

The End of the Fall: An Encounter with Five Woman Artists

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...He gets up clumsily on all fours and wants to walk,
then feels he has wings.
The man is still confused: he doesn't know
it's easier to glide than to crawl...

- From: Dahlia Ravikovitch, "The End of the Fall"

(trans. Chana Bloch & Ariel Bloch)

The whiteness of this paper, whiteness of no-color, whiteness of pre-color, opaque, depressed whiteness of mourning. Whiteness that repels reflection. Reconciled, indulgent whiteness of background, infrastructure or walls. Whiteness of the edge, margin-whiteness. White stains of the other whiteness; intense, lustrous whiteness, like an insulating screen. Life's labor of death, which in this instance is also the painting operating against itself, a double process of work and absence of work.

I see it, this whiteness, everywhere, in the figurative works of Neta Harari, Ruti Helbitz Cohen, and Merav Steinmetz, in the landscape paintings of Tali Ben Bassat and Nogah Engler. It is never indefinite. It colors more and more scraps of life with a density that might undermine or interrupt the transition between areas, between layers, between states. In passing, miraculously, it is like a link between the paintings in the exhibition; like an aesthetic distance which each artist sets in motion in her own unique way, in order to moderate the effect of catastrophe which she herself initiates; a whiteness which she casts out of herself, and although it refuses the Narcissist reflection and ostensibly undermines the auto-perception of the creative self, of the work's origin, of the object of identification, it nevertheless restrains the signs of extinction, erasing the familiar manifestations of violence, to the point of alienation. It underlies a painterly poetics of enfeeblement.

There is something ascetic in writing about painting. At some point you must shut yourself off from it, from its external appearance, and look inward. You think to yourself, what is the most ghastly sight you have ever seen, for they are so abundant. Many years ago, on television, they showed a girl with CP whose family, powerless, chained her to a doghouse. A girl-turned-bitch. This ever-so-desperate cry which did not turn into crying. Now

you remember. Why? Not because of what you perceived as the unbearable crossing of the boundary between human and beast. It is something else, something to do with the voice. The image doesn't let go because of the crying you never heard and the barking which you imagined hearing. You knew then that there was an end to the fall.

There are silences in a painting. The sealed or the wide-open mouth or the one fed ad nauseam in Merav Steinmetz's work; the sleeping bodies retiring from the common world such that they lose their identity in Neta Harari's work; still-life silences. The silences of the landscape revealed to us in two contradictory manifestations, by way of amplification or by reduction, in the work of Nogah Engler and Tali Ben Bassat. The figures of the dead dogs, the carrions' impenetrability. The silence of disfiguration of the face of horror in Ruti Helbitz Cohen's work. Here, however, it seems that not only do the artists present silences in their works; they address the silence of the painting itself, even its active silencing; the silence of the painting which forces us to silence, yet at the same time, paradoxically, also dubs the silences through which we try to listen to it.

Is there a way to indicate a partnership between female artists which is not stylistic uniformity, which is incongruent with attributes of continuity and rupture, of sources of inspiration or formal invention? For it is a partnership without a unifying principle, without identical syntax, without a range of influence and a certain cultural-historical borrowing; an association which is ostensibly nothing but the very work of each artist within the sensual element of an art whose boundaries are clear-cut, nothing but the grave experience with the question she poses to herself via a unique semiotic system whose constituent elements recur in different variations throughout multiple series; a partnership in the commitment to a non-mimetic painterly truth; a partnership in an experience of beauty and devotion to beauty. Is there a way to indicate a partnership stemming from something like similar sensitivity, even in the absence of a single, singular formative event; a partnership where the points of friction and intersection do not unequivocally tie the artists together, all the more so as it displaces familiar classification categories in a manner which binds figurative painterly manifestations with gestures of abstraction? Is there a way to indicate a partnership that does not bring together similar plot structures, when each artist consistently develops an idiosyncratic language all her own, and when the burden of combination is ultimately the viewer's association which transforms all of them and everything into accessories, intertwined, contaminating one another and blurring the pure cleanliness of a subject position, an artist as viewer, whose contours are fixed?

