

DOI: 10.31866/2410-1311.40.2022.269359

UDC 75.071.1:7.071.4Korol

WHAT DOES A BIRD CARE?! INDIFFERENCE AND YEARNING IN THE ART AND TEACHING OF MARIANA KOROL

Noam Topelberg

PhD in History of Art,

ORCID: 0000-0002-6729-1995, e-mail: noamtopelberg@gmail.com,

Bar-Ilan University,

Ramat Gan, 590002, Israel

For citation:

Topelberg, N. (2022). What Does a Bird Care?! Indifference and Yearning in the Art and Teaching of Mariana Korol. *Issues in Cultural Studies*, (40), 79-90. doi: <https://doi.org/10.31866/2410-1311.40.2022.269359>.

Abstract

The purpose of the article is to discover how Mariana Korol has applied contradictory duality in her paintings and teaching methods following the artist's past and present. The research methodology is based on the principles of comprehensiveness, methods of general scientific comparative studies, and formalstylistic and art analyses. The scientific novelty is to identify Mariana Korol's means to assemble and fuse distant and different cultural elements into a cohesive whole. Conclusions. The results of the study show an inevitable phenomenon of Mariana Korol. Artist and art teacher Mariana Korol's works constitute an anomalous intersection of Uzbek, Western and Israeli cultures, fused together to form her visual language and its meanings. The fact that she spent most of her adult life teaching art to immigrants and minorities of all ages in Israel adds yet another dimension, as Israel's typical identity complexities are embodied in her works and her pedagogical philosophy. The critical reading and examination of Korol's subtle and unique artistic choices offered here mirror a conflicting internal reality that is characteristic of Israeli culture and society. An analysis of two strata is provided. On the one hand, the reading of denotative, iconographic, and visual language, manifested in Korol's choice to combine images from ancient Uzbek tradition with Western modes of representation and modernist visual language. On the other hand, a connotative layer that charges the works in a reoccurring tension between two poles — indifference and yearning which symbolises dichotomies embedded in Israeli identity. These poles are intertwined in her life, creation, and teaching since immigrating to Israel.

Keywords: Mariana Korol; Uzbek Art; Israeli Art; Israeli culture; Art Teaching; Jacob Frumgartz

Introduction

Mariana Korol's birds sit silently on or beside fabrics, pictures, books, and kitchen utensils — childhood memories and associations from her distant past in Uzbekistan. Some are in natural surroundings, perching on branches, alert, as if they were waiting for something that may or may not happen. Occasionally, they fly off in a rush, caught up in the moment's excitement.

The birds, like the household objects and fabrics in Korol's work, are reminiscent of the virtually contradictory duality of the bird in the poem "What does a bird care" by Israeli playwright and poet Hanoch Levin (2004). On the one hand, the bird represents the natural order of things. As such, it is totally indifferent to human actions, thoughts, and desires. In Levin's song: "What does a bird care if he sings or is silent?" (1967). On the other hand, the bird represents the soul, the essence of human creation and yearning. In this guise, it is the antithesis of indifferent nature, and so "if the bird flies away, he will sing no more songs". These two opposite poles, brought together in Levin's song, mirror the unique complexities of Israeli society.

Throughout its history, Israeli society has been characterised by this paradox. From the early Zionist claim that the Jewish people should stand up for themselves and own their destiny sprang a demand for individual sacrifice. Due to this unique situation, the Israeli "Sabra" myth arose, referring to the first generation born in the State of Israel. The "Sabra" myth embodies all the characteristics of the paradox: he is ostensibly prickly, brash, hard, and indifferent, yet he is actually kind-hearted, soft, and willing to sacrifice himself for the common good. Throughout Israeli history, this inherent paradox has taken many cultural, social, and artistic forms, and its impact on the Israeli "zeitgeist" has been extensively discussed by various thinkers (Eisenstadt, 1967; Rubinstein, 1977; Roniger & Feige, 1992; Zuckerman, 2001).

The purpose of the article

In this article, we will see how this paradox's characteristics manifest and are repeatedly interwoven in Korol's unique visual language and educational philosophy, thus creating a complex tissue of meanings linked to the artist's past and present. Analysis of Korol's work, allows insights into the intricacies of Israeli Art and culture, that strives to assemble and fuse distant and different cultural elements into a cohesive whole. These intricacies offer a glimpse into the coping process of one immigrant from one culture and her encounter with the stratified Israeli culture.

