



The Storm

Text by Dominique Nahas

Yigal Ozeri's recent photorealist paintings of Cristal, the model with extraordinarily full hair and delicate frame, her tawny skin festooned with exquisite tattoos is juxtaposed with the paintings depicting the poses of red-haired Sonia, with her wispily ethereal gaze. Each painting has a mesmerizing close-up and far-away appeal. Perhaps it's because there is an underlying sense of the not-known that suffuses the work, a paradoxical condition of ineffability that pervades in-spite-of the work appearing to be, at first, without equivocation.

Ozeri's photo-realistically engendered paintings have a singular quality and each artwork seems to inform the others. They play off of each other when they are placed in proximity with each other. It is the radiating energy that exudes from the artist's works that strikes the viewer's mind's eye, creating sensorial impressions upon it that linger long after the beholder has left the physical space occupied by the actual paintings. There is that undeniable tremulous intensity that is part and parcel of "presence" in these artworks, each holds its own as a nearly sentient, vitalistic creation.

Ozeri typically (but with exceptions) photographs, with his crew of technicians, the model in forests, or as she is framed by grand vistas, or set-off by expanses of water as in the current exhibition. The artist intentionally recalls the sublimity of Mother Nature in his work. Poring over the result of numbers of photos taken, Ozeri chooses a select few for further intensive editing and modification. His extensive preliminary involvement with photography is a self-contradictory one in which he uses all available digital technologies and techniques to modulate and, importantly, to subvert the originally uploaded image. He manipulates the digital space in order to re-create a new image that supplants and ultimately "erases" (Ozeri's term) the original photographic trace. What emerges through this process (comprised of a double movement of distancing and closeness) is the development of a substitute image that has a crucially distinctive and necessary purpose. This substitute image's purpose, at a remove through intentionalized reconstitution from the original photographic trace, is to serve as a sufficiently resonant affective and psychological carrier for Ozeri to unleash his creative energies at the service of an intensification of his imaginal flows. In effect in its final phase and form this reconstituted photographic trace becomes a unique device, equivalent in many ways to an objective correlative, a literary term forwarded by T.S. Eliot that means an objectifying symbol that evokes a particular emotion or association. For Ozeri this imagistic device provides him with the necessary associational access to his intensified recollections about the model and his feelings towards her as she has reacted to her sense of self, to her natural environment and to the camera eye during



the photo shoot. (In his artist's notes Ozeri writes: "...How people react to the world is interesting to me..."). This re-engineered photographic image, this "altered" photograph that is then projected onto a canvas surface as the basis for a finished work forms the nucleus, internally, of Ozeri's painterly subjectivity as that subjectivity connects to his remembrances of his innermost reactions and feelings.

Ozeri's painterly practice involves using the codes of portraiture to maximize density of meaning accessible for himself and for the beholder. The artist interpolates and alters the established codes of photographic realism, creating pictures that serve as vehicles for awareness about what constitutes perception and how we apprehend, intimately, our sense of ourselves vis-à-vis others in the world. Ozeri's artwork points to phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty's insights that vision is not merely equivalent to seeing with one's eyes. Vision depends on a bodily experience and the act of being seen, which stresses intersubjectivity as a predominant factor in our understanding of perception. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, the individual is both object and subject at the same time. Perception, then, might be akin to what Vivian Sobchack in defining the "lived body" in film studies as "... bodily access or agency for being-in-the world, for having both a world and a being."

Another condition or part of Ozeri's embodied process of connecting to the content and understanding of people and places is his tendency as part of his painting practice to produce multiple works based on a single model. His series involves subtle changes of palette and offers differing sizes for the beholder to take in. This impulse toward repetition (perhaps re-iteration is a better word) is really about determinism as it is about discovery. When we inquire about the meanings of these pictures we should think less about the information they show, per se, and more about the ways in which they are presented as part of the viewing situation (each picture presented side by side, say; or sequentially, or across from each other, or both). Ozeri creates sets of actions by painting several permutations of the same general activity in the same setting thus allowing a spatiality for the viewer to create mental scenarios as incipient narratives flit through the mind's eye (analogous somewhat to seeing one-at-a-time, separate stop-action, frozen "takes" of a moving image sequence). In his most recent exhibition, for example, to see the continuity of unfolding body action and changing facial expressions on the part of Sonia in deep natural space as she elevates each arm and then both, and when she is seen wrapping herself with her arms as she envelopes her body with her slip as a means of protection or concealment. Ozeri supplies an internal unspoken but felt diegetic narrative that might loosely correspond to his event sequencing. Such temporal structuring is interwoven within each specific depicted situation; every rendered effect calculatedly taking form through the craftsmanship of Ozeri's mimetic-expressive handling of his pictorial surfaces, forms, contours and colors. The upshot is that a dynamic perceptual and affective spatiality is unleashed within each painting,



between the paintings themselves and between the viewer. This dynamic, in turn, induces the viewer's perceptual and affective response to the painterly codes deployed through the artist's mark making over each pictorial surface engendered through the craftsmanship of mimetic rendering.

