

Influencer Tour

Shir Cohen

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Influencer Tour, Shir Cohen, 2024
Oil on polycotton, 245x145cm

A few months after October 7th I started seeing well-known Israeli social media influencers publishing vlogs from the places that were attacked. Those were the results of real tours facilitated by the state of Israel. They were joined by international media, and mostly international politicians. These vlogs are all available to watch as internal Israeli propaganda, and some even repeat debunked misinformation that was widespread in the months after the attack, focusing on atrocities allegedly committed by Hamas. The vlogs had much in common, and as someone who keeps a close look on hasbara (a Hebrew word that literally means “explaining”, and used to denote external Israeli propaganda), the aesthetics showed a marked change. The journalists in bulletproof vests and helmets were new, as we usually see this look from Palestinian journalists. There were also the tour leaders: some residents of the attacked towns and kibbutzim led them, rather than the usual view of an army general. Israel was projecting itself as less strong, less professionalized, and as a country still recovering from humiliation and disaster.

Other residents of the attacked towns protested the tours being conducted while their own life was not able to return to normal, and in some cases, with the government ignoring their needs. Both types of survivors were still clearly traumatized, and not necessarily media prepared. They were then edited into formats that would fit YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, so that the influencers would not only tell their stories but also tell the world “the truth about Israel”, and specifically propagandise Israel’s atrocities in Gaza as a correct and acceptable response to the October 7th attacks.

The characters in the painting are all based on Israeli media personality types- the cameraman, the young influencer, a settlement spokeswoman, a muscular field journalist. All, including the victim telling his story, are based on friends and family. Nearly two years after the fact, the painting still evokes my complicated relationship with Israeli society, the way it retraumatizes victims in order to gain media sympathy, and the cover this type of operations give to atrocities committed throughout Palestine.

“Influencer Tour” was part of the duo exhibition “Scene Study” that took place in miłość gallery in January 2025, along with prints by Gosia Koldraszewska that portrayed inappropriate tourist photography in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and one selfie of Israeli soldiers in a residential house in Gaza.

Artist Bio

Shir Cohen holds a BFA from the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem and moved from there to London in 2018, to pursue a Painting MA at the Royal College of Art, with support from the Clore-Bezalel foundation. Their work often deals with queerness, disability, and scientific racism, but currently focuses on Israeli propaganda, starting in 2024 with the duo show Scene Study in miłość gallery with Gosia Koldraszewska.

Shir has exhibited projects based on Jewish and antisemitic literature, including a series of pictorial tapestries based on the Oskar Panizza short story “The Operated Jew”, an artist book inspired by the Breslov tale “The Indik”, and video work featuring readings from the neo-Nazi novel “Hunter”.

A 2023 duo show in Huxley-Parlour Gallery with Olivia Sterling, Rage Comics, focused on male victimization myths as perpetuated through incel culture and the online manosphere. Taking the form of a butcher’s shop, the artists worked on imagery related to meat, animals, and a constant competition between men and between genders. Building on a dog-eat-dog world of flesh and judgement. For this, Shir created paintings, works on paper, embroideries, and soft sculptures, which enveloped the gallery space.

Shir is currently working on a solo project for miłość gallery, based both on Israeli propaganda and Shir’s love of opera. The work will deal with the hard questions that come from loved ones being supportive, or simply indifferent to the genocide, and how can that be dealt with, emotionally and practically, by people of conscious.