

## Octogenarian artist Hava Raucher sets out her stall

• By BARRY DAVES

Things are getting more than a little linguistically and conceptually muddled in this PC-compliant, woke-sensitive abrogating world of ours. To a greater or lesser degree we are all getting into what the late pithy if not downright rabble-rousing stand-up comedian Georg Carlin called "soft speak."

The phrase "a little bit," for example, springs to mind whenever we want to talk about something we fear may cause some societal etiquette transgression, when, in fact, the situation is far more serious.

Hava Raucher has no such qualms. The 80-year-old painter and sculptor's new show, at Artists' House in Tel Aviv, is a visually, cerebrally, and emotionally stirring affair which conveys the artist's no-nonsense view of such burning and moving areas of life as gender identity, her own offspring, and the horrors of October 7.

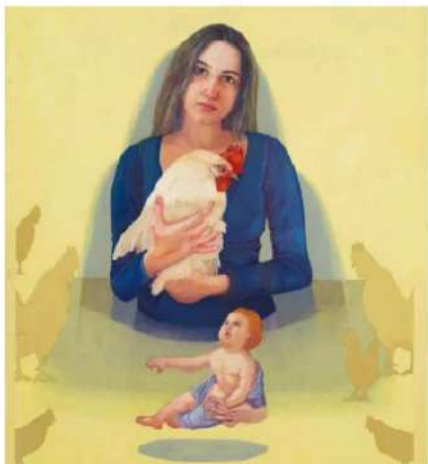
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Raucher, who was born in a deportee camp in Bulgaria during World War II, is not afraid to use good old basic expressions, and means exactly what she says. When I deferentially inquire whether her work today is informed by her "chronological progress," she kindly puts me in my place. "I am an old woman," she chuckles. "You can call me old. That is not a derogatory term. I much prefer for people to call me an old woman, rather than a senior. What's a senior?" she laughs, with eyebrows well and truly raised.

It didn't take long to warm



TWO OF Hava Raucher's paintings, on display at the Artists' House in Tel Aviv through the end of the week. (Daniel Hanoch)

to this diminutive, softly feisty woman, who is determined to have her say on all sorts of issues that many of us cautiously skirt around.

She has a firm grasp on her personal and sociopolitical environment, and we kick off from close to home.

"These are my granddaugh-



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ters," she informs me, with more than a hint of pride, as we shuffle up to a couple of paintings, each with a portrait of a fetching young woman set against a yellow background. Both exude a cozy ambience with a nod to the evolution of the art form along important junctures in art history and references to mythological lore.

Raucher may approach contemporary subject matter in her own singular 21st-century manner, but she is fully aware of her place along the discipline's timeline and the way that feeds into how she goes about work.

She is also perfectly happy to take a somewhat iconoclastic potshot at iconic works of yesteryear, dragging them into the here and now and making them more accessible in the

process.

"They look confident," Raucher notes with palpable naches. They do indeed. And there is a modicum of sardonicism in there, too, as well as a parodic element. *Girl with Hen* shows one of Raucher's granddaughters contentedly holding the eponymous crest-

ed creature. "She actually has a pet hen," Raucher laughs. The woman clearly has a sense of humor and appears to have passed on some of her funny bone genes down the familial line.

When you manage to drag your gaze away from the young woman's compelling facial expression, you begin to notice other hen shapes, in the form of silhouettes dotted around the canvas. Now there's food for thought which gets the viewer pondering the wider aesthetic hinterland beyond the portrait's physical confines.

Several of the paintings have small labels with wall text and tiny reproductions alongside, which shed light on Raucher's compositional source of inspiration and her deep reach into the discipline's substratum.

Berman goes on: "An additional layer of meaning arises from the fact that, unlike Jesus' mother, this girl's maternal mission is not about child-



There is a cherublike figure suspended in the air beneath the central figure, looking up with a mixture of fondness and entreaty. That is a direct allusion to the early Renaissance work cited in the small explanatory addendum, Sandro Botticelli's *Madonna del Magnificat*, from 1481.

It is a succinct example of Raucher's ability to convey the zeitgeist of the day fueled by her knowledge of art history. As they say, you can't know where you are headed if you don't have a good idea of whence you come.

"The baby gazes up at the girl holding the hen, much like the infant Jesus looks at his mother when she wears the crown of Mother of God," Berman expounds. "The girl embodies the Mother of All Living, a secular Madonna, protecting animals and embracing even those who typically consume." That is, except for us vegans.

Berman goes on: "An additional layer of meaning arises from the fact that, unlike Jesus' mother, this girl's maternal mission is not about child-

birth but about safeguarding nature." Now that's a heartening salubrious message if ever I heard one, and an encouraging take on Christianity.

Yellow provides a constant chromic thread across all the oil paintings in the anteroom of the upper floor; and as you swivel from the granddaugh-

ter portraits, you come across a charming character lolling around happily in a bathtub

like an outsized infant insouciantly waiting to be washed down by his mom. Apparently, that wasn't too far off the mark with, once again, Raucher taking a dip into historical artistic seams.

"Efraim [Raucher's long-standing life partner] sits in a pail - his mother's metal laundry basin - either to bathe or to set sail," Berman notes. "Next to him is the figure of [18th-century French political theorist] Jean-Paul Marat, inspired by Jacques-Louis David's neoclassical painting *The Death of Marat* [from 1793]. In David's artwork, Marat, who was stabbed while bathing, is portrayed as a martyr and a pure champion of

freedom who led the French Revolution and became a victim of his enemies."

Raucher plays on that theme in her very own style. "In Raucher's version, Marat accompanies Efraim on his journey in the basin, serving as a sort of guardian angel," says Berman. "Once again, the quoted figure is tormented, while Efraim smiles. Efraim's vitality and smile are stronger than the presence of death around him, both in the visible horizon and behind him with his angelic companion."

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RAUCHER'S OFFERING is shot through with quirky humor, but there is a serious side to her oeuvre, too. That comes across in the way she addresses aging and gender delineation, particularly in the dwarflike sculptors of naked men and women in the main display space, the majority of whom are in the - pardon the term - senior citizen league. For Raucher it is more about achieving a sense of oneness and closure rather than getting into the nitty-gritty of personal sexual preferences.

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"The differences between men and women become a little blurred with advancing age," she posits. "There is also the issue of transgenderism among young people." Raucher goes with the identity flexing flow. "I don't highlight the sex organs. They are there, but there is something about a man who is a bit feminine, and a woman who is also a bit of a man which I feel offers completeness."

There are few artists today that don't have the events and aftermath of October 7 somewhere in their tool kit. Raucher addresses that head-on, but seasoned with gentleness.

She exudes plenty of the latter, but you feel there is a certain steeliness in her personality makeup and a determination to have her say.

Feminism and the way older women are generally tossed onto the societal scrap heap when they no longer satisfy generally accepted parameters of physical beauty are examined in a group of cast-iron Amazons who look to be dancing around or protecting a bloodied truncated female torso. There is patent strength in the women's stance, particularly in the powerful-looking hands that seem to have been borrowed from some other era's goddesses (I mean, on, out seasoned with gentleness.

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Raucher says she basically taught herself to sculpt and came to it later in life. It shows. There is a compelling and alluring simplicity to the sculptures' composition, and they somehow manage to impart a great sense of presence and meaning.

Youth, the horrors of military conflict, mythology, death and life and much betwixt, it's all there at Artists' House.

"On the Living and the Dead" closes on November 16. For more information: <https://www.hava-raucher.com>