Ozeri has always had a remarkable sensitivity to touch, the manual activity of the painter activating the haptic field of sensation and to the brushstroke, the material traces that result from that activity. The touch or stroke in an Ozeri painting works in two ways: as a touch or stroke that calls attention to itself (even if it does so as a whisper, *sotto voce*) as a constitutive element in a larger image or as a self-contained expressive element in its own right. It has been amazing and shocking for me to see how ably both of these conditions are in evidence in Ozeri's work and how they switch off with each other in a group of paintings in which the painterly stroke follows its own seemingly inner-directed delineation and in which that very same stroke assumes a mimetic role or function as it emanates and responds as a sign for vine or twig or leaf. This is so evident in his earlier painting series *Priscilla With Vines* and *Priscilla in Ecstasy*.

Ozeri uses the mimetic code as a pretext, ultimately, that allows him to manipulate paint as a self-generating activity driven by the twin drives of inner-necessity (as Kandinsky would have it) and of outer-directedness. In his current series of paintings Ozeri is now allowing strategically placed, errant brushstrokes, those that do not attach themselves to any obvious signified, to have free reign as in scumbled background area directly above the head in the painting of camisole-clad Sonia, head looking down, eyelids lowered, [30x40 B.jpg] The marvel is that Ozeri's painterly mark (even as it seems to be subdued or resting under the domain or the regime of the photographic trace) can oscillate between the constructive and the mechanical as well as toward the self-effacing and the random and in what is even more startling, Ozeri's dialectical touch can (under close inspection) vacillate ambivalently between the poles of inner directed, unruly self-sufficiency of gesturalism (a visceral impact of a direct approach to mark making) and outer-directed coalescing around the signifier/signified mimetic code. Underlying the artist's extraordinary skill is his persistent challenging of himself to re-discover, to re-negotiate (and in a very real sense to amplify for the viewer --- as a dare, a tease, a defiant challenge ---) that ambivalent territory in which the beholder's eye is tricked to believe s/he is seeing a matter-of-fact depiction born from an image-capturing device --- an instrument that sees and records things systematically in a highly controlled, very particular, and very identifiable way with a single "eye" that tends to flatten out and homogenize space as it crops the scenic flow in front of it. This operation is distinctive from the way the natural biologic eye scans the space before it alternates between a focusing of the near and of the far, and according to the need and the emotional state, shifts between close-up detailing of the space directly near-at-hand



and sensing and responding (somatically and affectively) to the peripheralities of vision. Yigal Ozeri, as a photo-realist finds value and meaning in the play of continually negotiating that discursive territory of the explicit and the implicit visual sign or mark in his work. In other words, he is an illusionist of the highest order.

To see Yigal Ozeri's photo-realist paintings of his female subjects is to be immersed in an iconographic code that has mixed parentage. The artist's subjects are typically depicted alone, often communing in some way with nature, partially if not completely clad, seemingly withdrawn or appearing deeply pensive. What Ozeri is aiming for (and he often succeeds in this) is for the viewer to be suffused by the twin sensations of thought and feeling, by the presencing of a sense of hushed intimacy. Ozeri's stylistic inferences and references have been brought up many times in the past in reviews and articles: his return-to-the-past sensibility that in some measure can be seen as a critique of mass-media influences and reactionary positions in which pastoral equanimity pervades, his practice's association with the codes of the sub-rosa genres of late Romanticism (in interviews he has admitted being drawn to the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and other Pre-Raphaelite painters such as John Everett Millais), with the incipient sentimentality of Soviet Realism, with the eroticism of 19th century Orientalism. The artist has invoked, as part of his subtle subversive agenda, an even-handed re-examination of the judicious use of sentiment in populist culture as he has interrogated the prerogatives of baked-in-the cake late 20th century elitist avant-garde agendas with their self-legitimizing narratives and self-justifying progressive aesthetic conventions. Ozeri is re-examining, for example, the built-in cultural bias on the part of many cultural commentators toward Andrew Wyeth's populist appeal, its carefully calibrated realist style, its small-town/rural imagery and Rembrandt-ish palette. Wyeth's sympathetic renderings of haunting minutiae and depictions of his subjects' world-weary forlornness have provoked accusatory commentators to refer to what they consider Wyeth's artificial world view and stylistic exigencies as aiding and abetting the causes of "mute existentialism" and "manicured desolation." Ozeri nevertheless uses as one of his many ideational models Wyeth's highly personalized symbolism, along with frame of mind exerting the pull of rectitude (sexual and otherwise). In photorealist circles Ozeri is viewed as a new-comer iconoclast as his practice uncharacteristically attends to depicting young attractive people as portrait subjects rather than the prototypical agendas of the majority of photorealist painters who have prioritized the appearances of fetishized urban grittiness, the industrial ethos of the city, as well as quotidian goods pointing to a consumerist lifestyle all looked at with intense level-headed detachment and game-faced aloofness. In this regard Ozeri leans towards those artists in his professional orbit whose efforts and interests partially reflect or refract his own in indirect ways: Chuck Close and Gerhard Richter. Like them, Ozeri has been intent at investigating means to model the representation of the real while at the same time has been compelled to explore the female body in Nature, human



