

ART IN AMERICA
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trays an elderly, bearded man riding a donkey. Could this be the Messiah that the Jews await? Or is he a Palestinian refugee? Or perhaps the picture is of a refugee in some other strife-torn part of the world such as the former Yugoslavia. The man on the donkey seems weary. If he's a messiah, he's a faltering one, riding not a proud horse but a worn-out donkey. For his part, Azi claims to know nothing about the image's original context. It was simply a photograph he found somewhere and began to incorporate into his paintings.

The ambiguous image shares the canvas with a variety of other motifs, both stenciled and drawn (Azi is a virtuoso draftsman). He adds stenciled designs extracted from Islamic art, classical imagery (two recurring doves from a Ravenna mosaic), symbols of direction (a compass without a needle), partially erased words and legible texts (in English) associated with current esthetic or political issues. In one painting, for instance, we read the phrase

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Asad Azi: *Messiah on the Donkey*, 1998, mixed medium, 56 by 38 inches; at Nelly Aman.



TEL AVIV

Asad Azi
at Nelly Aman

Israeli artist Asad Azi poses an intriguing question about how we perceive an image. Each of the large paintings in the show por-

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"Deportation of Eastern Suspect." An underlying grid is visible in all the paintings, although Azi will often obscure part of it under layers of paint. In addition, vector lines criss-cross the canvases. In one work, the rider's shadow is surrounded by a white halo, which is juxtaposed with a patch of powerful azure paint. The painting seems to be inviting the viewer on a phantasmagorical journey which, upon closer inspection, dissolves into uncertainty.

In the late 1980s and early '90s, Azi's paintings examined the decorative tradition of the East, those varied patterns which the West has dubbed "arabesques." While his current work is responding to the political situation in Israel, it could also be interpreted as a bitter critique of the gaudiest theme in European art. Lurking in these latticeworks of images and signs are secrets and enigmas pertaining to questions of identity and cultural proprietorship. Yet, these complex paintings also possess a slow, bewitching rhythm that entices the viewer to the point of no return.

—Smezer Shell