



Some of Refaella Shir's drawings could have been created in another era. (Photos: Refaella Shir)

Towering squills are among author Meir Shalev's favorite flowers.



Lofty hollyhocks add height and pastel shades.

The natural way

• By BARRY DAVIS

There is something delightfully old-world about the illustrations to Meir Shalev's latest tome, *My Wild Garden*. The book, which came out in March, has been selling like hotcakes, while the originals of the pictorial complements can now be viewed by the public in all their glorious full size at an exhibition that opened at the Eretz Israel Museum in Ramat Aviv on November 3 and will close on December 1.

My Wild Garden is an intimate look at the patch of ground surrounding Shalev's Galilean home, in all its sprawling floral glory. Naturally, such a definitively aesthetic story line simply begged to be given the full, visually artistic treatment, and that was right royally provided by artist Refaella Shir.

Despite the fact that Shir has been a resident of Montreal for the past decade and a half, she has intimate knowledge of the garden in question and also knows the author pretty well. Shir is Shalev's younger sister and a veteran of the global art scene, with an exhibition bio that features showings in Spain, Canada and Israel, taking in etchings, drawings and paintings.

Even with that professional backdrop, her work on *My Wild Garden* was a departure for Shir. "I don't consider myself an illustrator,"

she declares. "I did not work in illustration before this."

Judging by the works on the walls in Ramat Aviv, and even by the smaller versions in the book, inexperience notwithstanding Shir did pretty well with the debut assignment, producing around 40 sketches and watercolor paintings that convey the elemental freshness that abounds in her sibling's rural residence.

"I related to the work on the book as if I was creating sketches and paintings. I didn't treat them like illustrations," she recalls.

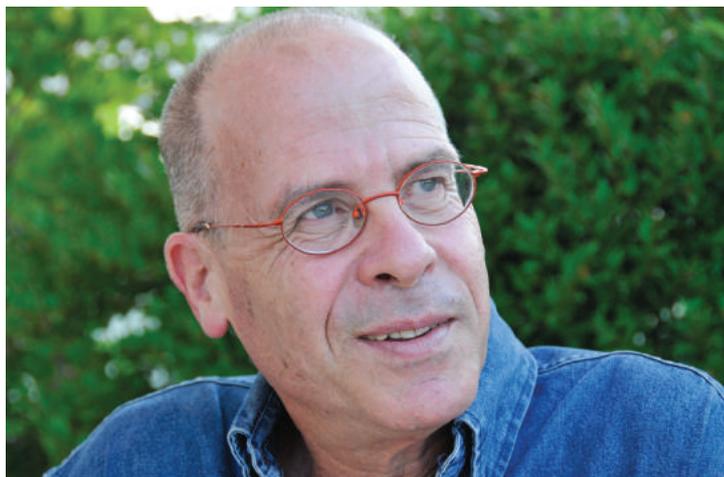
Familiarity with the source aside, Shir also took an ethereal and as objective an approach as possible to the job in hand. "I completely detached myself from the text. I didn't follow the text as I worked on the paintings and sketches. I didn't read it as I went along with my work. Meir sent me the text in installments, which I read almost in their entirety."

But that was before Shir knew she'd be adding the pictorial elements of the book. "When Meir suggested that I 'illustrate' the book - I'll call them illustrations for want of a better word - I immediately said I'd do it. I knew I'd have a lot of fun with it."

Shir felt she needed to take a step or two away from the story line in order to get her part of the project done to the best of her



A delightful early spring addition to the garden's polychromatic floral splendor.



Shalev: His wild garden. (PR)

ability. “I didn’t read the text as I created the illustrations. That was intentional. I wanted to relate a parallel story. I wanted to augment Meir’s writing, to add new information to the work. I didn’t want to note what already existed. I wanted to add a new stratum.” It must be said that Shir managed that with aplomb.