But a partnership in what exactly? What are the terms of this alliance? It is a partnership in a movement that operates in every work against the work itself, whether by deconstruction or dissemination of figures in the space, or by partial erasure of the visibility, its masking, its concealment. As if we were concerned with fettered imagination, imagination swathed in historicity which activates the boundaries of freedom each time, in a distinctively private manner. The means of expression by which it struggles against itself are far from the prevalent

reality, from the spectacular apparition, from the allegorical. For the imaginary freedom wallows in a catastrophe whose origins are latent, unknown, in a way which restrains and weakens its expressions. This delicate veiling, whiteness being one of its manifestations, brings together those women who are ostensibly far removed. For this very reason, this whiteness, which is not your whiteness, which is not the light familiar to you, a foreign whiteness which now emerges intermittently in an arid landscape as in a thicket, in silence and in clamor, may all of a sudden, in the interstices, become yours. Just as a community of woman-artists cannot be discussed in the customary terms, one cannot discuss a community of viewers possessing a given hermeneutics. In order to visit the expressive range of this cluster of works, the viewers must develop a mode of observation which is not only art-historical or socio-historical. I would have liked to call it sentimental, but this is not the exact term, since it is forced on me externally.

In the beginning of the art of painting, Narcissus observed himself in the water of a spring. The quintessential metaphor describing the artistic act is touching one's reflection. In Neta Harari's work, a woman leans over a brook (*Vertigo Inbox 1*). The tears rinsing her face, which she covers with her hand, seem to fuse with the tears of the world. But the intimacy transpiring between the human presence and being, between tear and water, does not reflect an image, thus remaining unreverberated. Nature's melancholy seals and is sealed. Vis-à-vis the woman, the turbid, conflicted waters, colored in shades of green, become a crystalline whiteness, a neutral void penetrating her entire being, sucking parts of her therein. The ostensibly present figure—her body is solid, her arms are strong—becomes aware of her potential disappearance once she is refused the dimension of depth, and all she can cling to henceforth, in all the paintings in the series, are episode fragments which do not unite to form a narrative memory.

Of all the artists participating in the exhibition, Nogah Engler addresses more explicitly the monuments of European memory, the history of Europe and European art. Her landscape seems to conceal the dimensions of naturalist, romantic, and impressionist time, but its laden, sizzling transformation, at times verging on abstraction, burdened in certain areas as if it were a still-life, renders it nameless. The anti-Narcissist effect here lies in the total neutralization of the human, in the exclusion of the artist and, by extension—of a hypothetical viewer figure. Engler does not insert figures into the landscape. In their absence, she prevents our entrance to hear the silence. The landscape is open, yet it doesn't open up. It is a total exterior which borders on no interior; a primordial entity presented outside the phenomenological pattern which brings the object to a viewer's eye. Who is the subject of this concentrated meditation on the landscape? Who is the source of the visible painting? Is it in fact a renunciation of the first person? What is the source of the wound appearing in the red color stains? Alternatively, what is the source of growth, the source of being? The hidden presence of the grid interwoven in-between the vertical tree trunks, brutally cut topless, and the horizontal lines of the afforested landscape, does not eliminate the sense that this is not

about a mere mental configuration. Once again the whiteness is omnipresent; tree trunks and paths and reservoirs, massive coloration whose visibility takes over the fine drawing gestures, an unidentified whiteness, devoid of a differentiated signified, which cumulates to form an enhanced impression of staining, like an empty space linking earth and heaven, undermining the distinction between upper and lower, restricting the sense of space and the field of vision.

The enfeeblement process in Merav Steinmetz's work is closer to us. On the pole opposite the landscape paintings, Steinmetz populates spaces highly-regulated on the surface with the familiar, ritualistic objects of contemporary consumerist culture, spaces which concurrently lose their perspectival and existential focal point, transforming into a nightmare. What are these paintings in fact? Portraits? Situations? Object representations? It is hard to tell, since the juxtaposition of the inanimate and human compositional elements in the same nonhierarchical space and the preoccupation, fine as it may be, with the abject deconstruct the subject to the point of rejection of any identifying or empathic observation, primarily in the space of the picture itself. No one looks another in the eye. No one listens to the other. The figures are virtually ageless. Their faces are possibly a mask, possibly an eccentric, tormented expression of no-man. The vision behind them, seen through the window without conveying the sense of infinitude, is a distinctively anachronistic gesture which unfolds a symbolical landscape as in late medieval and Renaissance paintings. Here, however, the landscape does not reflect the identity of the depicted figure, nor does it facilitate its interpretation. The use of the historical gesture thus reinforces the sense of fragmentation, which is further enhanced by the use of oil paint diluted as watercolor. Furthermore, Steinmetz creates a dense array of internal affinities between the painterly spaces, and a semblance of formal parallels which do not reflect each other. The painting again shuns representation, this time not only in terms of the relationship between the painterly world and the extra-painterly world, but rather in the terms of its self-created world. Why? Is this an ars-poetical statement regarding the work of art, the conditions which enable and eliminate it? Is it a broader ontological position? From where does the desistance stem? What thing is threatened by deconstruction or by erasure? At the moment of concealment, does the artist know what it is that she conceals? Does she activate the concealment in the same way as she sets its exposure in motion?

