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# Like psychedelic drugs, Israeli artist seeks to help people escape reality

With his penchant for vibrant colors, Ron Agam recalls his famous father, but the son is determined to forge his own path as a painter.

By Haim Handwerker | Dec. 4, 2013 | 10:16 PM

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Ron Agam's works call to my mind his father's penchant for vibrant colors. Photo by Courtesy

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Harvey Weinstein, co-chairman of the Weinstein Company, a multimedia production company, and one the most powerful people in Hollywood, recently acquired two works by Agam. Not renowned Israeli artist Yaacov Agam, a founding member of school of kinetic art, but of his son, Ron.

"I see a lot of vision and sensitivity in Ron's works," Weinstein says. "I love the feeling his work gives me. It has things that remind me of Salvador Dali when he was young."

Weinstein has hung the works by the younger Agam in his office. "I plan to buy more of his work in the future," he adds. "Yes, I know who Ron's father is, but I don't own anything by the father. However, I have works by

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the son. I just love them. I met Ron a few years ago via friends, though the decision to buy these works wasn't because of the friendship but because I just love what he does. I wouldn't have bought them otherwise."

François Delattre, the French ambassador to the United States, also has a work of Ron Agam's in his office in Washington. The work is an interpretation by Agam of the French flag.

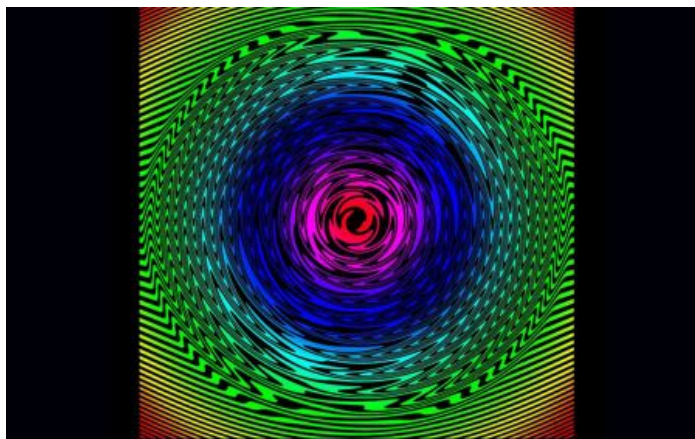
"I consider Ron Agam as one of the leading and most important artists of his generation," says Delattre. "No doubt about it. The French flag that he painted as a gift to France is a masterpiece and it's hanging in my office in Washington. I'm as proud to show it to my visitors as the masterpiece by [Pierre] Bonnard that we have in our residence there."

Ron Agam, 55, started painting only three years ago; in the past he had focused on photography. Dozens of his works hang throughout his sprawling studio apartment in Long Island City, a neighborhood in the New York borough of Queens, and others are in various stages of completion. He also has an apartment in Manhattan, but hasn't been spending much time there lately.

"Once I was crazy about Manhattan; today I can't stand it," Agam says. "Manhattan is too noisy and commercial for me. I live here and enjoy the surrounding energy. At night it's very quiet here. Everybody leaves. This building becomes almost deserted."

He says he works 16-18 hours a day. "This is more than during any other time in my life," he says. "Today I'm living a full life. But you have to remember that I'm a beginner. I've been painting for only three years; I'm like a baby as a painter. As happy as I am about what's happening to me, I'm also my own number-one critic.

"My works aren't in museums yet, but you can find them in galleries. People are already buying them in the United States, Western Europe and a lot in China and Asian countries. Many buyers are wealthy people. A billionaire from Uzbekistan bought three of my works in Hong Kong."



Ron Agam's work. Ron Agam

Janet Lehr, who manages the Vered Gallery in East Hampton, where many of New York's wealthy vacation, exhibited Agam's work last Memorial Day and the show was a great success, she says. She views Agam as a very talented artist who will have a successful career. When asked why no critiques have yet been written about his work, she has a very simple

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explanation: Agam is still a beginning artist using innovative techniques, and it takes time to win the critics' attention.

Agam's works, done on wood and canvas, are very colorful, usually contain geometric shapes, and around half have been produced with the help of a computer. Some are three-dimensional, among them holograms. He classifies his work as abstract, geometric and minimalist.

"People take drugs to flee reality," he says. "What I want is that people who look at my work can escape reality for a while."

