An Unheard Voice: The Paintings of Zohar Tal Inbar, a Mother Looking at Her Soldier Son

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on a series—*Of Beautiful Arms*—by Israeli artist Zohar Tal Inbar. The paintings were created a few years after the artist's son was released from the army, diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It includes figurative paintings, most of them focusing on the body of a young man—a soldier. The methodology combines visual analysis of the paintings with interviews with the artist. Findings have shown that the series embodies double estrangement—thematic and stylistic. The artist has used intertextuality to portray soldier images borrowed from Greek and Roman mythology and from Christianity. In terms of style, the paintings portray realistic figures against abstract backgrounds that distance them from Israeli reality while leaving them recognizable as Israeli soldiers. Using double estrangement allowed the artist to express a feminist counterposition—that of a woman refusing to passively accept the role of an uncritically supportive soldier's mother. In addition, she has explored the soldier's fragility by pointing to PTSD, a common phenomenon among military personnel, which in Israeli discourse still suffers a disfranchised status.

The current article deals with a series of oil paintings by Zohar Tal Inbar titled *Of Beautiful Arms* (*Yefei neshek*),[1] displayed in a group exhibition titled *Wide Load* (*Mit'an choreg*) in the Gallery of Israeli Art at the Memorial Center in Kiryat Tivon (curated by Michal Shachnai Yaacobi).[2] This

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1. *Neshek* is the Hebrew word for 'weapons/arms'. The title of the series is a play on the Hebrew expression *yefei nefesh*, loosely translated as 'people of beautiful/noble souls'. Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

2. I would like to thank Zohar Tal Inbar for sharing her thoughts and feelings regarding her artwork. Her honesty and cooperation contributed to the comprehension and the interpretation of the works. I would also like to thank Michal Shachnai Yaacobi, curator of the *Wide Load* exhibition.

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exhibition dealt with artistic expressions of post-trauma relating to military service in Israel. The artist had started creating the paintings several years after her son was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and released from the army. The series comprises 10 paintings, most of which depict a young man, a soldier, shown in various situations and positions. One painting depicts a mother and her baby, while another is of a glass jar containing a military dog tag and olive leaves. This article constitutes the first research analysis of this series.

Tal Inbar lives and works in Alon Ha-Galil in northern Israel. She holds a bachelor's degree in the arts from the University of Haifa, trained in artist Ellie Shamir's studio, and studied at the Jerusalem Studio School directed by artist Israel Hershberg. The series was not planned in advance but was conceived when the artist was involved in figure painting while observing a model. This led to a deeper observation of how she was coping personally with her son's condition. The series presents her position as a mother of soldiers, allowing her to conduct a penetrating and courageous examination of accepted perceptions of militarism, combat soldiers, fallen soldiers, and also mentally hurt ones in the Israeli discourse. In this series, these perceptions are broken down and reexamined through intertextuality, an artistic means of creating thematic estrangement when a familiar figure is turned into a stranger by extracting them from a realistic context. This occurs alongside stylistic estrangement whereby realistic depictions blend into abstract backgrounds that form a surrealistic imaginary space made up of colorful stains.

Intertextuality and Estrangement

The intertextuality approach was first presented in 1966 by Julia Kristeva (1980, 64–91), who asserted that all texts contain a set of culturally significant connections to previous ones. The reader or viewer is supposed to be familiar with previous texts embedded into a new one in order to identify them (Zantides 2016). Commensurate with the cultural approach of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, the notion of intertextuality called for separating the myth of the genius artist, the creator of original texts, thus undermining the hegemony that classifies people and cultural works according to a hierarchical scale of quality and prestige. Hegemonic writers tended to camouflage or even deny the intertextual dimensions of their texts in order to maintain their cultural status.

In the *Of Beautiful Arms* series, the artist offers a broad and comprehensive dimension of intertextuality, specifically to highlight the cultural dialogue as a means of creating meaning. The series title is also reminiscent of the line "of beautiful forelocks and countenance" (*Yefei ha'blorit ve'ha'toar*) taken from a popular

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poem by Haim Gouri, "Song of Comradeship" (*Shir ha'reut*). The poem, later set to music, was written in 1948 toward the end of Israel's War of Independence and epitomized the ethos of Israeli fortitude. Tal Inbar borrows a phrase from the poem, turning it into an inconceivable and even jarring word combination that changes the beauty of the soldiers' bodies into beauty associated with their weapons. The linguistic change offers a new meaning of a soldier's beauty that, in Gouri's poem, is purportedly that of innocence and purity. The artist states: "The term *yefe nefesh* [Hebrew for a refined, noble, or gentle person] no longer suits a soldier."[3] Militarism and beauty cannot belong together; juxtaposing them thus creates an oxymoron.

Tal Inbar's intertextuality is presented to the viewer through both the titles of the paintings and the visual images depicted therein. The titles consist of names from Greek and Roman mythology (Icarus, Sisyphus, Mars), from stories of the saints (Santa Ora-Lucia), and from Christian tradition (*pietà*, *ecce homo*). According to Wendy Steiner (1985), the titles given to paintings are a determining component in establishing intertextuality therein. The information they contain is already encoded in the language and thus constitutes an integral part of the way the paintings are interpreted. The titles of Tal Inbar's paintings indeed contain both verbal and visual content worlds, transforming them and enhancing their meanings.

Two types of intertextuality exist: ekphrasis and iconotext (Shakib 2013). The first refers to a verbal representation of a visual image and is typical of literature and poetry. The second refers to visual images that represent verbal or visual texts and is typical of illustrations, films, and works in the visual arts. The series *Of Beautiful Arms* belongs to the second type, as the paintings are visual images, referring to both past verbal and visual texts.

The figures depicted as Greek, Roman, or Christian characters carry on an iconographic tradition in Israeli art of portraying different figures as analogous to mythological characters (Mendelsohn 2016). Therefore, it felt natural for the artist to borrow themes from those sources since they have long dominated Western art history, which she had been exposed to during her academic studies. She admits to being much more inspired by these sources than by Jewish art and Old Testament episodes.[4] This choice could also be understood based on the artist's having been raised as the daughter of a converted German father in a secular family on an Israeli kibbutz.