Main research material

Korol was born in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, in 1969. From the age of nine, she studied at the National Art Academy, a government-funded institution under the Jewish artist Jacob Frumgartz (1923–1997). She enrolled at a local college, where she earned a B.A. and M.A. in draughtmanship and art education at seventeen. Before she immigrated to Israel in 1990, Korol participated in group exhibitions in Tashkent galleries, and a one-woman show of her work was mounted at her college.

She continued to study under Frumgartz until the age of twenty-one, even during her college years. In his studio, her identity as an artist and teacher took shape, and her mentor remains a role model in whose footsteps she follows to this day. From him, she learned to demand her student's total professional commitment to the process, to the medium, and a substantial, reasoned affinity between content and visual elements. Like him, she aspires to lead without imposing and to listen to the "unique voice of each student". "In the studio, we learned drawing, painting, etching, sculpture, and ceramics. It produced outstanding artists and architects. Every few months, we would go out to paint in nature, the city, and the country. We learned academic painting alongside experiments in free and conceptual painting. We learned art history with an openness that didn't exist in official institutions. The students' demands were high regarding devotion to their studies and seriousness. There I learned the professional attitude to art...I can actually hear my teacher's voice every time I start a new work. He encourages me and gives me a sense of balance. When I examine myself sometimes, I even think in his words. As a teacher, I really try to be like him: to honour the inner world, the special qualities, together with a demand for professionalism and respect for other opinions and approaches" (M. Korol, interview, June 27, 2018).

When Korol arrived in Israel, her artistic style was almost fully formed. Save for a course in computer graphics in 1992; she did not study in any of the local colleges or art academies. Her mature work is, therefore a rare mix of influences that stands out in the landscape of Israeli art. In the second half of the twentieth century, Uzbekistan, in general, and Tashkent in particular, was home to an art scene in which East and West came together. It was the site of the encounter between leading Soviet artists who fled to Uzbekistan from the Nazis, bringing with them modernist, and European ideas, and local artists working in Asian and Islamic traditions. These uncommon circumstances created the foundation on which Korol's style grew and solidified (Sternson, 2007).

Korol's paintings evidence a combination of Uzbek and Muslim folklore, Jewish culture, and influences drawn from modern art movements. The images, especially in her oils and acrylics, are realistic, at times even hyper-realistic, such as in her depictions of the textures of various fabrics, kitchen utensils, and birds. Some of the paintings tend toward the abstract, particularly the watercolours and the background in works portraying seemingly random scenes from nature, but that are, in fact, charged with a subversive symbolism that undermines the initial impression of a chance observation. In all her works, the organisation of the composition and juxtaposition of different objects distances the painting from a realistic depiction, positioning her style in the territory of fantasy or even surrealism.

This sense of distance from reality or of the surreal derives from two elements that recur in her work. The first is the blending of diverse times and realities, and the second, the charging of the representations and images with the two opposite poles of indifference and yearning.

The mix of times and realities, as well as the use of traditional painting styles along with the abstract and a modern language, can be seen primarily in works in which fabrics and objects are depicted on a table, as in the series *Memories of Home* (Fig. 1, 4).



*Fig. 1. Memories of Home, 2009, oil on canvas, 65X46 cm,
by courtesy of the artist*

Here (Fig. 1), as in all the paintings in the series, there appears to be an almost arbitrary division into two images, an inner and an outer picture. Each representing a separate time and reality, they are placed one atop the other, coming together to create a single entity. The two parts are distinct from one another in terms of composition, colouration, light, technique, and even style and brushstroke. The central section, representing memories of the past and depicting the Uzbek tea ceremony, is lit and, therefore, brighter than the surrounding frame. In the centre, on a traditional crochet doily, is a piala filled with tea (Fig. 2).¹ Besides it is a glass in a Russian-style metal holder (Fig. 3). The decorations on the doily, the piala, and the glass holder are drawn from Muslim arabesques and plant motifs typical of central Asia (Talbot Rice at al., n.d).



