddy Kun] is from Zagreb, and my dad [Zeev Kun] from Budapest. They are both Holocaust survivors who met in Israel after the war. I never had a day job, actually, but they did before they became successful artists. Today, everybody knows them in Israel. I was always 'the son of...' So I come with a lot of baggage. [Laughs.]

— *Do you try to distance yourself from your parents' reputations?* Actually, their work permeates my own. My dad's work looks at the decay and deterioration of landscape: things falling apart, Picasso's Blue Period, Rose Period, and so on. Very dark, morose. And my mom's work looks at the more celebratory side of landscape: things in bloom, patios, poppy fields and happiness. In my own art, I try to bastardize their greeting card habits, which I find very attractive at the same time that I'm turned off. Growing up was a process of helping my parents, then imitating them, then moving on. I wanted to do something completely different, but in the end my work comes from a personal background that deals with how they handled their pasts.

I started studying art at a very early age, so I was always a sound artist, technically. But

my real experience was observing these two people. Art was both life and profession for them. They sold well, and 15, 20 years ago, that wasn't exactly acceptable in Israel. 'You're living from your art? That's crazy. That's something only people in Paris and London do.' In Israel, there's more of a DIY, Arte Povera mentality: make it with your hands; it will never get sold, art is a part-time activity. But I love that my parents did [it], and that's influenced how I work. The only thing I do is work. I don't drink. I don't smoke. I've been married for over ten years. I'm the antithesis of a normal artist.

— *Is their influence visible in your artworks?* My hot-air balloon series came together because of these toys my parents brought with them to Israel, which included a few carved wooden hot-air balloons that were really deteriorating. In my art, I nurtured these decaying toys back to life; I kind of bastardized them and took them on my own journey. But everything in my work has to do with my parents, in a sense. The images I make are never of sheer beauty; they're about an inner struggle.

But I don't paint from real life. Everything is artificial. I'm not one of those painters sitting in Central Park, overwhelmed by what's in front of me. I like things that have been thoroughly chewed already; reproduced a hundred times. That's when I want to repaint them in my own way. Some of my images come from 3D computer games, war games, urban war. Some of them are pastiches or recreations of a landscape. I'm influenced by magazines and books. The source material usually gives my work a bit of a sinister feeling, but there is also a certain longing, a lyrical aspect running through everything I do. The hot-air balloons, for example: those are toys from the Holocaust, not Toys R Us.

— *Can people familiar with your parents' art pick up on these points of reference in your work?* I came to New York in 2001, but before that I lived in London, then Boston. By the time I had a real 'breaking out of my shell'

*It Will End in Tears, 2011-2012, oil on canvas, 121.9 x 91.4 cm, courtesy of Benrimon Contemporary, photography: Joseph Sturges*







Brief Encounter, 2012, Oil on canvas, 96.5 x 142.2 cm, courtesy of Berlimon Contemporary, photography: Joseph Sturges



show in Israel, in 2007 [Old Flames Don't Die Out, They Build New Fires], I had been out of the country for about ten years, doing my own thing. I was surprised by how much my work was initially misunderstood there. Many people thought it showed nothing outside of technical ability. 'It looks like a photograph. It looks American'; they made no attachment to it. But there were a few people who saw something in it, and found it very refreshing. Now I go back there, and people have a much better sense for what I do.

But no single work or series is ever over. If I had only one canvas in life to paint on, I would work on it endlessly. I'd never think it was finished. Work is very liquid, very elastic, it can always be transformed. I'm a firm believer in that. Whenever I have a show, I see it as just one way of doing what I wanted to, but it's not the only way, or the 'complete' way. Art is kind of a Sisyphean myth. To be honest, art has been done to death. You see everything again and again, over and over. Every time you think you see something fresh, it's just the same thing with a twist.

— Then what is its redeeming quality? For me, a painting can sometimes feel like magic. Of course, 99 per cent of the time, the trick fails, but you keep going until that rare moment of fascination hits. You don't understand what's happening, or how, but you're captivated. And when it works, you don't ask any more questions.

shaykun.com  
www.bcontemporary.com



The Moon Spinners, 2012, Oil on canvas, 124,5 cm diameter, courtesy of Benrimon Contemporary, photography: Joseph Sturges



The Bride, 2012, Oil on canvas, 124,5 cm diameter, courtesy of Benrimon Contemporary, photography: Joseph Sturges



Splendor Falls, 2011, oil on Canvas, 165,1 x 139,7 cm, courtesy of Benrimon Contemporary, photography: Joseph Sturges