

Stopping to Smell the Roses: *FLOWERS* At Expo Tel Aviv



A section of the *FLOWERS* exhibition, April 25th, 2024.

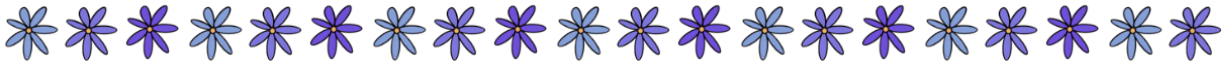
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For weeks, my small town of Ra'anana has been in bloom. The sudden warming of the temperature has brought with it a burst of colours and blossoms, with every tree and bush showing off its flowers as summer rapidly approaches. To be honest, I have never been knowledgeable about botany or really even considered flowers beyond their aesthetic appeal. However, I have become an amateur anthophile in the past couple of months thanks to my friend Claudia. Claudia, an *olah hadasha* from South Africa, is the biggest lover of flowers I know. On our near daily walks around her neighbourhood with her dog Milky, she names and describes every flower we see, helping me create my very own plant encyclopedia. We stop to photograph brilliant Bougainvilleas in all colours, we pose Milky in fields of Lupines, and I listen as Claudia tells me stories of her garden in South Africa.

And so, when I saw an advertisement for *FLOWERS*, the largest flower exhibition in Israel, I immediately sent it to Claudia. As we sat together in her home the day after the Pesach seder, we talked

about the exhibition. “Is it real?” she asked me. “Of course it is!” I laughed. We bought a ‘family’ ticket and made plans to go.

FLOWERS is the largest flower exhibition in Israel. For eight fleeting days, over two million flowers are painstakingly arranged into a vast array of sculptural designs, some very dramatic, some quite whimsical. Created by Haya Aloni and multimedia designer Gil Taichman, the exhibition features native Israeli flowers as well as flowers from around the world.¹ The sculptures and displays are organized into a myriad of themes, including Animals, Space and Flowers at Night. Although the exhibition will have been finished by the time this article is published, I nonetheless hope that readers enjoy my thoughts on the works, my experience at the exhibition, and the selection of images I have provided here.



On April 25th, we arrived at Expo Tel Aviv. I walked through the entrance with Claudia and her sister Roxane as we searched for Gad, Claudia’s partner. It was crowded, and I was shocked to see so many people having turned out for a flower exhibition; that is, until I spotted a sign pointing the way to a Hanan Ben-Ari concert being held in the exhibition hall next to us! *That makes more sense* I thought to myself, *no way all these people are here to see flowers*. However, as we made our way inside the *FLOWERS* exhibition, I was proven wrong. It was so full I could barely move. Visitors of every age milled about, all eager to enjoy the explosion of colours and floral scents that awaited us.



The Earth and the Moon, *FLOWERS*. April 25th, 2024.

A cool mist filled the air as we walked into the first section of the exhibition, Animals. In front of us was a staircase with lights and flowers draped in a canopy over visitors, guiding them further inside. On either side of the staircase were large sculptures of snakes, butterflies, and lions and zebras. In the centre of the first hall a peacock, its tail made of a ‘quilt’ of purple and pink flowers, had dozens of visitors

¹ “*FLOWERS* floral extravaganza lands in Tel Aviv on Passover to showcase 2 million blossoms”, Ynet, February 22, 2024. <https://www.ynetnews.com/travel/article/ryoizdmna>

lined up to be photographed with it. The sculptures were seemingly ‘woven’ together with flowers from all over the world, a combination of places and colours that resulted in stunning, living, breathing pieces of art. Some flowers were considered rare enough to be displayed on their own, placed under the careful watch of security guards, small placards placed next to them with their names in Hebrew and English. As we walked through Space and then Flowers at Night, the exhibition added UV lights and sound effects to highlight the works in new and creative ways.

As much as I loved the flowers, I admit to being equally, if not more, taken by the full representation of Israel laid out before me in the crowd. I saw religious girls posing next to the flowers for *shidduch* (matchmaking) photographs, Arab-Israeli families corralling their children past animal sculptures, and Russian immigrants live-streaming the exhibition to family and friends over WhatsApp. As I watched them, I thought of our small foursome, our ‘family’ ticket unit, and where we fit into this mosaic of Israel, here, part of the display at *FLOWERS*. After months of constantly, *relentlessly*, hearing about what divides Israeli society, it was refreshing to see Israeli coexistence in action – even if it was just a shared appreciation for a sculpture of a peacock made from peonies.

Of course, I also thought about the war. It is impossible to go into a crowded space in Israel and not think of what to do if the air-raid siren goes off – here, most likely, we would have had to lie on the floor and cover our heads. I was unable to shake off the unease and discomfort I have with crowds and busy places, despite the hard work of the exhibition to distract from all that was happening outside.



Sunflowers arranged into a yellow ribbon for the hostages, *FLOWERS*. April 25th, 2024.

After walking through the themed exhibition rooms, all carefully set up with mesmerizing light and sound displays, we came to a short hallway with sunflowers on either side. At the end of the hallway, in its own corner sat a canvas with a yellow ribbon made of sunflowers. This was the first and only reference to our situation in the exhibition, and I welcomed it. The atmosphere around the piece was quiet, and I took a picture quickly, hesitant to linger on it too long. An elderly religious couple posed in front of the work, their faces somber. I looked again at the ribbon and thought of the news of the day before, the video of hostage Hersch Goldberg-Polin that Hamas had published. After a few minutes with the ribbon, we continued to walk and were, to our relief, transported far away from Gaza into an elaborate rendering of Swan Lake.



FLOWERS, April 25th, 2024.



Despite the title of this article, there were in fact no roses in any of the *FLOWERS* pieces. However, the concept of ‘stopping to smell the roses’, in the sense of taking a moment to appreciate beauty and life, is one which I feel fits the exhibition. As we made our way through the sculptures, I felt an undeniable sense of people wanting to take a moment just to enjoy the beauty of the flowers, and to take a collective breath from the stress of the past six months. The experience reminded me of when I went and saw the kalaniot at the Megiddo Airfield after seeing the bullet-torn photographs of Nahal Oz. A welcome respite from the ugliness of current events.

There were moments where I was put off by the exaggerated animal noises and flashing lights in the exhibition rooms, the critic in me taking over. After months of looking at art loaded with intense emotions of fear, pain, grief, and death, I was unused to just looking at a flower and seeing a flower. But, after a few rooms, I felt myself relax. Here, a flower was just a flower. A beautiful thing in its own right, no need to think too hard about it.

After finishing the exhibition, I saw many people leaving the gift-shop with bouquets of flowers. I wondered if they had bought them in the hope of recreating in their own homes the same sense of peace and beauty from the *FLOWERS* pieces. I thought of the small bunch of roses I had sitting at home in my kitchen, placed with the same wish and intent.

Official website of the *FLOWERS* Exhibition (In Hebrew): <https://www.flowers2024.co.il/>