Many born in the UK or who brought up their own kids in Blighty will be familiar with the work of children’s writer and illustrator Beatrix Potter. Her best-known book is about the adventures of Peter Rabbit, who mischievously sneaked into a forbidden garden to sink his incisors into some succulent veggies.

Some of Shir’s sketches of her brother’s patch, especially one with a wheelbarrow and another which has a bunch of plant pots, are more than a little reminiscent of Potter’s late-Victorian, early-Edwardian pastoral style.

While cognizant of the British artist’s work, Shir rejects suggestions that she may have been inspired, even unwittingly, by Potter’s seminal illustrations. “I think Beatrix Potter’s illustrations engage in the imaginary, while I addressed real life. I painted a specific place which actually exists.”

Then again, as an artist, Shir assumes a certain license with the tangible facts on the Galilean ground. “I may have added the odd element from my own imagination,” she admits. “Maybe my work came out ‘more beautiful’ than the original. I don’t think that’s the case, because I didn’t sit there, in the garden, to paint. I painted from a great distance.”

You can say that again. Almost 9,000 kilometers of land and sea lie between Shir’s adopted Canadian hometown and Shalev’s rambling rustic domicile in Alonei Abba, not far from Kiryat Tivon. “On the other hand, I know the place very well,” she insists. “It’s a place I can easily recreate in my mind.”

Did the physical distance impact on the manner of execution? Did the geographic divide allow Shir to approach the subject matter more dispassionately and hence produce a more professional end result? Surprisingly, the opposite was the case.

“I think I would have made the illustrations more objective had I sat in the garden and done them there,” she posits. “I think the distance was to my benefit for my work on the book. It was simply more comfortable for me to work from Montreal. I could focus more easily.”

It also helped Shir bond with her native country. “I would go to work every morning and it would bridge the gap and bring me back to Israel. It was a very emotional journey for me, particularly with the sketches.”



Shir’s sketches evoke a sense of yesteryear bucolic tranquility.



Shir ‘didn’t read the text as [she] created the illustrations. That was intentional.’ (Sachi Gerlitz)

The monochromatic drawings are a wonder to behold and suggest some hidden paradise betwixt rich foliage and blissfully wayward vegetation. The sketches invite the observer to part the branches, dart between the scrub and the flowers, and take a stroll around the grounds.

As Shalev says in the book, he was drawn to the house and in particular the garden, and he knew from the outset that he wanted to nurture something that tended toward its untamed side. Shir clearly got that, and her sketches abound with the bountiful, seemingly unbridled joys of Mother Nature.

"I took photographs of the garden, which I took back with me to Montreal, but I didn't really look at them during the work," she relates. "They were a sort of reference point."

Shir not only got into her brother's garden, but also delved into some professional literature to ensure she was drawing the flowers accurately. "I read botanical literature. I didn't want to make mistakes, such as painting a cyclamen with six petals. Cyclamen flowers have five. And if, maybe, a couple had dropped off, I'd leave a space where they might have been."