3. Interview with the artist, 2021.
4. Interview with the artist, 2023.

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The main argument of the article is twofold: The artist's use of intertextuality to create estrangement allows her to profoundly and comprehensively formulate a feminist stance of a mother who refuses to automatically and passively assume the role of a "soldier's mother" (Guilat 2012). Instead, she implicitly expresses her opinion regarding the situation of PTSD-afflicted soldiers who are under-acknowledged by Israeli society, similar to various bereaved groups suffering from "disenfranchised grief" (Doka 2008). "This kind of grief refers to one which does not include social honor, as opposed to the 'cult of the fallen' . . . which elevates the military-related dead to the ranks of martyrs" (Guilat 2023, 26).

The series also presents the artist's "maternal thinking" (Ruddick 1995) and critical thinking with regard to the complexity of the maternal role. These maternal responsibilities range from support and concern for her son about to enlist, to uncertainty and resistance, to a reality that is consensually accepted by Israeli society—the centrality of militarism. Thus, Tal Inbar joins other Israeli artists who have chosen to express their stances as soldiers' mothers in response to the national appropriation of the soldier figure and the mother figure in Israeli culture (Guilat 2012).

I conducted this study was by embracing an approach that required examining art in historical and sociocultural contexts in addition to examining formative-stylistic and iconographic aspects of artistic imagery. This approach, referred to as *social art history* (Harris 2001), acknowledges the importance of art not just as reflecting artistic trends but also as being an integral part of the semiosis prevailing in the environment where it is created (Sperber 2015).

The research methodology consisted of a visual analysis of representative paintings in the series as well as in-depth interviews with the artist. The cross-check between qualitative-visual analysis and qualitative-verbal analysis reveals the artist's critical position as a soldier's mother, being highly sensitive to PTSD and the artistic means she uses to depict it. In the first part of the article I present prevalent perceptions of soldiers' status in Israeli discourse and its reflection in Israeli art over the years. I then present a survey of soldier's mother images in Israeli culture. Contrary to the prevalent patriarchal discourse, I propose feminist approaches toward mothers' roles with regard to militarism in Israel and discuss the issue of voicing criticism of (and even resistance to) their sons' conscription. The survey is followed by a presentation and discussion of several paintings in the *Of Beautiful Arms* series in which their inherent meanings are decoded through intertextuality that here enhances interpreting the Israeli soldier figure in light of Western cultural myths.

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Soldier Representations in Israeli Culture

Israel is an exception among Western liberal democratic countries in that its military sphere takes precedence over its civilian sphere. Uri Ben Eliezer (2003) defined it as a "nation-state in uniform" that was built on a collectivist, national, and hegemonic model that remained dominant from the beginning of the 1950s until the First Lebanese War in 1982. Military service was considered an integral part of the Israeli experience and is closely bonded with the definition of citizenship (Barkai 2008; Marnin-Shacham 2012). Those who serve in the army earn social recognition, whereas those who do not are ranked lower on the social recognition scale. Fighting is associated with patriotism and gives soldiers a sense of belonging to and owning the country due to their contribution to the collective. Accordingly, the image of the soldier, whether in the media or translated into artistic exhibits, always was and remains an inherent issue in Israeli culture and society. The Israeli soldier epitomizes the essence of masculinity, the kind that was established with the onset of Zionism, which created a new ideal—muscular, strong, and courageous—in contrast to the image of the Diaspora Jew, who was perceived as weak and feminine (Gluzman 1997; Sasson-Levy 2006).

The Zionist rejection of the image of the weak Diaspora Jew and the adoption of European patriotic perceptions based on physical strength and an affinity with nature contributed to the shaping of two types of ideal Zionist men among the Jewish communities during the British Mandate for Palestine of 1918–48: the pioneer and the fighter. The image of the pioneer focused on working the land, whereas the image of the fighter focused on involvement in defense, guarding, and the emergence of the belligerent approach whereby conflicts with the Arabs can only be solved militarily (Sasson-Levy 2006). The image of the combat soldier who served during the War of Independence first appeared visually in this period (Mishory 2019, 312–13). It is based on biblical and literary characters from Jewish history and on images of soldiers from Western alliances as well as on reality (British soldiers). The 1948 generation of artists exalted the soldier to the level of a mythological-biblical archetype (Ofrat 2004) or depicted him involved in leisure activities between or after battles. Realistic descriptions of soldiers in the battlefield, of war wounds, or of deaths did not exist in Israeli art in that period. Alec Mishory (2019, 313) claims intentional blindness on the part of the artists, who remained faithful to the image of the heroic soldier in accordance with the spirit of the time and did not dare to depict the horrors of war. Any depictions of wounded or dead soldiers were presented through allegory and symbolism, such as in a series of paintings titled "Wounded Soldier" by Marcel Janco.

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A dominant feature in the depictions of soldiers by that generation of artists was an atmosphere of harmony with nature (Ofrat 2004, 231).

In the 1950s and 1960s, images of soldiers continued to appear in memorial sites for fallen soldiers. They were depicted as heroes who succeeded, despite being heavily outnumbered by enemy armies, due to their ethical values, intelligence, and determination. Their deaths were considered redemption for their nation, an idea also expressed in Hebrew poetry and literature in those years (Mishory 2019, 334). However, in this period, fewer images of soldiers appeared in visual art. The reason for this lies in the trend in the Israeli art scene to prefer formal-abstract art rather than figurative-narrative art (Mishory 2019, 327).