*Fig. 2. Traditional Piala, Photograph:
Mariana Korol, by courtesy of the artist*

¹ A piala is a small bowl used for drinking tea throughout central Asia, including Uzbekistan. The tea is generally served in a ceremony known as a kaytar, in which a teapot and one piala more than the number of guests is placed on a tray. The tea is poured into the piala and returned to the teapot three times, thereby stirring it and intensifying its flavor (King, 2006, p. 150).



Fig. 3. Traditional Russian Tea Glass Holder, Photograph: Mariana Korol by courtesy of the artist

The central section of the painting looks like a cloth with uneven edges that has been “cut out” clumsily and “placed” on another cloth, so that it almost appears to be hovering above it. The composition and perception of the space in the inner picture arouse associations with modernist language in general and Cezanne’s multiple perspectives in particular, as the piala and doily are seen from above while the glass in the decorative holder is seen from the side. The background in which this scene from the past is “placed” represents the present. A dark cloth in shades of reddish-brown, it is also adorned with plant motifs. Its style is freer and more abstract than that in the central picture, the light is dimmer, and unlike the sense of spatiality in the inner section, it is two-dimensional. The gap between the two sections of the painting creates a sense of instability and unease that conflicts with the calm domestic aura conveyed by the objects themselves.

In another work in the series (Fig. 4), the central image and background treatment are somewhat different. Here, too, the past and present are juxtaposed using a central unevenly “cut” square “placed” on a contrasting surface. However, unlike in the previous painting, there is a greater similarity in form between the two sections. Nevertheless, it conveys the same sense of alienation and discomfort that typifies the series as a whole.

In the inner picture, depicted in a hyper-realistic style, is a china saucer embellished with two gold rings, a wider one around the rim and a thinner one beneath it, that holds cookies and an upside-down silver spoon. The saucer sits on a rather casually folded white cloth with blue stripes, which brings to mind a tallit (Jewish prayer shawl), although it can also be construed as a kitchen towel. Like the saucer, the decoration consists of thick and thin stripes. The position of the spoon and cloth creates a solid diagonal running upward to the right, in opposition to the direction of the diagonals in the outer background section, which shows a traditional white crochet cloth on an abstract yellow surface. Despite the abstraction, the surface can be

interpreted as a table, perhaps even the same table that appears in the inner scene. Here, however, the perspective is much closer, as if the artist has “zoomed in” on the part of the table. The two crochet strips are placed on diagonals running counter to that in the inner picture, one moving downward from the upper left-hand corner to the lower right-hand corner and the other running upward on the right with a slight shift to the left that upsets the balance of the composition. This subtle “infraction” echoes the imprecise folding of the cloth in the inner picture. The two sections of the painting are more similar in colouration and lighting than in the previous work. Still, the deviations from the balance in the composition, the different perspectives, and the almost total abstraction of the background create a web of contrasts that conveys the same sense of instability and unease.



*Fig. 4. Memories of Home, 2009, oil on canvas, 65X46 cm,
by courtesy of the artist*

The works in the series combine past memories with reality in the present. The different times and realities are represented visually by the framing that separates them, creating a sort of picture within a picture. The past is depicted in the inner section in which objects associated with the artist’s childhood in Tashkent are arranged in something resembling a traditional still-life: a crochet tablecloth, a tallit, a book, a perfume vial, pictures, embellished dishes, pialas, etc. The inner “memory painting” is framed by a two-dimensional pails cloth that also appears to be traditional but can be seen to represent the present, the surface on which the memories are “placed.” In terms of visual language and style, it is actually the inner picture that is more realistic and life-like, while the section portraying the present is two-dimensional, decorative, and at times more abstract or faded than the memory. This contradiction adds to the sense of a Freudian “uncanniness” conveyed by the paintings and attested to how the artist experiences the cultural gap between herself and

Israeli society and between the past and the present, as she states: “I often feel like a stranger, detached. On the other hand, I often feel that I understand reality much better than many people born here. After all, I come from an Eastern, Muslim, culture” (M. Korol, interview, 2018).