The fact that the exhibition seems to freeze a certain moment in the work sequence of each artist enables us, by moving from one to another, to reinstate this forced staticity with motion. In view of Tali Ben Bassat's series "Gray Expanses" one may reformulate these questions more abstractly, this time from the side of the line rather than of the coloration. Even if Ben Bassat is not entirely free of her dependence on matter, the fine watercolor drawing transforms the raw material into a type of preliminary sketch, ostensibly voiding it of itself, making it activate minimal force on the white sheets of paper attached to one another to form the infrastructure of a grid. The watery paint breathes a quiet, fluid life into the line, thus guarding the drawing's privacy and enigma. The concrete coloration gradually fades away

under the labor of reduction. The painterly expression accordingly weakens. An ontological cloudlet, one which transforms being into an outcome of the void, seems to obscure everything. The sun is but a circle of nothingness, a fullness of light-warmth constituted by a bare, vulnerable, and transient paper surface. The sun is thus, simultaneously, being and nothingness. It is not the customary light of day. Its beingness remains unresolved. That which makes it possible as a colorless formal distinction is that which consumes it. Such also are Ben Bâssat's birds, which carry nothingness, the morbid potential of nonbeing.

The painterly poetics of enfeeblement may be translated into the language of elements, an elemental language—water, being, nothingness, creation, art, words which we tend to skirt, words which we may experience as too powerful, too direct. Ruti Helbitz Cohen adds to this elemental register the preoccupation with the anatomy of the human body as a quandary about the essence of the human, a body which seems to hang by a thread, a fragile, highly concrete body which, at the same time, verges on the abstract and the neutral. Her "Damsel's House" series presents, after Velázquez, paper *infantas* covered with grease-proof paper, an ultra-thin lace veil colored by a mixture of ink, acrylic, spray, and fabric softener as a coating to protect bare life. The gap between the signifier "damsels" and the signified "girls" in fact involves a more inundating ambivalence. The screen of sublimation shields these abjectal figures, whose transformation into beautiful objects does not eliminate the uncanny elements in their being, the staring eye sockets, the missing limbs, the incoherent body which calls a mechanized doll to mind. Helbitz Cohen embraces the totality of life, from the embryonic beginning to the shroud-like paper covering the corpse. Yet it seems that this act of embracing, the totality of the world created in the work, emerges from the material. As if the secret of the material and the secret of the human were one. As if the material itself contains the movement from the unveiled to the veiled, the ontological possibility of crystallization, regression, and collapse. In the artist's intricate relationship with the material and the work, a work based on Christian motifs of incarnation and sacrifice, the self is once again forsaken to an impersonal force.

The autonomy of the artistic process as a double process of work and absence of work in each of the five worlds presented here sometimes transforms the very act of observation into a type of trespassing. Something important happens close to me, in physical proximity, yet it is inaccessible to me, solitary ad infinitum. Somewhat like our gaze at the sleeping other, or perhaps like a painter's gaze at anything and anyone who does not look back, unaware of his visibility, who is exposed to her thus, or betrayed by her, unable to retreat or resist, in a gesture of total trust. There is in the painting, or more accurately—in the painter's treatment of the visible, something of the structure of sacrifice. Her gaze, however, like ours, is impromptu a gaze at her own sleeping self, its anxieties, doubts, lack of control, loss of face. Neta Harari paints this scene, a painting which acquires a meta-serial status among all the series. Harari observes the secret of the sleeping body, and perhaps more than that, the secret of the sleeping father and the sleeping children. The whiteness once again spreads on the

plywood, resisting assimilation and harmony, like the sleeping body itself. The interruption is brutal—the one which sleep generates by definition, the one which it implies with regard to the consciousness and to the body parts deconstructed on the bed. We, who have been exposed from time immemorial to the sleep of Joseph and Jacob, but also to that of Noah, to the sleep of revelation, dreams and shame, a locus where absence becomes present, almost too present, we are now not entirely sure whether this is a phenomenological painting of sleep or one of catastrophic wakefulness. Either way, the ears are sealed, and we enter the timelessness of the end of the fall.