From the end of the 1960s to the end of the 1980s, the image of the Israeli soldier underwent a process of demythologization that was the result of "profound soul-searching of a culture awakening from its dream to the crushing pain of its existence" (Ofrat 2004, 230). The Six-Day War (1967) changed popular attitudes toward the Israeli army, and soldiers began to be portrayed, first in cinema and theater and later in the plastic arts (Mishory 2019, 330), as expressions of damaged masculinity (Guilat 2019, 219). The Yom Kippur War (1973) illuminated this trend even further when Israel experienced a deep crisis of trust in the political system and subsequently in the military system and its representatives—the soldiers (Guilat 2012, 286). Research conducted by the "new historians" continues to expose cracks in the myth of the omnipotent, ethical, and fair Israeli soldier. The discourse expanded to encompass approaches that demand inclusion of the Palestinian narrative and a reexamination of accepted conceptions in the Zionist-Israeli narrative (Barkai 2008, 16–17).

Alongside criticism of the Israeli army, the soldier is perceived not only as being part of the system but also as a victim thereof, an issue to be discussed below in the context of the soldiers in Tal Inbar's paintings. Igael Tumarkin expressed the perception of the soldier as a victim of a military system in his important sculpture *He Walked through the Fields* (*Hu halach b'sadot*, 1967), which drew much attention and numerous responses in the Israeli art scene in the 1980s (Mishory 2019, 333). The Israeli soldier sacrificed for the integrity of the nation and the homeland is depicted numerous times as an analogy to the myth of the Binding of Isaac (Ofrat 2004; Mishory 2019, 333). The First Lebanese War led to a plethora of art works depicting the Israeli soldier as a bound Isaac, the most important of which are the versions created by Menashe Kadishman, in which reality takes precedence over the biblical story. As in Kadishman's *The Binding of Isaac* (*Akedat Yitzchak*, 1985), the son is taken for binding, but there is no intervention of the angel of God, and it is Isaac, not the ram, who is sacrificed.

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The 1980s, and even more so the 1990s, saw the birth of the homoerotic soldier in Israeli art (Ofrat 2004, 232). This was another aspect that undermined the machismo associated with soldiers.[5] Since then, soldiers have been depicted as fragile, sensitive, and vulnerable in literature, poetry, theater, cinema, and the plastic arts, with special emphasis on characteristics that deviate from the norm.[6] These features are also presented as an expression of the negative implications of military service for the soldiers' souls, an issue that had been totally repressed for several decades.

The last few decades have enabled various types of what is often refers to as a "new masculinity" in Israeli discourse (Barkai 2019). In their study, Orit Bershtling and Roni Strier (2022) show that this trend toward new masculinity enables soldiers to express fragility and weakness through their intimate relationship with their mothers. Within this bond, young soldiers find comfort and emotional support.

The first evidence of traumatic responses to military activity was seen in the post–Yom Kipur War period. A bit later, PTSD was announced by the American Psychiatric Association as a distinct phenomenon. In Israel, the connection between military service and PTSD was suppressed until recently. However, following Operation Tzuk Eitan in 2014, the connection has been more widely acknowledged, and there have been numerous artistic expressions of this phenomenon. The group exhibition *Wide Load*, which included Tal Inbar's series, is a good example of this. It has been agreed that "artistic activity could replace the traumatic chaos, creating an integration and a frame for all the broken parts of the mind, while also giving room for personal emotional expression" (Bleich and Kutz 2013, 2).

Tal Inbar's artistic language shapes the fragile soldier as a beautiful one. The soldier image transforms itself from the strong hero of Israel's history into a more delicate and mentally cracked masculine figure. This transformation is realized in Tal Inbar's art by integrating classical figuration and themes with backgrounds consisting of abstract stains that create unclear spaces. This blend, which reinforces estrangement by portraying distant characters as familiar soldiers in imaginary scenery, is both thematic—creating a text within a text—and stylistic—juxtaposing figures painted from observation and abstraction. "This estrangement suggests a wide range of interpretations of the scenes: identifying

5. The trend of portraying antiheroic images of soldiers is prevalent in world art. For an analysis of this artistic process, see Solomon (2002, 104–29).

6. Two notable artists who created such images of soldiers at the beginning of the 2000s are Nir Hod and Adi Nes (Guilat 2012, 287).

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the Israeli soldier as such but at the same time conjuring figures from different worlds," states the artist.[7]

Estrangement as an artistic means is easily recognized by Israeli audiences;[8] The figures feature some military signs—the khaki clothes, the beret, the tag, and the helmet—while at the same time their titles locate them in distant mythological episodes that are well known in Israeli culture. This creates a text within a text, requiring the audience to make the necessary connections to formulate a meaning.

A Soldier's Mother: Discourse, Feminist Theory and Representation

Just as Israeli soldiers are seen as an important element in the national (patriotic) discourse, so are the soldiers' mothers, who are expected to raise, nurture, and educate their sons regarding conscription and to support them in every way during their military service. A popular decades-old radio program on the army radio station IDF Waves (Galei Tzahal), "The Mother's Voice," reflects and strengthens this stance in the public arena, in which mothers of soldiers are expected to support them and, indirectly, to support the country by carrying out their duties in the domestic space. The book *Being a Soldier's Mother* (Lapid 2018) reflects a similar normative and accepted attitude. Mothers are not supposed to express skepticism regarding mandatory conscription or to oppose it. Guilat (2012, 284) terms artistic expressions of soldiers' mothers as "pre- and counter-commemoration," formulating their resistance by rejecting the role of the mother in mourning for wounded or dead sons. Such oppositional positions are marginal in the Jewish-Israel discourse, and mothers are themselves hesitant and ambivalent about expressing such sentiments (Luski 2005; Marnin-Shacham 2012).

Studies show that Israeli parents take for granted the role of raising children for conscription that the country has imposed on them , while the most prestigious military role of all is that of a combat soldier. This acceptance allows state-run schools to promote army service as part of their educational program (Katriel 1999; Gon-Gross 2003). The strong alliance between parents and educational institutions, which peaks in high school, weakens the ability of the individual (mother or father) to take a stance that deviates from the norm (Marnin-Shacham 2012). Unconventional viewpoints that challenge the norm are regarded by the Israeli public as unacceptable, as they undermine two important orders that form

7. Interview with the artist, 2023.

8. The curator of the exhibition *Wide Load* supports this observation; interview with Michal Shachnai Yaacobi, 2023.

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the foundation of Israeli society: the gender order and the military order (Sasson-Levy 2006). The gender regime determines a gendered division of labor that grants advantages to men in the spheres of the family, the labor market, and the army. The fact that women have in recent years assumed combat roles in the IDF has not resulted in any changes in this power struggle. The military order is founded on the premise that a combat soldier is at the top of the pyramid, while its entire organizational structure ensures that his status is maintained.