A different approach to the duality between indifference and yearning can be found primarily in Korol’s animal paintings, mostly birds and occasionally butterflies. In *Animals and Art*, Perry Hinton (1971) relates the contrast between indifferent nature and human aspirations in depicting animals in art. He identifies two opposing approaches that appear throughout history: animals as an expression of the mystery and spiritual power of nature; and animals as a symbol of human control over the natural world. In periods in which humankind is less confident in its control over nature, such as prehistoric times, the Middle Ages, and the postmodern era, there are more depictions of animals in general, and they are more mystical or religious, portrayed as having more power to influence the life and fate of human beings. The animals in prehistoric cave paintings, for instance, play a central role in daily life, hunting, and ritual. Another example is the animals among the symbols on the garments of shamans and religious leaders in primitive tribes throughout the world and throughout history, where animals are a source of life, as well as a source of mystery and danger, and consequently also a source of faith and the power of nature.

In contrast, in periods when humankind has confidence in its knowledge and control over nature and sees itself as the focus of creation, such as in ancient Rome and Greece, the Renaissance, and the modern era, there are more depictions of people than of animals, particularly in a religious or mystical context. When animals do appear, they are generally associated with human control over the natural world or, in certain circumstances, represent a combination of man and animal in legends relating to the divine, such as Greek mythology.

The birds and butterflies in Korol’s work occupy the line between these two meanings. They are an image of untamed nature, nearly frightening in their indifference to all human desires and aspirations. At the same time, they are also a reification of the freedom of the human imagination and soul, an interpretation often attributed by human civilisations to birds and butterflies as part of how they give meaning to the connection between the human and natural worlds. In Korol’s own words: “Something is frightening about birds that are inaccessible to human beings. They are at a lower level of development than mammals, something between mammals and insects. Our inability to understand or communicate with them is scary and wild” (M. Korol, interview, 2018).

For example, this duality can be found in *After the Rain* (Fig. 5). The composition of the painting is divided into two horizontal sections, in contrast to the vertical canvas. A single tree occupies the righthand portion of the upper section. Its bare branches extend to the left, like human fingers reaching longingly for the horizon. A crow stands silently and still, gazing in the direction in which the branches are pointing. In the background is a desolate hill with scant vegetation against the background of an empty white sky. The scene conveys a sense of loneliness, “the quiet after the storm”, and tense anticipation of what is to come. In the lower section is a lake in which the tree is growing in it is reflected. The movement of the water blurs the details, and the

figure of the bird is entirely absent. The reflection suggests that the water is flowing in the same direction as the branches and the bird's gaze. The painting thus arouses a sense of yearning for the unseen horizon beyond the composition, and is charged with a tense silence, perhaps the artist's personal "waiting for Godot".



Fig. 5. After the Rain, 2010, watercolour on PVC, 80X 200 cm, by courtesy of the artist

The current in the water and the way in which it alters natural shapes resounds in many of Korol's paintings in which she depicts khan-atlas silks (Fig. 6), a traditional fabric that was popular during the 1950s and 1970s. In fact, every Uzbek woman and girl had at least one dress made from this fabric that was never used for men's clothes (Mentges & Shamukhitdinova, 2013).

Khan-atlas silks are associated with an ancient Uzbek myth that also deals with flowing water and the link between the indifference of nature and human beauty and creativity. The legend tells of the Khan of the city of Margilan who wanted to take a fifth wife. He chose the youngest daughter of a poor weaver. The father, fearing for his daughter, fell to his knees and begged the Khan not to take her. The Khan agreed that by the following day, the weaver would bring him something more beautiful than the girl. The distraught weaver sat in despair on the bank of a river. Suddenly, he saw the reflection of the clouds in the water, creating a striking array of colours. Thanking God for the inspiration, he ran home. The next day he returned to the Khan with an exquisite fabric: as light and airy as a cloud, as cool as the mountain air, and as colourful as a rainbow. When the Khan saw it, he asked in awe: "How did you make this?" The weaver replied: "I took green leaves washed by the rain, added tulip petals, the blush of the sunset, the blue of the sky, a bit of sunlight on the water, and the light in the eyes of my beloved daughter and I mixed them together".

The Khan renounced his intention to take the girl as his wife and instead married her with great ceremony to his son. The material has been known as khan-atlas, or khan silk, and is commonly made in one of two versions: vivid colours or black and white (Hays, 2016).