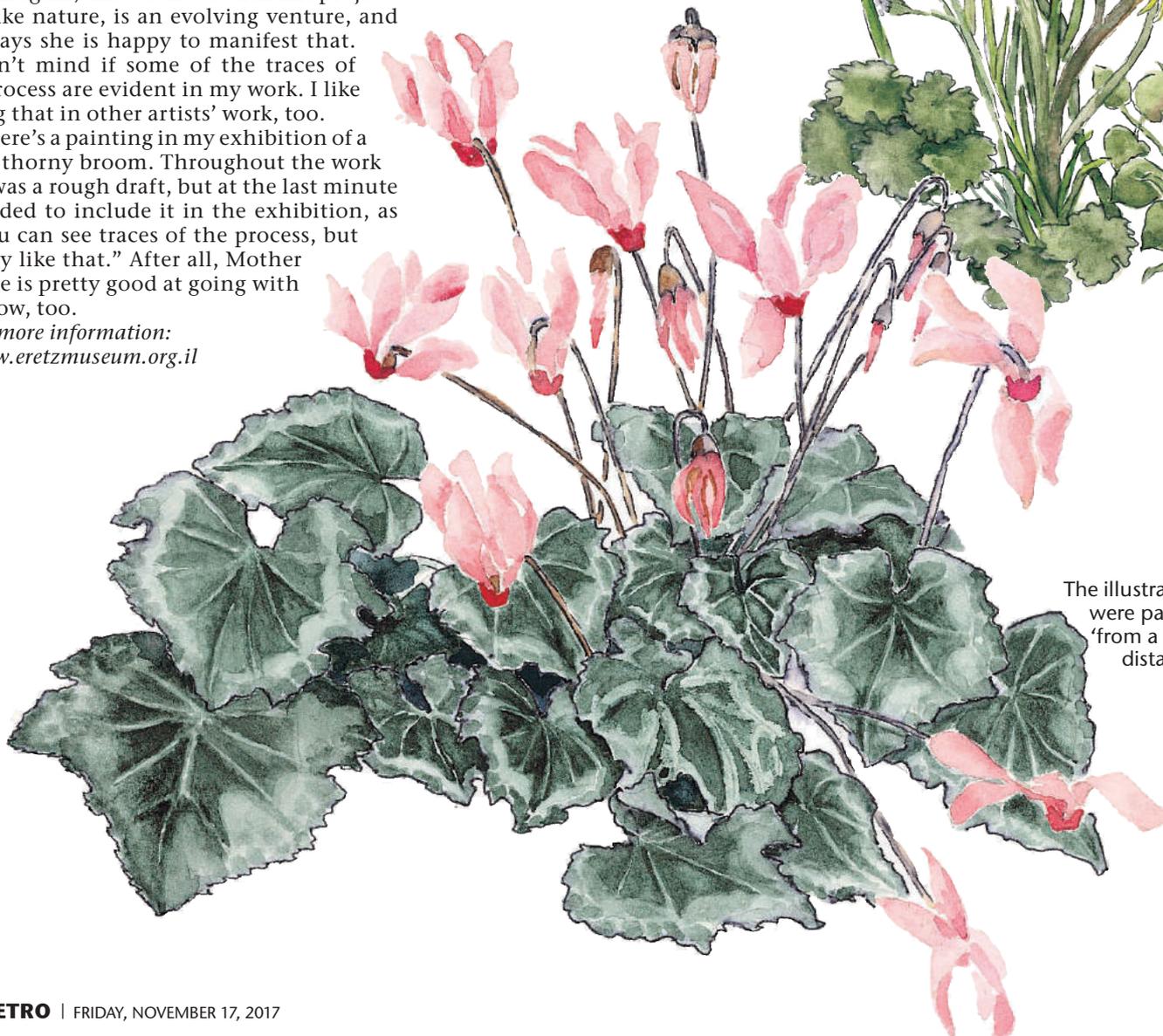
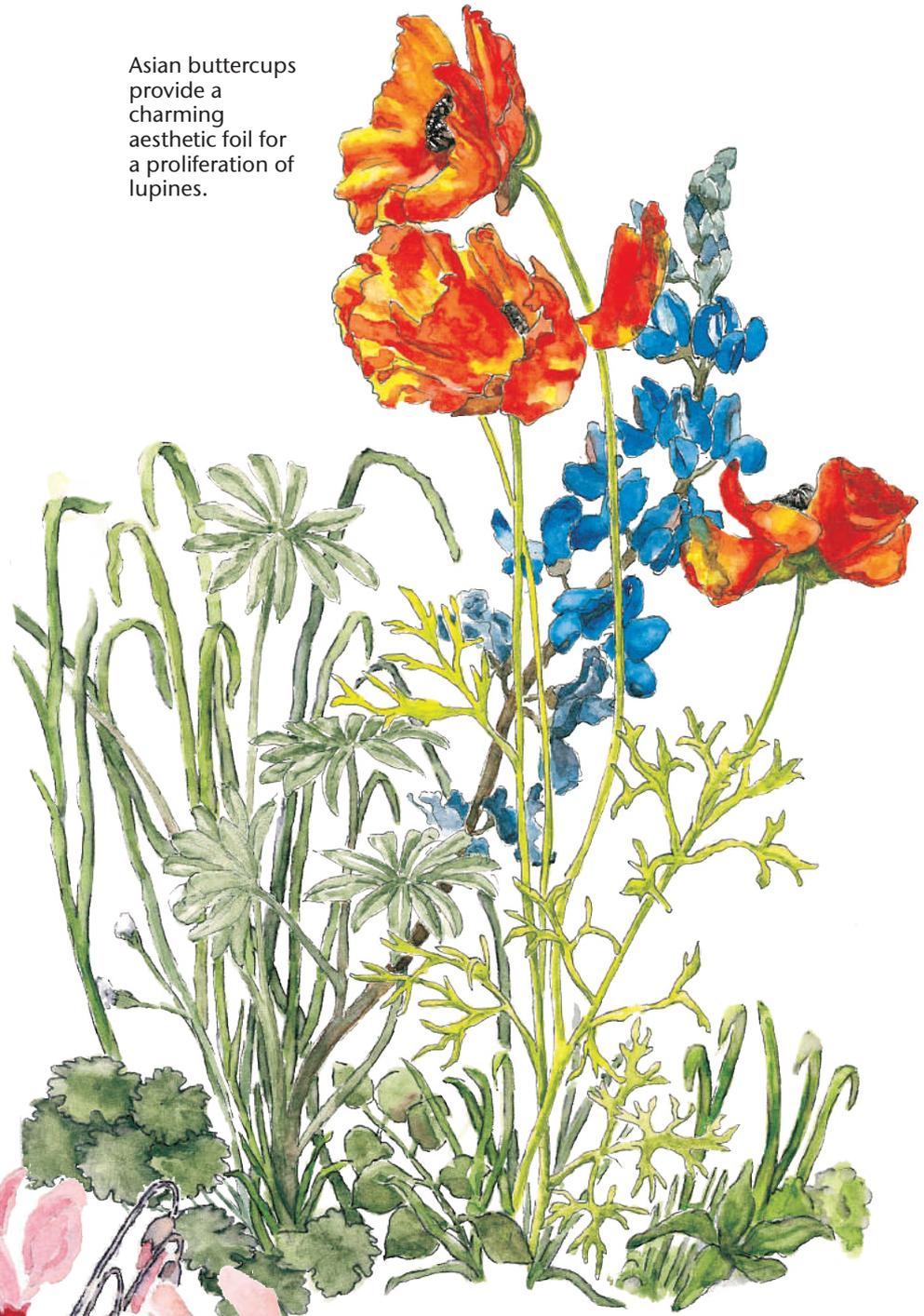
Shir certainly had her work cut out for her, not only due to the complexity of the subject matter and the minute detail, but also as a result of the materials she worked with. "Ink and water colors are very unforgiving mediums," she notes. "If you make a mistake, you are left with the mistake. You either have to start over or try somehow to correct it. Oil paints are much easier to work with, in that respect."

Then again, this was not a scientific project. Art, like nature, is an evolving venture, and Shir says she is happy to manifest that. "I don't mind if some of the traces of the process are evident in my work. I like seeing that in other artists' work, too."

"There's a painting in my exhibition of a hairy thorny broom. Throughout the work that was a rough draft, but at the last minute I decided to include it in the exhibition, as is. You can see traces of the process, but I really like that." After all, Mother Nature is pretty good at going with the flow, too.

For more information:
www.erezmuseum.org.il

Asian buttercups provide a charming aesthetic foil for a proliferation of lupines.



The illustrations were painted 'from a great distance.'