Sara Metzer (2009) found that mothers of combat soldiers have difficulty expressing their opinions, as they lack the social legitimacy to make their voices heard. Their testimony contains contradictions because language that would truly reflect their complex and conflictual stances has not yet been invented. The interviews Metzer conducted with these mothers gave rise to images from the biblical story of the Binding of Isaac, in which the voice of Abraham was heard, while the voice of Sarah, the mother, was absent. Tal Inbar also mentioned the conflictual stance she has held for many years, even before her children were conscripted. She rejected reverence for the army and combat roles, yet she did not object to the conscription of her sons and even supported them throughout their service.[9] Metzer explains this ambivalent attitude as an internal conflict over maternal responsibility and the national responsibility that illuminates the path all Israeli citizens are urged to follow through educational and cultural means.

The mother as a national figure has been prominent in Israeli art and culture from the outset. She was memorialized in public monuments that contributed to defining her symbolic role (Scheflan-Katzav 2001). The images relied on myths taken from the Bible and on iconography from European nationalism. Thus, the woman was formed as the allegoric mother of the nation, protective and victorious, but also wailing and mourning as she pays the price of victory (Guilat 2012, 291–92). It is interesting to note that women artists who sculpted monuments in Israel in the first half of the twentieth century did not question these nationalist woman archetypes and continued to reproduce them in their art works (295).

The place of the mother in the national-militarist discourse started to change in the 1990s, parallel to the development of feminist theory about motherhood. Women and mothers began to make their voices heard in public spaces with the goal of influencing decision-making regarding security and military issues. In the spirit of that period, numerous protest groups, such as Barricade Watch, Women in Black, and Four Mothers, came into being.[10] These groups promoted the mother as a political subject who renounces the marginal domestic role

9. Interview with the artist, 2021.

10. In Hebrew: Machsom Watch, Nashim B'Shachor, and Arba Imahot, respectively.

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allocated to her in the framework of the family-nation relationship (Olmert 2018). The case of Four Mothers—founded by the mothers of four soldiers who served in the First Lebanese War with the purpose of persuading the government to end the war and withdraw its forces from Lebanon—irrefutably proved the effectiveness of maternal thinking (Ruddick 1995). Defying the expectations of the male-dominated society, the movement succeeded in changing public opinion and in exerting massive pressure on decision-makers to withdraw from Lebanon (Schefllan-Katzav 2020).

The processes that occurred in the feminist, politico-cultural, and artistic discourse included a growing number of representations of motherhood in various cultural fields. Prominent literary works in Hebrew were published that focused on the "soldier's mother" who had to cope with "the charged spaces of the national and gendered Israeli experience," as defined by Dana Olmert (2018, 11). The mother characters in literature range from those who honor the political and constitutional conscription of their sons to those who violate it. Two prominent artists in the 1980s and 1990s, Miri Nishri and Dorit Feldman, offered "images of matriarchal bodies that challenge the role of the female body in the national-Zionist construct" (Guilat 2019, 196). However, it was the exhibition *Oh Mama: Representations of the Mother in Contemporary Israeli Art* at the Ramat Gan Israeli Art Gallery in 1997 (curated by Hadara Scheflan-Katzav and Yehudit Matzkel) that was the turning point in the curatorial discussion of the subject of motherhood in the local art scene. In this exhibition, artists were not afraid to express vexatious aspects relating to motherhood (Scheflan-Katzav 2001, 263) and to deal authentically with topics that until then were considered taboo (Dekel 2013, 209).

Since 2000, several group exhibitions devoted to the subject of motherhood were held in Israel, but none of them focused on the mothers' views about their sons' conscription (Scheflan-Katzav 2018). These exhibitions dealt mainly with mother-daughter relationships and aspects of pregnancy, birthing, and mothering.[11] It appears that in recent decades mothers have been increasingly promoting feminism by rejecting the negative perceptions of motherhood that prevailed

11. Group exhibitions since the early 2000s on the subject of mothers include *Imahot U'banot: B'svach Chavlei Hakesem* (Mothers and daughters: Entangled in a web of magic), curated by Miri Targan, Arad Museum, 2002; *EE-Mahut—Dikaon Le'achar Leida* (Non-motherhood: Postnatal depression), curated by Nurit Tal Tene. Gerstein Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2002 (the Hebrew word for *motherhood* is *imahut*; when the first vowel is separated from the rest of the word it means 'non-essence'); *Al Sha(day)im Vehazana Bare'i Haomanut* (B(r)easts and bottles—Breastfeeding and nutrition mirrored in art), curated by Nurit Tal Tene, Beit Na'amat, Tel Aviv, 2018; and *Ima Ilai—Omanut Ha'imahut* (Exalted mother—The art of motherhood), curated by Nurit Sirkis and Noa Leah Cohen, Jerusalem Biennale of Contemporary Jewish Art, Jerusalem, 2015, which presented corporeal and spiritual aspects related to the concept of motherhood.

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in the early days of feminism, together with the idealization thereof. Motherhood continues to be the focus of feminist discussions, and it seems that the complexity of the mother figure presents both theoretical and practical challenges. As mentioned earlier, Bershtling and Strier's (2022) study proved that mothers and sons are bound to separate following the sons' recruitment into the army but nevertheless still keep a close relationship, with the mothers being involved in their sons' lives. This finding is especially interesting in the context of Tal Inbar's series, since, as she herself admits, it could only be created thanks to her close bond with her son[12]—hence the importance of Zohar Tal Inbar's *Of Beautiful Arms* paintings, which are courageous and sensitive representations from the viewpoint of a soldier's mother who challenges axioms pertaining to conventional concepts of militarism as well as their implications.

