

# The Telegraph

## Danish painter Tal R on ghosts, art and obscenity: 'I think sex is quite banal'

By Alastair Sooke

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"Paradis" reads the sign by the entrance to Tal R's studio in Copenhagen. But when I arrive, the barking emanating from within sounds more like the hounds of hell. Tentatively, I open the door to the building – a former print studio that the Israeli-born Danish artist has occupied for seven years – and a Great Dane called Fanny, who is almost as tall as my chest, comes bounding towards me. "Sorry!" cries Tal R, in a high-pitched voice, from the other end of the room. "Fanny is beautiful and loyal, but she understands very little."

A charismatic character in a white baseball cap, Tal R – whose paintings can be found in permanent collections everywhere from Stockholm's Moderna Museet to the Art Institute of Chicago – is strikingly boyish, despite having recently turned 50. His faded yellow T-shirt reveals forearms covered in tattoos, which he designed himself. We don't shake hands, because his are covered with blue paint – since April, he has been preparing for an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, due to open next year.

Before that, though, he will be in London, for a show opening later this month at the Victoria Miro gallery, where he will display up to 14 canvases from a body of work that he calls Sexshops. In this ongoing series of around 45 paintings (on which he has been working intermittently since 2014) Tal R depicts the façades of brothels, strip clubs, massage parlours, and other red-light establishments all over the world, from Antwerp to Los Angeles.



Paris Chic, 2017, Pigment and rabbit skin glue on canvas CREDIT: VICTORIA MIRO/TAL R

I find the most recent picture from the series leaning against a wall. Like the others, it is a remarkably flat image, composed of nothing but a narrow red door in a wall of gorgeous colour comprising two bands of russet and saffron, divided by a strip of emerald green. Above the closed door is a sign emblazoned with the Egyptian Eye of Horus, a pair of sinuous, silhouetted dancers, and the words "Bar Faraon" and "Kabaret".

"It's a bar in Prague," Tal R tells me. "And 'kabaret', in Prague, means something more than just drinking. So, this place is dodgy. You don't know if you want to enter."

Great paintings are always based on mystery. Is it a nightclub he knows well, I ask, innocently. Tal R laughs. "Of course, I have been inside sex shops as a young man," he says. "But I haven't visited any of the places in this series. I never go inside, because I like the fantasy, the imagination. I don't like the real."



Tal R in his studio CREDIT: SUSANNE HARTZ

He strides across the studio and opens a small pink chest. Inside are hundreds of photographs of sex shops and strip clubs, mostly taken by other people on his behalf. Between 2005 and 2014, he held a professorship at the Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf (alongside his friend, the British artist Peter Doig), and he often sent out students to photograph "every goddamn strip club" in cities across Europe. "It was an assignment the students loved," Tal R says.

The finished paintings, though, aren't meant to be titillating. "There isn't a lot to see in them," he tells me. "In that sense, they are quite disappointing: no obscene images in the windows. In fact, they don't have much to do with sex, because I think sex is quite banal."

Rather, he is captivated by the "weird façades" of



'Venus', 2017, Pigment and rabbit skin glue on canvas CREDIT: VICTORIA MIRO/TAL R

the sex shops, which, surprisingly, he sees as an analogy for painting: "With any other shop, you look in through the window," he explains. "But sex-shop facades are mostly two-dimensional, because what goes on, on the other side, is private."

Similarly, he points out, paintings are flat surfaces that appeal to the viewer's imagination. "By chance, a few years ago, I made a painting of a sex shop, and I suddenly thought, here is a weird parallel to the idea of painting. An awkward parallel – and funny."

Tal R is no stranger to sexually explicit imagery: a recent body of work depicted naked girls – mostly strangers he'd met in cafés or on the street – posing in hotel rooms. Yet, in the case of his "Sexshops", which will be on sale at Victoria Miro for up to €100,000 (£92,000), the subject matter is, in a sense, merely a

come-on, seducing the viewer to engage with their underlying concern: the history of abstract modern art. How does he choose which doorways to paint? "I always look for doors," he explains, "where I have this feeling: 'Uh-oh, you don't want to enter.' If I feel there's a mystery about what's behind a door, then I know there is an alibi for a painting." Later, he tells me: "Great paintings are always based on mystery."

As a child, I saw ghosts everywhere, so my parents took me to a shrink. Tal Rosenzweig was born in Tel Aviv in 1967, shortly before the Six-Day War. Soon afterwards, his Danish mother persuaded his Israeli father, a Holocaust survivor, to settle in her homeland, where he established a business polishing diamonds, and she worked as a high-school teacher.

