

Run!

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Even before the gaze lingers on the images, on the painterly work, on the paint layers, the title bursts forth and awakens something in the collective cultural memory. *Run Betzer, Run* (2009–10), the title of Anat Betzer's series of paintings, is a paraphrase on "Run Forrest, run!"—a replica from Robert Zemeckis's award-winning film *Forrest Gump* (1994), starring Tom Hanks. The scene from which the phrase was taken occurs in the beginning of the movie, with young Forrest walking beside his childhood sweetheart, Jenny, in the dirt roads of southern Alabama, flanked by indigenous trees to the left and right. Intellectually challenged, Forrest was born with a spinal deformity and walks with the aid of a metal contraption that supports his legs. All of a sudden, a stone pierces the frame, hitting his head. Forrest runs away, limping; his legs and knees, fixed in the brace, prevent him from gaining momentum. He tries to run, as the group of kids who threw the stone chase after him on their bikes. At this moment, Jenny enters the frame and yells at him: "Run Forrest, run!"

Forrest runs awkwardly like a scarecrow, as the camera follows the chase, focusing on his crooked legs and the children closing in on him, and then, in slow motion, a miracle occurs: the metal brace snaps open, the joints loosen, and Forrest gains momentum and runs at a mad speed. He was saved, free and unfettered. "From that day on," Gump testifies in the voice of the adult narrator, "if I was goin' somewhere, I was runnin'!" Indeed, Forrest

runs; he runs throughout the entire movie—and this is the overt message: You can overcome everything! And by extension: Here's an embodiment of the American Dream. Anyone can succeed, even if they are mentally and physically disabled. Gump is America, and America is Gump. Gump's defining traits are those of the American nation: kindness, determination, family values, loyalty, and sacrifice. A little divine intervention won't hurt either.

But the title is not just a paraphrase of the cinematic replica. Betzer introduces herself—her name—into the series title, even though she herself is not present in the works. The paintings depict only "others." Why, then, did she include her name in the title? Why does she urge herself to run? To flee? One possible reason that comes to mind is the affinity between her and those "others," all those hunters and hunted figures who appear in the paintings, whether human or animal; a sense of shared fate, of being in the same boat rather than a mere onlooker.

Another possible reason is related to the trigger that prompted Betzer to paint this series. In August 2010, released IDF soldier Eden Abergel posted pictures of her military service on Facebook. In one, she is seen next to two Palestinian detainees sitting on the ground, hands cuffed behind their backs and their eyes blindfolded. Abergel herself smiles, as if it were a picture of a family vacation, rather than a reflection of a violent, absurd reality. In Israel of that time, before the days of Elor Azaria,¹ the horror in the lack of shame, in publicizing the banality of evil, left a profound imprint that penetrated the crust of civilian life in Israel. Under her influence, Betzer embarked on an Internet

¹ Israeli soldier convicted of killing an incapacitated Palestinian assailant.

journey, "hunting" additional images that reflected this violence. The political became personal, the personal became political, and the title of the series outlines this movement between the private identity and the public and artistic dimension.

Three paintings stand out in particular among the hunter depictions in the series (all *Untitled*, 2010), in which the hunter appears next to the hunted bear. These are unusual works in Betzer's oeuvre, who up to that time rarely painted figures, let alone in close up. The close framing suggests a striving for intimacy with the painted subjects, but at the same time there is a disturbing gap between the hunter's smug look, proudly displaying his catch, and the bear's victimized expression. The bear seems to be at the center of each of these works. In another painting, the bear is alone, sprawled on a vertical wooden plank reminiscent of an altar. In all four paintings, the body's posture and closed eyes imply sleep. Either way, the bear's situation is heart-rending, maddening, virtually impossible to take in. We do not know what happened before and what will happen next; we do not know where the hunting took place—but we are clearly concerned with a sport, hunting for its own sake, the pleasure of killing.