The Soldier as a Victim

In *Ecce Homo* (fig. 1) the image of the artist's son appears as Jesus prior to his crucifixion. The Latin title of the painting is taken from the words of Pontius Pilate, "Behold the man!," spoken to the Jewish leaders and the crowd that had gathered to witness the crucifixion, as described in John 19:5. Numerous painting in Christian art focus on this scene, usually included in descriptions of the Passion—the lashings, the crown of thorns, and the hostile crowd mocking Jesus. Israeli art has borrowed Christian iconography that is analogous to different scenes and stories (Meiri-Dann 2010).

In Tal Inbar's painting, her son is depicted sitting on a chair, the upper part of his body bare and his hands crossed and resting on his thighs, a pose that is typical in Christian iconography where Jesus's hands are usually tied together with rope. The son's loins are covered with a red fabric, similar to white fabric that covered the same area on Jesus, and on his head, he wears the red beret that represents the military unit he was attached to. The beret replaces the crown of thorns placed on the head of Jesus to humiliate him.

According to the artist, she photographed her son in this pose but did not notice at all that his hands were crossed. She did not stage the pose, but when she realized that it reminded her of Jesus before the crucifixion, she decided to choose this title.[13] As in many Christian depictions of *Ecce Homo* (e.g., Titian's painting),[14] the main figure in her painting is bent over with a pensive look on his face, in contrast to the upright masculinity of soldiers portrayed in numerous

12. Interview with the artist, 2023.
13. Interview with the artist, 2021.
14. See Nygren (2017).

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Figure 1. Zohar Tal Inbar, *Ecce Homo*, 2018, oil on canvas, 90 × 60 cm

monumental paintings. Here the image of the soldier is cast as an antihero while also raising questions about gender stereotypes, since the design of the room and the decorations therein, as well as the soldier's seated pose, are related to feminine patterns. Dealing with gender in portrayals of soldiers has been common in Israeli art since the 1980s (Guilat 2019, 220), such as in photographs of reserve soldiers taken by Simcha Shirman during Israel's presence in Lebanon or in Nir

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Hod's painting titled *The Soldiers* (1993), where he portrays himself as a female soldier.[15]

It appears that the artist wants to present her son in a position corresponding to that of Jesus prior to his crucifixion. Just as Jesus was considered an innocent victim, pure and untarnished, so the soldier is perceived as such, since he is not responsible for his own fate. This comparison highlights the meaning she seeks to imbue her painting with, specifically due to the discrepancies therein. Her choice of *Ecce Homo*, "Behold the man," represents a call by any spokesman to any listener. In this case it was Pontius Pilate, who announced to Jewish leaders and citizens that this was the man who was sentenced to crucifixion. In the contemporary context, the spokesperson's voice is that of the artist and the audience is Israeli society. We are thus made to understand that just as Pontius Pilate was responsible for Jesus's fate, even if only partially, so the artist sees herself as responsible, even if only partially, for the fate of her son. The Israeli public, the audience, is also held accountable for her son's fate for having sent him to the army, by virtue of the law.

Tal Inbar chose to pose her son on a chair in his home, emphasizing her stance regarding his expropriation from his domestic, personal space to the public one, with his cooperation and for which he paid a heavy price. Fortunately, his sacrifice was not the loss of his life but rather poor mental health as a result of military service. The red beret on his head in the painting represents the army—the entity in which his soul was damaged. The analogy to Jesus's crown of thorns allows the artist to maintain her ambivalent attitude toward the beret as a sort of crown that symbolizes the army in all its glory (berets are worn for military ceremonies) while also symbolizing the army as an entity that is harmful to soldiers.

The image of the soldier as a victim of the military (and political) system is not new to Israeli art history: suffice it to recall the aforementioned statue by Tumarkin, *He Walked through the Fields*, and Kadishman's metal sculpture *The Binding of Isaac*. The story of the Binding of Isaac serves as a foundational text through which many artists over the years have observed the soldier in Israeli society. An exceptional feature of the story is the absence of Sarah, the mother, whose voice was silenced by the biblical author. There are several artists who created symbolic representations of Sarah and thereby added a significant element to the story.[16] Tal Inbar chooses not to use the story of the binding but instead reaches out further to the story of the crucifixion. Perhaps this was

15. On the artistic activity of Nir Hod in this painting, see Katz-Freiman (1994).

16. See, e.g., the painting *Sarah* (1947) by Mordecai Ardon, which describes Sarah the mother mourning the death of her son Isaac.

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a subconscious choice to distance herself from the culturally close story of the binding and to venture into a foreign culture, due to the difficulty of adopting a maternal stance in a place that is usually reserved for men. Moreover, the binding served as a text with reference to a fallen soldier, while her son is still alive.

The fact that the artist's son is depicted alone in the room in an unmasculine pose that suggests helplessness, similar to the way Jesus is depicted standing outdoors and exposed to a jeering crowd, highlights an unspoken aspect of the situation. As opposed to Jesus's heroism when about to sacrificed as atonement for the original sin, the sacrifice of the Israeli soldier, who suffers from psychological wounds, is not perceived as critical to the fate of the nation or that of the people. The psychological price is not visible to others in a twofold manner: it is not physically visible in any way and does not receive the proper attention outside the domestic-private space. The fact that the artist paints her son in this scene in an indoor setting reinforces the grievance hidden in the painting—from the moment the soldier is mentally wounded, there is no appropriate place for him outside the family home that can contain, understand, and support him.

The use of Christian iconography also appears in *Pietà* (fig. 2), which depicts the artist's two sons, both discharged soldiers, with the older one holding the younger. Pietà paintings are known in Israeli art (Meiri-Dann 2010), including those where two men are depicted, like in Tal Inbar's work. They are both dressed in khaki, the color of Israeli military uniforms. The brother being held seems to

Figure 2. Zohar Tal Inbar, *Pietà*, 2020, oil on canvas, 120 × 120 cm

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be asleep—his eyes are closed and his head is leaning back and sideways. However, his arms are not limp, which indicates that he is conscious. He is holding on to his brother with his right arm, while his left arm is hanging down in the forefront of the painting. They are depicted in an indoor setting, some sort of room devoid of any identifying signs.

