

Living Atop a Powder Keg

■ Israeli artist's work brings the reality of tragedies to life but also portrays the cabaret lifestyle some countrymen assume to deal with fears.

By NANCY KAPITANOFF
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Israeli artist Gretty Rotman-Rubinstein wants people to understand the dichotomous nature of life in Israel.

In her recent series of paintings, "Gretty R: Life Is Not a Cabaret," on view at the University of Judaism's Platt Gallery, she reminds us that the Gulf War and the Middle East peace talks are not abstract incidents for Israelis, but real events that affect their daily lives. On the other hand, her art also says that like anybody else, Israelis know how to leave their troubles behind and have a good time.

Reminiscent of German Expressionist paintings done between the world wars



Show organizer
Sagi Vas.

that depict nightclub life in Germany, several of her paintings portray people dressed up and out on the town, socializing in cafes. Within each work, these colorful images have been juxtaposed with murky, black-and-white-toned likenesses of gas masks, Patriot missiles, bombs and politicians.

"If you come as a tourist to Israel, it's like a cabaret, especially Tel Aviv. People are on the beach, or dancing and singing in coffeehouses at night," said Sagi Vas, an



"Waiting for the Peace," above, and "Life Is Not a Cabaret II" are included in the exhibit of works by Gretty Rotman-Rubinstein at the University of Judaism.



Israeli artist who lives in Los Angeles and organized the show for the Platt Gallery.

"But it's all an act, because life in the morning becomes totally different there. At 6 a.m., they get the news, about the peace talks, about violence, about their destiny. Gretty is showing a way of life, a way of thinking. Life is a cabaret in Israel

unless you listen to the news."

Gretty (as she refers to herself) was born in Romania in 1947, studied art at the Grigorescu Art School in Bucharest and participated in youth art exhibits in Moscow, London, Paris and Rome. She immigrated to Israel in 1964, and lives in Jerusalem.

Where and When

Exhibit: "Gretty R: Life Is Not a Cabaret."

Location: University of Judaism's Platt Gallery, 15600 Mulholland Drive, Los Angeles.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday to Thursday, and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday, through Oct. 26.

Call: (310) 476-9777, ext. 276.

Her 1991 mixed media sketches take viewers into the sealed rooms that Israelis retreated to during Iraq's Scud missile attacks on them.

"They were all done while she was in a sealed room during the Scud attacks," said Jack Flier, chairman of the university's fine arts council.

"A Wall" is dedicated to a man killed by a Scud. As we learn from the artist's statement accompanying the work, "I didn't know him. He loved my paintings.

He had them on the wall. A Scud destroyed his wall, my paintings and him."

From the illustration of dogs in "The Sealed Room," we know that Gretty and other Israelis brought their pets into the rooms with them. Vas said they put gas masks on them when they could. The animals, like babies, were frightened by them, and fought to get them off.

"This was the most terrifying war for the Israelis," Vas said. "The most horrifying thing for them was sitting in a sealed room and not knowing what would happen."

Poetic comments, written in English by Gretty with the assistance of an American collector of her work, are also posted by each of her paintings. "Waiting for the Peace" presents the artist with her mother, and this thought: "Me and mother/Me—little/She knows everything/I want to remain little."

"Life Is Not a Cabaret I" comes with the words: "When in the cabaret know that serious businessmen of war won't let this peace survive." However, "Life Is Not a Cabaret II" recommends: "Ignore the news/Erase the clues/Turn on the lights/The party is on."

The note with the very austere "The Peace Makers at Work," which shows solemn-looking men surrounding a large rectangular table, tells us that it was "painted at the beginning of the peace conference in Madrid. The first day of hope!"

"Her work is optimistic," Vas said. "If you are not optimistic in Israel, you are dead. Pessimism is not part of the Israeli attitude."

Nancy Kapitanoff writes regularly about art for The Times.