

Neta Harari – Vertigo Inbox (1)

Varda Steinlauf

The young woman's body lies motionless on the road. Her loose, curly black hair surrounds her head like a frame. Her mouth is invisible; all we can see is the shadowy outline of her face, the profile of her chin and nose. Her entire figure is suffused with eroticism and desire that are intertwined with death. On the one hand, the image appears to be a horror scene that makes use of gender-related elements enhanced by means of colorful brushstrokes – not unlike certain scenes from some of David Lynch's films. At the same time, Neta Harari teases us through the use of values borrowed from the dream industry, pushing the mechanism of illusion to its subversive extreme. Is this perhaps a ghostly fantasy attempting to seduce the viewer?

The series *Vertigo Inbox (1)*, which is featured in this exhibition, consists of a body of oil paintings on plywood that extends between two contrasting poles. At one pole are images of female bodies cast down on the ground¹ and women in inverted positions implying dizziness or vertigo. At the other extreme are the "family" paintings: images of a woman, a man and children. The beautiful, shapely young women in Harari's paintings mesmerize the viewer's gaze. They seem to be challenging our habitual mode of observation, while their bodies function as a source for fantasies of desire. At the same time, however, these scenes of seduction, passion, eroticism and voyeurism also contain disturbing elements related to states of distress, shock and death.

Harari's scenes do not unfold in clearly defined sites, but rather in non-places: dreamlike yet not imaginary landscapes based on concrete environments whose attributes have been blurred and abstracted, acquiring a deceptive quality. Crude colors – a poisonous fluorescent green, a bold red and a biting yellow – envelop the female figures. According to Harari, she begins by creating pencil drawings and later lays on the bold, bright colors in a manner that is at once seductive and violent. The way in which the paint is applied lends it an ethereal quality and influences the pigment's process of setting on the plywood support, infusing the painterly gestures with life and movement. These gestures, however, are accompanied by the erasure and abuse of the paint through the use of chemical solutions; in other instances, the paint is scraped off to expose the underlying layer of white primer.

The light radiating from Harari's paintings has a unique and captivating effect on the viewer. The patches of light that fill her work mesmerize the eye and enhance the mysterious

1. In Freudian terms, this state dialogues with the concept of mourning/melancholia and with the pleasure principle.

atmosphere. The palpable vulnerability that infuses these images is shaped by a range of technical and formal means that enrich Harari's tangle of painterly ruses. Neta Harari uses photography to reinvent reality. She stages and then photographs or captures on video scenes featuring her own body or the bodies of women she knows, and uses the photographs or video as a basis for her compositions.² The real-fictional event – at once innocuous and terrifying, banal and exotic, possible and fantastic – is channeled into the space of painting, serving as the basis for Harari's work. The photographs and videos enable her to construct her own formal lexicon, while the paintings process these forms in a manner that distances them from their origin. With an uncompromising sensibility, she thus manages to transmit to her viewers an image of a world that is at once personal and impersonal.

Neta Harari consciously dialogues with cultural images culled from the worlds of cinema, television and advertising, yet does so in a concise and purified manner. Her portraits are both self-portraits and portraits of others; they bespeak a deconstruction of the self, a dismantling of the represented reality. The viewer can never arrive at their essential meaning; for meaning, in these works, never appears in its pure form, and is always incomplete.

The female imagery in Harari's paintings seems to be the product of popular culture. The body of the young woman lying down before the viewer's lust-filled eyes provokes a voyeuristic gaze that alludes to sexuality, artificiality, and the pursuit of sensationalism. Harari's work, however, also raises questions concerning the active nature of the voyeuristic gaze. She examines the boundaries between the active state of the artist/photographer/painter and the passive state of the object/model. The artist stages herself and her close circle of women friends as models for her paintings, engendering a movement that vacillates between activity and passivity, between the creation of a meaningful subject and the creation of a passive object – a movement that carries a metaphorical charge in the context of the artist's own experience of being a woman.

The vacillation between subjective states and states of objecthood concerns an additional relationship – that between the artist/model and the camera. In this context, the camera is perceived as a third bodily organ partaking of the sophisticated and carefully encoded female structure produced by the paintings. The female body in Neta Harari's work undergoes a metamorphosis, and is represented as an estranged and distanced structure. In order to

2. Neta Harari has served as a model for photographs by Israeli artists such as Tiranit Barzilay, Adi Nes and Gil Shani.

prevent the transformation of the female body into a fetishistic image, she shatters and disassembles it through the use of manipulative strategies that transform the viewer's relationship to the painting. The orchestration of different gazes – the artist's gaze, the gaze through the camera lens and the viewer's gaze – produce different subjective states.

According to Neta Harari, this series evolves "[...] in the open expanses between Sisyphus' mountain and Tantalus' orchard."³ Yet Sisyphus and Tantalus' hopeless existential tasks are merely the point of departure for what follows. As Harari states, "These are pawns set up for a fateful journey, rather than for an inevitable defeat. This journey evolves along a continuum that involves points at which one must shift to a different language; different ways of reading oneself and the world. The series describes the moment of change; the moment when the train is diverted to another set of rails. This is the moment of vertigo, which always involves destruction and death. It is an instant in which one's existential center of gravity shifts and is transported elsewhere, to a place that remains unknown. It's like being at sea while the heavens break loose over your head. What will you do while waiting for the water to recede and for dry land to emerge and anchor the ark? This series is also about lots of movement and noise that are the result of a small change – or perhaps even just the daring to change, to cross a line. And sometimes crossing a line is like being reborn. Because everything depends on one's point of view."⁴

3. This quote is taken from Shlomo Giora Shoham's book *Rebellion, Creativity and Revelation*, Urian Publishers, 1986, p. 10 [Hebrew].

4. Quoted from a conversation with the artist in preparation for the exhibition, 2008.