Growing up in Denmark, Tal R – who says he is "almost dyslexic" – began abbreviating his surname because he had difficulty spelling it correctly. He describes his childhood as "suburban", saying he "had no idea what art was about". He was more interested in cartoons. In those days, he had an overactive imagination: "We lived in an old house, and I saw ghosts everywhere. I was so scared of ghosts that my parents even took me to a shrink." In part to tame his scary fantasies, Tal R spent much of his childhood drawing. The habit was compulsive: "It was like dreaming, for me," he explains. "My way of turning around things that bothered me."

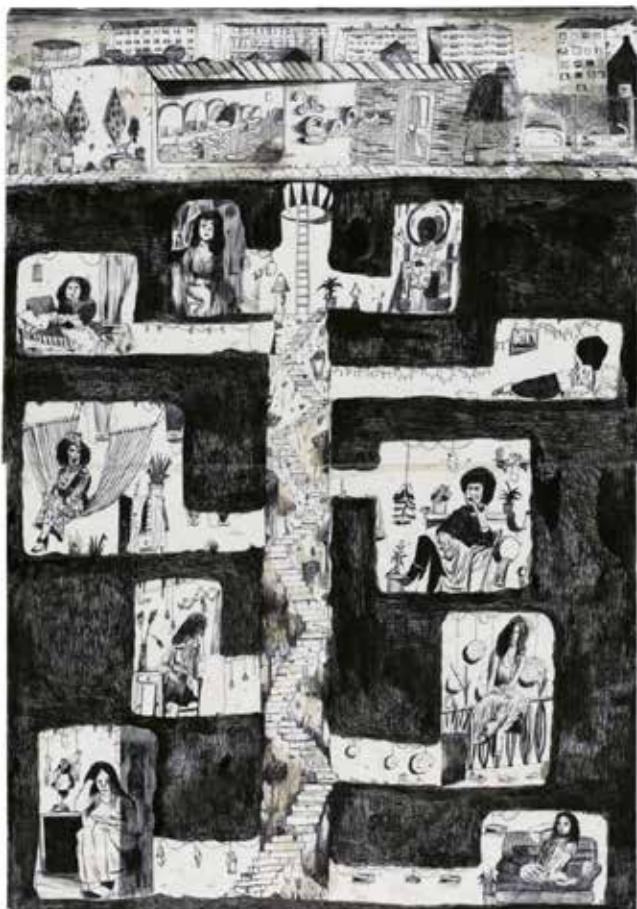
At school, drawing gave him social status. "There is this saying that every village has a fool," he says. "At that time, every class had somebody who could draw. And I was the one." Yet, when he enrolled at a private art academy in Copenhagen, in 1986, he discovered that his style of drawing – vigorous, wonky, heartfelt – was not valued. He describes this period of his life as a "fall from grace": "I got beaten," he says, speaking metaphorically about the way his teachers treated him.

For years, he suppressed the urge to make art. He travelled to China, where he studied calligraphy and boxing. Eventually, though, in 1994, he was accepted, at the third time of asking, by the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. Since graduating, almost two decades ago, he has established an enviable reputation, based on his exuberant and

instantly recognisable painting style. His first mid-career retrospective, *Academy of Tal R*, is currently on show at Denmark's esteemed Louisiana Museum of Modern Art.

His pictures are characterised by an artfully rough and folksy quality, as well as the use of bright colours. But often, he is drawn to what he calls "cheesy" subject matter, such as the moon reflected in water, because he sees it as a taboo, and thus a challenge, for serious painters.

In 2009, he started experimenting with an unusual technique that involved mixing ground pigment with rabbit-skin glue. The effect, he says, is "vibrant": "It feels like the colours are in the air." But, he points out, using bright colours doesn't make his work lightweight or upbeat. "People have this banal idea that if you use bright colours, then the work must be happy," he says. "But what if bright colours have nothing to do with 'happy'?"



CREDIT: SUSANNE HARTZ/TAL R



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Instead, Tal R says, he is striving for an "uncanny" quality: "Something out of tune, like there's something knocking under the table." He raps the underside of the table in front of him, for dramatic effect, before continuing: "The moment something is out of tune, it becomes human. It's almost embarrassing to quote him, but Leonard Cohen said, 'There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in'. To make mistakes is human."

He pauses, before evoking an empty fairground in winter. "Imagine it's November, and you are there alone. All the amusements are empty, but they are still turning around. You get a weird feeling: something is off," he says. "That's how I look at my own work."