I remark that the style of his work reminds me of his father's art.

"In its colorfulness, absolutely," he replies. "I also have kinetic works. But if you go a little deeper, you see that there are significant differences and that there is no connection between what my father does and what I do. My father makes kinetic art. In my case only some of the works are kinetic, others are optical and minimalist and contain optical illusions. Nevertheless, I guess I learned a thing or two from my father. I couldn't be Ron Agam if I hadn't first been Yaacov Agam's son."

He was born in Paris, the eldest of Yaacov and Clila Agam's three children. In his early years the family divided its time between Paris and Rehovot, though at some point they moved back to Israel. At the end of fifth grade, he returned to live in Paris.

"My father was good to me," he recalls. "Initially he had time for me. I watched him work. He took me to galleries. We visited friends and collectors. He encouraged me to create. But later he had less time."

After high school he started studying architecture in Paris, but at 19 he moved to New York to study finance at New York University. For years he tried his luck in business. He was involved, for example, in a failed attempt to market Maccabee beer in New York; he also worked in real estate in Chicago and even owned a publishing house and gallery in Soho. In the early 1990s he decided to turn his hobby, photography, into a profession. Buyers of his works, which focused on [Jerusalem's Me'a She'arim](#) neighborhood, included Madonna.

He is currently working on a major exhibition in New York scheduled to open in 12 to 18 months. Until then he will show this January in Hong Kong, during the winter he will exhibit in Palm Beach and next year he'll have a show in California. Bernard-Henri Levy and architect Richard Meier wrote warm words about the works that were shown in his previous exhibition in New York two years ago.

"My goal is to create a unique place in the art world for myself within 10 to 15 years," he says. "I think I'm doing something very, very unusual."

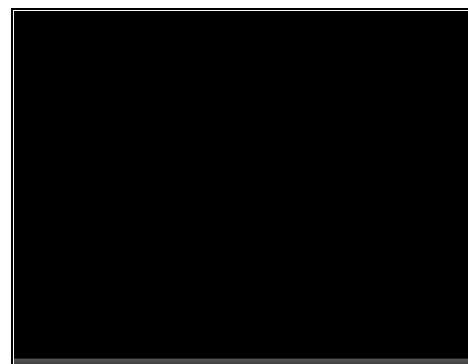
*What does your father say about your work?*

"My father surprised me and came directly from Israel to the opening of the exhibition in New York two years ago. He said nice things. However, you need to know that my father does not come from a culture of giving compliments."

*The name Agam helps?*

"I must be honest and say that the answer is yes. Among the people who buy are people I am associated with, and I do know a lot of people. But I guess there are people who buy because of the name."

He started painting at a time when he felt depressed and anxious. "I shut



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myself up for six-seven months and created 20 paintings. Surprisingly, I began to like it. All my insecurity about my lack of talent for painting disappeared. You have to understand that painting was like forbidden territory for me. When you have a father like mine, you think twice, three times and more before you dare to paint.

“I grew up with a father who was extraordinarily successful and achieved, and still achieves, international recognition. Even today, at the age of 85, he has a very strong personality, and he ‘crushed’ me with the force of his personality. I have to be careful using that term, though. There was no deliberate act nor any desire to do me harm, but that’s what happened.

“What happened to me with my father is not unusual for children of famous artists. Few such kids come out perfectly fine. When you’re the son of Yaacov Agam, when you see the talent and creativity and the achievements of this man and you try to find your own path in life, it doesn’t matter what you want to do, it will always be hard for a young person. It took me many years to find my own way. Now, at age 55, I’ve found it. I called my friends, I showed them the work and they told me it was good and suggested I do an exhibition.”

At our first meeting Agam was wearing a pink shirt, green pants and orange sandals. Even if he has a somewhat agonized look, life is smiling on him now, mostly because he’s in love: He has a girlfriend named Adriana, who is 26 and originally from [Ukraine](#).

*Are you in contact with your father?*

“Yes, I’m in touch with him almost every day. I need to know he’s okay. He’s 85 and has the energy of a child. He jumps from Paris to Israel and then to Taiwan and elsewhere. He continues to create and they are now building a museum for his work in Rishon Letzion. But I’m nervous about the future. Don’t forget, he’s not a young man, and people don’t live forever.”

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