Dream (Fig. 7) shows two crows, again appearing to be waiting silently for some unknown event. As in *After the Rain* (Fig. 5), they are perched on branches gazing toward the unseen horizon. Here, however, instead of moving water below them, the artist depicts a traditional khan-atlas on the tree trunk, symbolising the gap between the natural world and the human attempt to capture its elusive beauty. Domed buildings can be seen in the background, painted in a childish, schematic style in contrast to the birds and the tree. Branches, again resembling human arms, stretch out from the windows, suggesting both abandonment and passionate yearning. Unlike the previous series, which arouses a global sense of longing, the symbols in these paintings are clearly allied with Uzbek culture in general and the artist's memories of her childhood in particular. The patterned silk links the present and past and, like the birds, between nature and human endeavour.



Fig. 7. *Dream*, 2016, oil on canvas, 30X50 cm, by courtesy of the artist

In *Birds of the East* (Fig. 8), the khan-atlas and the birds become the main subject. The painting triggers associations with surrealism on the one hand and Escher's optical illusions on the other. The composition is divided in half by a diagonal running from the lower left quarter of the canvas to the upper right quarter. In the bottom section is a stretched khan-atlas resembling a wall or wave, and in the upper section is what appears to be a stormy abstract sky. Along the line between the two parts of the painting, black and white birds take flight, seeming to fray the fabric as they rise into the air.



*Fig. 8. Birds of the East, 2016, oil on canvas,
60X80 cm, by courtesy of the artist*

This painting, with its surrealistic aura, embodies the essence of Korol's artistic worldview and her work: an ongoing struggle between the past and present, between East and West, between the natural and the man-made, along with an almost desperate attempt to capture the core of the moment which, like the cloth, is constantly unravelling. The birds in her paintings connect the human and civilised with the wild and free. Thus, a single motionless bird stands on the rim of a blue piala, which the artist uses to perform the traditional tea ceremony in her home to this day, and foreboding crows are perched on a tree of dreams adorned by a khan-atlas pattern.

Like her art, Korol's teaching, in which she has engaged since immigrating to Israel, has always involved merging cultures. And in her teaching, as in her paintings, the same two poles can be identified: maintaining a deep personal connection to her students and letting them go by granting them total artistic freedom, an approach she learned, as we have seen, from her Uzbek mentor, Jacob Frumgartz.

Korol's blend of cultures can be traced back as early as 1994 when she began teaching in a primary school for girls in the Arab town of Umm el Fahm. She knew no Arabic and her pupils knew no Russian, so her lessons were largely conducted through visual representations and physical gestures. Despite the language barrier, Korol felt an affinity for the Arab culture and mentality, which reminded her of her childhood home. In 1995, she left Umm et Fahm and started teaching in a new primary school near her home in Hadera. At the same time, with her friend, the architect Olga Levitt, she opened a school of art and architecture for children from primary to high school. This project, which was run in the form and spirit of Frumgartz's studio, was closed in 2011 with the death of Levitt. Korol, then in her forties, suffered a severe crisis, abandoning her work in the studio and the school and moving to distant

Kfar Hasidim, a religious town where she still teaches. She began by giving weekly middle-school enrichment classes, and a year later, at the request of her students, she instituted an art major in the girls' high school.

Conclusions

Just as her paintings utter polarities and complexities unique to immigrants in Israeli actuality, so does her art teaching for high school students embody the core of those complexities. For Korol, teaching art was the realisation of a dream, perhaps because, once again, as a secular teacher in a religious school, she got to pick up the thread that runs through her life: the merging of cultures and the opportunity to bridge between the indifference of reality and the tender soul and aspirations of her students. They, too, share in her experience of dislocation and alienation, as most of the girls are new immigrants to Israel who also had to contend with difficulties adjusting and a sense of estrangement from their new surroundings. Working with Korol helps them to cope with these feelings and, like her, to transform difference into uniqueness and the other into the centre of focus in its own right. For Korol, her teaching opens a window into the inner world of her students, with all the complexity of the young psyche going through the invariably challenging period of adolescence. It aids her in dealing with her past memories, the uprooting and alienation imposed upon her, and the need to belong without erasing her original identity.

