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## The challenge of realism

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**Caption:** Sigal Tsabari, 'Interval Between the Two,' 2006, oil on canvas. Ken Kewley, 'Striped Tart with Lemon Half,' 2000, oil on wood panel.

Ever since the Renaissance, critics and theorists have been writing treatises and broadsides related to the concept of illusionism in art. How and with what means a painter defines space on a gessoed wall, a chunk of wood or a length of canvas has been the focus of untold dissertations for the past 500 years.

From Michelangelo's foreshortening of anatomical descriptions and architectural detailing on the Sistine Chapel ceiling in the 15th century to Jackson Pollack's in-your-face non-objective splashes and drips in the 20th, painters have confronted the problem of representational art and what it means to the viewer.

As time marched on, painters and sculptors were able to free themselves from the confines of religious subject matter while looking toward the genre of daily life, pure landscapes and a simple still life. And with the inclusion of psychiatry and psychoanalysis into our vernacular in the early 1900s, the mind, with its full range of emotional responses, dreams and associations, has been given equal status together with the eye. Expressionism and non-representational art capture something of the depicted subject's intrinsic qualities rather than its external appearances.

In recent years, a cache of art students has begun to reject the latter in favor of a return to the traditional style and values of figurative painting. Rothschild Fine Art, a gallery devoted to exhibiting representational art, has recently mounted its first show of six painters, all working on small formats. Of the six, I choose to discuss the works of two, Sigal Tsabari and Ken Kewley.

Kewley, trained in the US and recently on the faculty at the Jerusalem Studio School, shows a handful of oils and several small, complex collages, each one a delightful voyage into a world of texture and color. There is little subtlety or ambiguity in Kewley's pictures. They are decidedly painted with broad

crisp strokes of pure color with little use for tones and tints except for the occasional flat surface onto which he places his still-life objects.

Kewley's oil painting on wood panel entitled *Striped Tart with Lemon Half*, is an alla prima, high-intensity colorful picture in which paint, and not the objects, is the medium. Using a palette knife in lieu of a brush, there is an obvious physicality about the work as Kewley seems to carve the various elements into existence while compressing them all into the upper left hand quadrant of the composition. The pastry, lemon, metal spoon, plate and crinkled paper wrapping are grouped in a way that their hues seem to compliment each other, and in so doing intensify the entire picture plane. The cake, described in concentric orange and reddish bands, is situated diagonally from the sharply delineated, near-cubistic, piece of blue paper adjacent to the acidic lemon. Together they form a triumvirate of the primary colors vibrating on a flat tabletop and plate in tones of pale olive and cool gray.

*Interval Between the Two*, 2008, a romanticized landscape by Tsabari, describes a lazy summer's afternoon in which two grazing horses stand idly in a yellow field. The equine forms and the natural surroundings of trees and sky are brushed with a scrubby freedom that is the antithesis of Kewley's strict adherence to sharp contours, clear colors and compositions planed to the extreme. In Tsabari's picture, the viewer is directed to enter the picture plane via a fence expressed in a dash of gray line that crosses the front legs of the brown horse as one's eye moves up to its head and into the middle ground where a second gray mare nibbles at the dried grass. The entire scene is shrouded in a haze as if a diaphanous veil has been pulled over the picture's frontal plane. The horses' muscularity is nicely rendered in several broad strokes that cover their necks and hind quarters, but they have been denied details like eyes, mouths and manes, while hooves are totally neglected and dissipate into indistinct smudges.

A second landscape by Tsabari is a perfectly symmetrical composition in which two Thai workers, standing back to back between two trees in the middle ground, are dusting crops in a pasture composed from several tones of green from a deep viridian to olive and turquoise.

Although her time line is about current events, the pictorial results are more about our unlimited memories and what was than they are about the burning here and now.

Other painters in the exhibition: Stuart Shils, Yael Scalia, Sharon Etgar and Guy Yanai.

Rothschild Fine Art, Sderot Rothschild 140, Tel Aviv. Tel. 077-502-0484. Until August 4.