An olive wreath floats at right, like a sign that cannot find its signpost, raising the question of who it belongs to and what its role is. This wreath resembles the Greek wreaths (*arete*) that were used to crown victorious athletes or those who excelled in their public roles, as well as Roman imperial wreaths. "I wanted something that symbolizes Omer's aspiration to excellence, because this is what advanced him to the highest place in the army, to an elite unit."[17] The wreath appears in different locations in each of the paintings in the series, sometimes highlighting excellence and at other times indicating the utter irrelevance of this excellence. In *Pietà* the wreath seems to be abandoned, because the excellence of both sons, each in his own capacity, was unable to turn back the wheel and prevent the damage suffered by the artist's younger son.

Components of the space resemble geometric shapes that hint at some kind of structure. The artist explains that she thought of barriers, a common feature in the military landscape, or alternatively of a Roman temple.[18] Either way, her intention was to keep the space obscure to suggest a concise and perhaps universal examination, devoid of any preconceptions, of the human story therein. All these contradict the realistic and figurative images of the brothers, described through observation, and detach the scene from any familiar location or context.

The painting is based on a real situation in which the artist's older son comes to help her younger son in a moment of distress resulting from his army-related injury.[19] The artist detached the personal experience from the concrete to the mythological past and once again created estrangement by using the device of intertextuality. The older son is holding the younger, just as Mary held her son Jesus in the *Pietà* scene. The analogy deepens the meaning of the painting in that it raises questions about the condition and importance of each of the images and the nature of their relationship. First, we learn how critical the wounded son's condition was and, second, how important the assistance that he received from his brother was. The close relationship between Mary and her son underscores the closeness of the two brothers. The strong brother comes to his brother's

17. Interview with the artist, 2021.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.

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aid, while the younger brother willingly submits to his brother and accepts his support.

Unlike Mary, who regarded the dead Jesus with a look of acquiescence and acceptance of the divine plan, the older brother looks at his younger brother with an expression of concern and authority. The painting was based on a photograph staged and taken by the artist and the depiction of both brothers' bodies as muscular, convey masculinity and strength. The firm way in which the older brother is holding the younger and his sturdy posture convey a sense of confidence with regard to his ability to positively change the situation. The physical resemblance between the two brothers and their similar khaki-colored garments highlight the fact that they share not only the same family but also military service experience. Yet their similarity is only physical, since one of them is damaged inside.

The Soldier Loses His Power

In addition to intertextuality based on Christian iconography, the series includes three paintings whose titles name specific characters from Greek and Roman mythology. Each of these characters represents a soldier in a posture that hints at a mythological figure. In all three, the figure depicted is based on a model, a young man, close in age to the artist's son, who was invited to pose for her. The painting *Icarus* (fig. 3) portrays a naked young man, lying in a fetal position with a red beret on his head, who appears to be floating in an undefined space. His loins are covered by a khaki-colored fabric (army uniform), and his back and

Figure 3. Zohar Tal Inbar, *Icarus*, 2019, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm

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shoulders are partially covered by the same fabric, which here resembles an angel's wing. The same olive wreath that appeared in previous painting appears in the top right corner. The background of the figure consists of undefined patches in shades of pink, green, and blue that blend into one another.

The title of the painting indicates the artist's desire to portray the soldier as Icarus, who fell from the sky when the wax in his wings melted because he flew too close to the sun. The story of Icarus focuses on the warning his father Daedalus gave him, during their escape from the labyrinth, about flying too high and getting too close to the sun. But the young and impulsive Icarus committed the sin of arrogance, hubris, and did not heed his father's warning. He took a risk and paid for it with his life. The fact that the artist chose to depict the soldier as descending from the sky, with its inevitable outcome, contributes to deciphering the painting: the young soldier tends to be arrogant and does not internalize the dangers facing him that his father warned him about (in this case the focus is on the mother's opinion and not that of the father). As in *Ecce Homo*, here too the depicted moment is the one before death, a dramatic moment that embodies the area between life and death, the area in which we can, supposedly, influence the fate of the character.

The tenderness of the artist in depicting the model's body (resembling that of her son) in the fetal position—the curve of his back, the way he holds his knees close to his body, the angle of his inclined head, and his closed eyes—are indications of the artist's sensitivity toward the young man's situation. This position indicates his vulnerability, and it is clear that the artist does not blame him directly for the sin of hubris. Arrogant behavior does not apply to a single individual; it is the part of the atmosphere that typifies the army in general and that dictates the behavior of young soldiers who sometimes endanger their health and their lives.

The painting *Sisyphus* (fig. 4) depicts a young soldier wearing a military helmet, with a dog tag around his neck. He is bent over with his arms thrust backward, which hints at someone carrying a heavy burden. Half of an olive wreath, hanging over a large boulder as if marking its outline, symbolizes the weight of military responsibility and of the military service that the youth carries on his back from the moment he is conscripted. The artist states: "As soldiers they are expected to excel in everything they do. This is hard."[20]

According to the myth, Sisyphus was the founder and the first king of Corinth. He was considered a cruel and evil king who managed to deceive both humans

20. Ibid.

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Figure 4. Zohar Tal Inbar, *Sisyphus*, 2018, oil on canvas, 100 × 100 cm

and the gods. The punishment meted out to Sisyphus by Zeus in the underworld after his death was to repeatedly roll a huge boulder up a mountain that constantly rolled down once it reached the peak. Sisyphus was thus condemned to an eternity of endless despair. The artist depicts the Israeli soldier as Sisyphus carrying out his punishment. In this way she brings into focus the similarity between the characters: young soldiers too are condemned, perhaps also to an eternity of useless effort, to carry the burden of military activity on their backs. PTSD-afflicted soldiers, in particular, exemplify this endless punishment. Using intertextuality here widens the artist's expression of what it means to be an Israeli soldier. By making this analogy, she criticizes Israeli militarism and the glorification of soldiers. The artist uses intertextuality to express her complex stance as the mother of soldiers:

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> When Omer went into the army I told him, "I will not revere you!" Omer grew up in a family of generals . . . in an atmosphere of military heroes, but I never connected with this. I was always against it, yet never extreme. The environment also supports combat soldiers, and an exceptional child also wants to excel in the army. You know how it is, combat soldiers come to lecture them in schools, and so it goes. Then you say your piece but it doesn't have much effect. When they are in the army you just want them to sleep and eat, all resistance dissolves.[21]

Tal Inbar's attempt to dismantle the myth of the soldier hero is also reflected in the painting *Mars* (fig. 5), which shows a soldier sleeping, his body slumped back on some kind of platform, perhaps a bed, that suggests a tombstone. The soldier is naked apart from his loins, which are covered with fabric, and he is also adorned with a halo. The artist explained, "I invited Rotem [the model] and posed him in a defeated position. I thought of Velázquez's *Mars*. I wanted to see a defeated, weak, exhausted, inactive, non-hero soldier in the most direct manner. The halo around his head indicates that the Israeli soldier is holy, but it is also reminiscent of Jesus after he was removed from the cross."[22] Thus, here the intertextuality is twofold: The Roman god of war is depicted as sleeping and stripped of his power and aspirations to victory. Jesus also died defeated and, when taken from the cross, lay alone, not surrounded by family and supporters (usually attending to his body) as depicted in numerous artworks. As opposed to Velázquez's *Mars*, in which the god is depicted with a helmet on his head and his armour lying at his feet and is looking directly into the viewer's eyes as though confirming his defeat, Tal Inbar's *Mars* does not make eye contact with the viewer, and his weapons are nowhere to be seen. Only his helmet is depicted, at left, with his arm resting on it.

Tal Inbar's soldier may be resting or sleeping, but this pose echoes his potential death. The artist poses him as an Israeli mythological victim who is assigned a heroic task that includes a hidden and inherent tragic element. The maroon (suggesting blood) slab or headboard at the back of the bed looks like a tombstone and reinforces the connotation of death. This board may also echo the exclusion of the esteem usually afforded to political and religious dignitaries, seated in the place of honor or wearing a mantle. Thus, again, the artist creates an ordinary scene taken from daily life, adds a touch of sanctity, and turns the soldier into a martyr.

21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.

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Figure 5. Zohar Tal Inbar, *Mars*, 2020, oil on canvas, 70 × 50 cm

It is interesting to note that in four of the paintings in the series, the soldier is not the artist's son but another youth. Similarly, artist Hava Raucher "recruited" a young man from another family while dealing with a personal issue concerning her son in her series that bears his name, *Nachshon* (1996–97). Hadara Scheflan-Katzav (2018), who studied the series, claims: "Distancing oneself from one's own

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private subject allows for expanding the personal case out into the general Israeli-Jewish public sphere. . . . Nachchon becomes everyone's son." Thus, in the case of Tal Inbar too, it may precisely be that her initial observation of the youth-soldier who is not her son and the estrangement later derived from adopting foreign texts allowed her the freedom to delve deeply into her soul, where she found her authentic voice—that of a mother whose children went into the army.

The Soldier's Mother: Between Blindness and Awareness

Unlike the other paintings in the *Of Beautiful Arms* series, *Santa Ora-Lucia* (fig. 6) depicts a mother with her baby. While the title mentions Lucia, the visual image refers to the iconography of Mary and Jesus. Santa Lucia was born in the third century in Syracuse, Italy, and was betrothed to a local idol worshipper. Saint Agatha, who had been martyred many years before, visited Lucia in a dream before her marriage and promised her that she would never give up her virginity. This element of the legend forms the connection between Lucia and the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, who, according to Christian dogma, also remained a virgin. The rejected suitor sought punishment for his intended, Lucia, and denounced her as a Christian to Paschasius, the governor of Syracuse. When the guards came to imprison her, the Holy Spirit turned her body into a heavy object that could not be moved, and so her eyes were gouged. The loss of her eyes,

Figure 6. Zohar Tal Inbar, *Santa Ora (Lucia)*, 2019, oil on canvas, 40 × 40 cm

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however, did not cause her to lose her sight. She was then set on fire, but her body would not burn. She was eventually beheaded, but her head miraculously returned to its place. Veneration of Santa Lucia first occurred in the sixth century, spread throughout the late Middle Ages, and still exists today.

Tal Inbar's painting depicts the image of a woman holding a baby. Her head covering, the strips covering her eyes, and the fabric in which the baby is wrapped are all painted in khaki, the color of Israeli military uniforms featuring in the series. Iconographically, this painting constitutes a meeting between the images of Mary and Lucia: The artist explains: "For me the image of Mary alone did not fully describe my experience of what happened to my sons when they went into the army" (Shachnai Yaacobi 2021). The woman image echoes the Virgin Mary, first, because Lucia was childless and, second, because the way she holds the baby is reminiscent of the familiar iconographic mold of the Madonna and Child.

The way in which the mother cradles her sleeping baby also echoes the *Pietà*, an iconographic image of Mary cradling the body of Jesus after he was removed from the cross. Two important women artists have used similar poses of mothers and children: German artist Käthe Kollwitz and Israeli artist Ruth Schloss.[23] For both artists, painting was a means of expressing antiwar protests by moving mothers' viewpoints from the confines of the home into the public arena and by depicting mourning mothers not as heroic but rather as devastated, not accepting the national call of the "soldier's mother."