References

- Eisenstadt, S. N. (1967). *Israeli society: background, development and problems*. Magnes Press [in Hebrew].
- Hays, J. (Comp.). (2016, April). *Clothes and Beauty in Uzbekistan*. Facts and Details. https://factsanddetails.com/central-asia/Uzbekistan/sub8_3d/entry-4716.html [in English].
- Hinton, P. R. (1971). *Animals in Art* [Painting]. New York [in English].
- King, D. C. (2006). *Cultures of the World: Kyrgyzstan*. Cavendish Square [in English].
- Levin, H. (2004). *What Does the Bird Care*. Tel Aviv [in English].
- Mentges, G., & Shamukhitdinova, L. (Eds.). (2013). *Modernity of Tradition: Uzbek Textile Culture Today*. Waxmann [in English].
- Roniger, L., & Feige, M. (1992). From Pioneer to Freier: The Changing Models of Generalized Exchange in Israel. *European Journal of Sociology*, 33(2), 280–307 [in English].
- Royle, N. (2003). *The Uncanny*. Manchester University Press [in English].
- Rubinstein, A. (1977). *To be a Free People*. Schocken [in Hebrew].
- Sternson, T. (2007). *Mariana Korol. Touching the Nature of Things* [Exhibition]. The Museum of Jewish Culture, Bratislava, Slovakia [in English].
- Talbot Rice, T., Kramrisch, S., & Snellgrove, D. L. (n. d.). *Central Asian arts. Visual Arts*. Britannica. Retrieved January 4, 2018, from <https://www.britannica.com/art/Central-Asian-arts/Visual-arts#ref13976> [in English].
- The Uncanny*. (n.d.). Tate. Retrieved February 10, 2018, from <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/t/uncanny> [in English].
- Zuckerman, M. (2001). *On the Fabrication of Israelism: Myths and Ideologies in a Society of Conflict*. Resling [in Hebrew].

ЩО ПТАШЦІ ДО ТОГО?! БАЙДУЖІСТЬ ТА ПРАГНЕННЯ В МИСТЕЦТВІ ТА ПЕДАГОГІЧНІЙ ПРАКТИЦІ МАР'ЯНИ КОРОЛЬ

Топельберг Ноам

*Кандидат наук з історії мистецтва,
ORCID: 0000-0002-6729-1995, e-mail: noamtopelberg@gmail.com,
Університет Бар-Ілан,
Рамат Ган, Ізраїль*

Анотація

Мета статті — з'ясувати особливості застосування суперечливої подвійності в картинах і методах навчання Мар'яни Король у контексті минулого та сьогодення. Методологія дослідження базується на принципах комплексності, методах загальнонаукової компаративістики, формально-стилістичного та мистецтвознавчого аналізу. Наукова новизна полягає у виявленні засобів, які М. Король застосовує для збирання та злиття віддалених і різних культурних елементів у єдине ціле. Висновки. Результати дослідження висвітлюють феномен художниці та викладачки мистецтва М. Король. Її роботи є аномальним перетинанням узбецької, західної та ізраїльської культур, які злилися воедино, сформувавши візуальну мову та смисли художниці. Той факт, що більшу частину свого дорослого життя вона викладала мистецтво іммігрантам і представникам меншин різного віку в Ізраїлі, додає ще один вимір, оскільки типові ізраїльські тонкощі ідентичності втілені в її роботах і педагогічній філософії. Критичне прочитання та аналіз витончених і унікальних художніх рішень М. Король, запропонованих у дослідженні, відображає суперечливу внутрішню реальність, характерну для ізраїльської культури та суспільства. Запропоновано аналіз двох прошарків. З одного боку, прочитання денотативної, іконографічної та візуальної мови, що виявляється у виборі М. Король поєднати образи з давньої узбецької традиції із західними способами зображення та модерністською візуальною мовою. З іншого боку, конотативний шар, який заряджає роботи повторюваною напругою між двома полюсами, символізує дихотомію в ізраїльській ідентичності — байдужість і прагнення. Ці полюси переплетені в її житті, творчості та навчанні з моменту імміграції до Ізраїлю.

Ключові слова: Мар'яна Король; узбецьке мистецтво; ізраїльське мистецтво; ізраїльська культура; викладання мистецтва; Якоб Фрумгарц



This is an open access journal, and all published articles are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0.