relations, inter and intrasubjectivity. Towards those ends Ozeri is particularly sensitive to the inventive stylistic and formal contributions and thoughts of the Swiss artist Franz Gertsch --- a leading influential European photorealist, little known in the U.S., who for decades has painted gigantic head portraits as well as mural-sized scenes of nature delineated with hallucinatingly crisp detail. Gertsch has been quoted as saying that in a post-modern environment "...reality can no longer...be grasped other than with a camera, because man has grown used to considering photographic reality as the maximal capture of the real..." Equally noteworthy is Gertsch's follow-up remark: "...a painting must remain a painting and not a substitute for reality..."

The hyperrealist painterly codes Ozeri infuses in his work initially gives his paintings and drawings on paper an authoritative photographic allure --- an intentional bluster-game of truth-claiming that just as intentionally is quickly dispelled by the artist upon closer viewing of the intricately worked out surfaces consisting of all manner of painterly facture through the intercession of the artist's touch and the consummate craftsmanship that attends it. Such misidentification, set up as a suave lure by the artist, serves as a point of recognition for the naïve viewer, getting the unguarded viewer's mind in a state of receptive attention from the onset. What is presumed to be the appearance of the photographic trace enchants and beguiles through the lure of instantaneity: yet another fraction of a moment in time captured through the click of the shutter. The vaunted notion that the photograph (chemical or digital) through indexicality is representative of reality, of course, persists. Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, points to the undisputed, unchallenged presence of "That-has-been" that seems to attend to the photographic process:

" I call "photographic referent" not the optionally real thing to which an image or sign refers but the necessarily real thing that has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph...In the daily flood of photographs, in the thousand forms of interest they seem to provoke, it may be that the noeme "That-has-been" is not repressed.... but experienced with indifference, as a feature that goes without saying."

As Yigal Ozeri's paintings are encrypted, so to speak, with the DNA of the photographic trace because they necessarily invoke (almost by transference) the Barthean "That-has-been" presence. Yet this reference to indexicality, the inevitable memento-mori affect that builds up in the work, and the concomitant feelings of loss and longing that it brings forth is permeated with a feeling of suffused joy. This admixture, feeling-wise, arises by virtue of the way Ozeri paints and what he paints, of course. Youth, the feminine and its mysteries, and the agency of sensualized intimacy are the three elements that he takes on as subject matter. The mutable content of his work resides in Ozeri's relation to this libidinally charged, erotically - tinged subject matter. Without going too deeply into specific psychical material as it pertains to the artist himself might



point to the overt late Post-Modern Romantic attitude that Ozeri has about his subjects and subject-matter, a frame-of-mind that tinges his artwork with remarkable auratic force. Ozeri's impulses are well circumscribed by Novalis when he writes: "The world must be romanticized. In this way its original meaning will be rediscovered. To romanticize is nothing but a qualitative heightening. In this sense the lower self is identified with a better self...Insofar as I present the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar and the finite with the semblance of the infinite, I romanticize it." Ozeri's photo-realistic paintings have a strong idealistic pull to them, they are charged precisely because his yearning romantic attitude affects the way he paints in the way he does and particularly how he bathes his figures in a transient luminosity that seems to bespeak (forthrightly and matter-of-factly as only a photograph, taken instantaneously, could) of the incommensurability of the artist's desires, dreams and drives. Yigal Ozeri's paintings bear testimony of his ongoing (and of course, failed) attempts within himself to synthesize considerations of the tragic and of the sublime, and of corruption and innocence, of the present moment of lived-experience and of the timeless. Ozeri's paintings, writ large, bring to bear considerations of finitude and of infinity. He has, as an artist, internalized the core of Romanticism which is about the attempt to turn the finite into the infinite, while recognizing that it can never be realized. As the German philosopher Schlegel stated: "...that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected..." Inferences of infinity and of the present moment seem to oscillate in Ozeri's paintings. The sensation of time in an Ozeri painting is peculiarly (and I would say, remarkably) skewed, deliciously destabilized and opens up a field of indeterminability in a wondrous way: the painting hovers between being part of time, chronos, and yet it also seems curiously removed from the Bergsonian *durée*, as if it is suspended in idealized perpetuity.

Yigal Ozeri's recent photorealist artworks examine the condition of late post-modern painting. The artist persists, as he has for many years, in delving into the facets of perception and of subjectivity, while exploring illusionism and the variable territory of the senses.

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Dominique Nahas is an independent critic and curator based in Brooklyn and Chatham, N.Y.