Even without referring to the *Pietà*, the sleeping baby wrapped in khaki-colored fabric that connotes a military uniform links the baby image to his future conscription. Lihi Lapid (2018, 6) writes: "When the doctor conducting the ultrasound tells you 'It's a boy,' you immediately imagine your fetus in a uniform." Thus Tal Inbar creates intertextuality that reinforces the interpretation of the painting: Mary cradling her baby reminds us of the young mother's potential future sacrifice, as she already knows that the time will come when her baby son will have to face the obligation of military service. The soldier, according to the accepted Israeli discourse, is expected to sacrifice himself for the country when necessary, just as Jesus was required to sacrifice himself for human redemption from the original sin. Mary is unable to change his cruel fate in the narrative imposed on her by God, an element the artist does not identify with; she therefore introduces the blindness of Santa Lucia by covering the woman's eyes. The artist claims that she experienced the entire conscription and military service process with a sort of blindness, a form of denial, which probably helped her to continue

23. For in-depth reading on the subject, see Dekel (2006).

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living her life in a normal manner.[24] She explains: “In my paintings I deal with devotion that leads to blindness” (Shachnai Yaacobi 2021). However, just as Santa Lucia continued to see when her eyes were gouged, the artist’s blindness was partial and temporary since she was always aware, to a certain degree, of reality. The blindness, as it were, disappeared, and the sobering process, accelerated by her son’s army service-related mental issues, found expression in all the paintings in this series.

Sara Metzer (2009) claims that soldiers’ mothers have difficulty expressing being torn between maternal and national responsibilities and must cope with insufficient linguistic tools to convey this complexity. Perhaps the covered eyes of the mother image reflect this difficulty of expression by metaphorically distancing the mother’s inner world from the viewer. The blindfolded female figure strengthens the analogy between Santa Ora-Lucia, who remained able to see even after losing her eyes, and the soldier’s mother repressing his day of recruitment while aware of the harsh consequences. The artist termed this complex situation “elective blindness.”[25]

The olive wreath is depicted in *Santa Ora (Lucia)* as a kind of halo, like the one surrounding the baby’s head. The wreath may be interpreted as a martyr’s halo, the baby as a future soldier who is about to be sacrificed for the sake of his country, and his mother as the one raising him for that cause (Shachnai Yaacobi 2021). In Israeli iconography, bereavement wreaths are a common image, as can be seen, for example, in the art of Moshe Gershuni, Bianca Eshel Gershuni, David Vakshtein, Erez Israeli, and Nava Harel-Shoshani (Shachnai Yaacobi 2012). Olive branches signify peace and bring to mind the olive branch a dove brought to Noah to indicate the end of the flood. Olive branches also appear, with the menorah, in the emblem of Israel, where they symbolize the leaders of the Jewish people returning to its land from the Diaspora.

If the wreath is indicative of the mother’s link to peace, it also contributes to validating her antimilitaristic views as part of her “maternal thinking” (Ruddick 1995). Ruddick claims that mothering consists of intellectual activity and not just the practicality of caring for children. Mothers develop a way of thinking in which a high awareness of the needs of others can result in significant change in social behavior and the breakdown of militant aggression in the public space (Scheflan-Katzav 2020). The series *Of Beautiful Arms* indeed conveys maternal

24. Interview with the artist, 2021.
25. Ibid.

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thinking, as it reflects the intellectual activity of expressing critical feminist stances with regard to the myth of the Israeli soldier.

Conclusion

This article presents an analysis of the *Of Beautiful Arms* series by Zohar Tal Inbar. Visual analysis and interviews with the artist were used to delve into the hidden meanings therein and to expose the artist's stance toward central concepts in Israeli culture: militarism, combat soldiers, and PTSD resulting from military service. The series reveals the use of intertextuality as a device rendering all painted episodes multilayered, combining ancient myths with local and familiar soldier images. This intertextuality, which consists of figures from Roman and Greek mythology and from the Christian narrative, brought about thematic estrangement.

Another facet of estrangement occurs as a result of Tal Inbar's merging of realistic figurative images, set in colorful, abstract spaces. Painting undefined settings and naming the figures as mythological heroes distance the viewer from these remote imaginary realms; nonetheless, the choice of khaki (used for military uniforms) as a dominant color, the red beret, and genuine and truthful representations of face and bod direct the focus firmly back to Israeli reality. Even the victory wreaths, a throwback to the ancient world, seem somewhat misplaced; they are depicted in the paintings' spaces as detached from their context, which hints too at the burial wreaths that are so familiar in Israeli bereavement culture.

In the article, I claim that this estrangement makes it easier for the artist to express critical stances toward the objects in her paintings, stances that undermine the consensus with regard to the recruitment of young men into the army to become combat soldiers. Her critical position has developed over time as she supported her children during their military service, especially her second son, Omer, whose military experience left him coping with PTSD. By presenting images of mythological characters in moments of crisis and collapse and even in their last moments before death, the artist portrays the Israeli soldier as vulnerable, as opposed to the accepted portrayal of masculine strength in the cultural discourse over the years. This vulnerability also refers to the phenomenon of PTSD that results from engaging in military activities, which although common, is underacknowledged by Israeli society. By exposing the vulnerabilities of the masculine soldier figure, the artist brings to mind those whose injuries are hidden and who are thus denied society's appreciation and honor, similar to various bereaved groups suffering from "disenfranchised grief."

The image of the artist-mother does not appear directly in the paintings, but she is clearly present in the painting *Santa Ora (Lucia)*. There, as analogy is

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made between her and the merged image of Santa Ora and the Virgin Mary. The artist herself reported having been in a state of conscious denial and blindness with regard to her sons' military service, as represented by the blindfolded female figure. After her son had been mentally injured during his army service, however, this elective blindness was transformed into the mother's illuminated awareness. Like a martyr, she gathered her strength and dared to look courageously into Israeli reality, where she, as a mother of a PTSD-afflicted soldier, refused to accept that role with the equanimity expected of her. Thus, her paintings convey criticism of Israeli militarism, including that of leaving similarly afflicted soldiers to carry their unseen wounds for the rest of their lives. The paintings also explore the twofold complexity of Israeli mothers' stance: being torn between their natural desire to protect their sons and making their voices heard in the public space versus the role they are expected to play in passively supporting their sons as central participants in fulfilling the national mission of maintaining a strong country.

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