

Back Mind

Anat Betzer, Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art, 2023

(The text was written before the Oct 7th attacks and ensuing war)

“With the wreath’d trellis of a working brain” (*John Keats*).

The central image in my new exhibition is a woman’s head painted from behind. The back of the neck, the less familiar, vulnerable, hidden side. Long months of painting a portrait that is not a face, a hidden face (“hester panim,” if you will). A topography that turns back, charting with 0 and 00 brushes the details of this “no-face coming towards me” (Abraham Chalfi).

The different hairdos in the paintings are like a shroud, a curtain or a veil, which cover, conceal, and illuminate – a woman, femininity.

The head that grows from the bare back seems to emerge from a nebulous background, like an infinite cosmic space. Pictorial surfaces, brush strokes or splashes of paint seem to unfold from an indeterminate realm. The ball of hair is in sharp focus with realistic specificity and characterization, which is paradoxically also abstract and almost indistinct, like an obsessive realization of the decorum, the ornate, the trifling.

The pattered or chaotic arrangement, the regular or irregular construction reveals how the “tangle” on the back of the head is the X-ray image of a structural paradigm, method, thinking. Conversely, these can also indicate eclectic modes of seemingly disheveled disorganized order, piled and tossed back in a rush, like examples of chaos theory (a paradoxical expression), like the movement of the clouds in the sky, their shape and transformation, which are not logical and cannot be replicated.

Metaphorically, one can think of a hairdo as a reflection of the brain, of electric circuits, the exploration or attempts to pattern the mysteries of the unknown. A network of synapses that carry information, thoughts, an emotional labyrinth as thick as the depths of the forest – continuing my early forests paintings and those featured in this exhibition. The twists of the paths in the forest disappear towards the dense darkness or a source of light, towards the unknown.

In the painting, a polyphony of interlacing that intertwine one on top of the other, sometimes interwoven separately, or as a flower and foliage arrangement that emerges from the purple-green darkness – this is a dark (and enchanted) metaphysical nature that appears as a

disturbed, mysterious mutation, like the back of the neck that remains hidden from view. The painting heightens the concealment, veils the veiled.

The woman that appears in the paintings, who turns her back to the viewer almost defiantly, is “nature.” This is a seductive and thorny, embellishing and wounding, floating or captured “nature.” The beauty erupts from within it or disappears into it like a miraculous grafting, like a parasitic plant that climbs a body, a human head, above the timeline of the mind. This is a dark forest lit by flickering fireflies.

The beauty, which I insist on, is a deceptive mask. Underneath its meticulous aesthetics, this series of paintings can be read as an echo of an ongoing struggle, which also reflects the cardinal dramatic conflicts of this time. Behind the curtain of beauty, unfolds the drama of undoing orders, of challenging the “method” to the point of a unbearable conceptual chaos.

“...the Impressionists, were perfectly right in electing domicile among the scrub and stubble of the daily spectacle. As for us our heart throbs to get closer to the depths.... These oddities will become...realities...because instead of being limited to the diversely intense restoration of the visible, they also annex the occultly perceived portion of the invisible” (Paul Klee, quoted by Merleau-Ponty in *Eye and Mind*).

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