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COVER STORY

## The Tell-Tale Art of Tal R

Though the Danish Artist's Technique Has Evolved, His Work Expresses a Continuing Narrative

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In a Copenhagen studio cluttered with clay sculptures, endless jars of vibrant pigments, brushes, crayons, pencils and pastels, half-finished canvases and hundreds of art books, the artist Tal R stands in front of a small pot full of rabbit glue. He picks it up and gives the gelatinous substance a stir.

Dressed in jeans, a plaid shirt and an orange corduroy baseball cap with a small "H"—for Hermès—embroidered above the brim, Tal R is boyish-looking despite his gray-specked stubble. Earnest and soft-spoken but excitable, he explains the process of heating the glue, adding in pigment and applying the fast-drying mixture to a canvas for a bright, translucent effect. The technique defines "Science Fiction," his latest series of paintings on display in a monthlong exhibition at London gallery Victoria Miro, which opened this week in conjunction with Frieze Art Fair, when the biggest collectors descend on the city.

Tal R's art—from his cartoon-like, often sexually explicit drawings that playfully consider the dark and absurd, to the almost child-like collages that mix and match medium and material without convention, to fancifully rendered narrative- and character-rich paintings, full of dramatic color—have made him a buzzed-about talent over the past decade. It has been a decade in which Tal R has restlessly explored his identity as man and artist—considering boundaries and belonging, subjectivity and national history, dreams and convention.

Born in Tel Aviv in 1967, the son of a Danish mother and a Czechoslovakian Jewish father who was a Holocaust survivor, Tal Rosenzweig moved to Denmark as an infant. The name Tal—a traditional Hebrew name that, unhappily for a school-age boy, is also the word for "number" in Danish—coupled with a surname that was exotic in a small homogenous country, left Tal R often having to explain himself. "From the beginning, there was this sense of not belonging anywhere," says the artist. "In Denmark, I looked the part but my name was strange. In Israel, my name was right, but with broken-Hebrew and Danish looks, I didn't fit there either. It was this feeling of being caught between two worlds, and in a way it's never gone away."

He found expression for those feelings through art, with his initial endeavors beginning while he was attending Carolineskolen, a Jewish grade school in Copenhagen. "It really started with drawing swastikas in the classroom," Tal R says, recalling how he and his fellow students recreated historic scenes. "From time to time, we'd need to draw them—on the wings of planes or something—and I was the one who could get the slant right, the angles perfect."

As he grew older, Tal R's drawings evolved into an elaborate class-time habit, an inward escape from history and math. "For me, drawing was the same as dreaming at night: you don't decide what to dream about, you dream about what you need. In the same way, you don't draw what you are supposed to, you draw what you need and you don't question its function, because no one ever asked you to be able to draw—it's all yours," says the artist, who at 18 dropped out of high-school and enrolled in a private art academy, hoping to further explore the drawings that consumed his day to day.

With encouragement from his family, Tal R began applying to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. After two failed attempts, at 26, he was finally accepted; his submission was a painting of Adolf Hitler, rendered upside down. In his second year, Tal R caught the eye of Anders Kold, a curator at Louisiana, the modern art museum just north of Copenhagen. "The weird narrative was initially what drew me to Tal's work," Mr. Kold explains. "The tale-telling about physicality, love, unfulfilled love—he spoke of a world that was imbued with all the darker sides of what we as human beings strive for and wish to engage with, a world that was beyond the control of the good and orderly mechanisms of civil society. It was about danger, bodily involvement and romance.

"He could talk about darkness and love together and I saw him as this genuine romantic character," Mr. Kold adds. "But at play was also his background: being born in Israel, but having moved to a Scandinavian model state of welfare and designer furniture—this mix of a very orderly, happy society and the awareness of his family's past and the dangerous, darker sides of life. He has grappled with that his whole life, and if you look at his iconography, there's always this one world, and then another, whether portrayed literally or more abstractly."

But the moment he walked through the art school door, "Art walked out of me," recalls Tal R. "Art became something entirely different—you had to follow forms, rules. It was kind of like getting to decide what you dream about, which sounds like a nice idea but it's also somehow claustrophobic, because the wonderful thing about dreams is the natural momentum, the unknowing," he says. After

two frustrating years, he threw in the towel. Art fell to the wayside and the notion of turning it into a career was replaced by one odd job after the next, one year after the next.

Mr. Kold included Tal R's work in a Scandinavian group show at Louisiana in 1997, and soon after, the artist's professional career took off. Nearly 15 years on, those same narrative tendencies persist, even though Tal R's techniques have evolved from drawing to collage and sculpture to painting, the medium Tal R has chosen to call his own, at least for the moment. "It has always been about subject matter for me—the things I fear, the things that occupy me. These small themes and thoughts, I can't escape them and it is quite claustrophobic," explains Tal R. "At least with surface, that I can change, that I can control. I can't really control subject matter."

"Science Fiction," painted over the course of the past year, marks yet another transition. In the series, the artist mixed the rabbit glue with pigments to create a fast-drying mixture that leaves little room for hesitation or revision. For many years, Tal R worked with oil paints, slathering them on the canvas in thick gobs, revising and adding elements, the canvas growing heavier. "With his new technique, he can't just dabble a bit more paint, or put another canvas on top—it's do or die," Mr. Kold says, adding that the new work reveals Tal R as an artist who has finally begun to come to terms with his talent. "This is much more mature work, more refined, more assertive. His work has reached a balance now, it's lost that cartoon-like thing. There's obvious mastery in it."

Indeed, now 44, with countless international solo shows and commercial success under his belt, it seems Tal R is at ease with both his work and his story. "It's no longer a discussion about being an artist or not being an artist. It is no longer a relevant personal debate because it is not something I can separate from myself. It really becomes a relationship to the world," says Tal R. "Mentally, what I'm doing is so much drifting and wandering around and, at this point, I have become quite happy being a tourist, not having that sense of belonging. I am deeply rooted in the cross of being here, and not being here."

But as he stands in the frame of the large glass door to his studio, bidding goodbye, he looks very much at home, in a space he has chosen to call, according to a sign just to the right of the entryway, nothing short of "Paradise."