One can assume that the hunter paintings are based on self-glorifying photographs uploaded to social networks. It is likely that these photographs came from North America, that the hunters were engaged in "legal" hunting, and that the pictures garnered abundant admiring responses, since we are faced with man's victory over nature, the victory of violence and weapons, the victory of the artificial over the natural, however large and impressive. The same is true of the painting in which the hunter is seen next to a variety of

partridges, and that of a fisherman boasting a sizeable fish. Let us characterize them: these are self-satisfied white middle-aged men, in hats and combat suits. One can easily imagine them being the same boys who chased after Forrest Gump on their bikes and tried to hunt him down, and now, having grown older, they turned to the sport of hunting, which gives a place to a cultural violence that has no room in civilization. As in the movie, here too, the viewer wants to turn the clock back and shout: "Run bear, run!", but in vain. The killing, the murder, had already taken place.

Observing yet another painting in the series, which portrays a group of young people, including a boy and a girl embracing, one wonders: What is the nature of this hug? The posture of the two implies that they are comforting each other for something terrible they have just experienced. The girl's gaze conveys sheer horror, and her face is covered with a thin veil of green, like a delicate mask. They have experienced violence, perhaps a school shooting; the type of incident that has become commonplace in recent decades in the United States, where the right to bear arms is enshrined in the Constitution. "Run kids, run!"—I wanted to scream when I saw this painting.

In two other paintings, Russian leader Vladimir Putin is holding a shotgun in a thicket. Ironically, these paintings are small compared to the rest of the series. The undisputed ruler of the Russian nation is depicted on one occasion shirtless, and in the other painting—with an open army camouflage shirt which exposes his chest. Betzer has appropriated Putin's PR images, which glorify him in the midst of a hunting trip. The year is 2010, and Putin is serving as prime minister for a second term, after having been prevented from serving as president of the Russian Federation for a third term due to

constitutional restrictions (later removed; in 2012 he was reelected to the presidency). The images present him as a white alpha male casting fear over the state he heads and the surrounding countries.

Putin, who began his political career after years of service as a KGB agent, disseminated these heroic photos to shake off his bureaucratic image and present himself as a "real man"—a field and nature man, a fearful hunter. Once painted, Betzer's works acquired an added meaning in view of Donald Trump's conduct as head of the world's strongest power. Without dwelling on the speculations regarding the secret relationship between these two men, and despite the great difference between them, we are faced with two who are one—powerful rulers who implement the same methods: intimidation, violence, xenophobia, cynical use of the media, spreading lies and disinformation, and overriding every humanistic value. The paintings tell of violence that has become routine, legitimate, overt, and public. Trump has never hidden his desire to be seen as a powerful, violent, predatory man; on the contrary: it was this image that brought him victory.

This is perhaps the story of the series *Run Betzer, Run*, which offers a sober, somewhat prophetic, gaze at manifestations of violence in contemporary society. It contains violence, life, and death; it also spans a (blood-?) red forest, hunters and victims, nature and (bad) culture. In retrospect, it proposes a different, less naive reading of the film mentioned in its title. Re-viewing *Forrest Gump* in light of the current political reality in the United States, the overt message about the individual's triumph—the power of the humane individual aspiring for the good—is revealed as a thin, optimistic layer barely covering the mechanisms of violence deep-seated in American

society: domestic violence, political manipulation, and racism; the violence at the core of the economic and political systems, and of white man's mastery. In the nightmarish current situation, where violence has become a banal routine, the only option left for us is to run—as fast as possible.

In most of the series' paintings, the movement between the political and the private takes place in a generic space far from here, a space of world superpowers, endless hunting fields, and rulers with unlimited power. In one painting, however, this reverberation of meanings assumes a very local aspect. A man wearing a *kefiyeh* walks comfortably, a tree in the foreground hides his profile, ostensibly cutting his body in half. This splitting graphic gesture marks the Arab as the concrete figure of the denied. We watch him from a reasonable distance, and he, not noticing us, carries on walking. The tree in the foreground hides-protects him, the weapon is zeroed, the safety is disengaged. What happens there is in fact what happens here; only that here, no one will jump up and yell at him: "Run!"

In the series *Run Betzer, Run*, Betzer looks at "there" but thinks "here," as if she wanted to scream and run, yet stays put, stays and paints. This tension is at the core of the subversive tone of the series, which invites its viewers, through a variety of pictorial means, to move away and draw nearer at the same time, to examine their local as well as global political stance, to ask moral and ethical questions, to face a hidden truth. It is political art per se: complex, blatant and mysterious at the same time, beautiful and terrible.