

A Stepdaughter: The Pain Beyond, or Advanced Romanticism

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There is no snow in Israel. There is no snow here, nor gushing rivers. The rivers in the Holy Land do not freeze, and there are no dense forests either. There is neither bear hunting nor salmon fishing here; no English, and no rock 'n' roll.

All these are from "there." In fact, modernism and modern painting are from "there" too, from those snow-covered places where rivers gush amid dense forests, and where bears roam and salmon bounce and leap. Zionism, too, came from "there," from the realms of snow, grand rivers, and thick forests, from the lands where bears flee hunters.

Zionism was, at the outset, an offspring of Romanticism—and Israeli art, until recently, was largely a loyal, even if occasionally somewhat defiant, descendant of Zionism, so that art in Israel was, until recently, a direct result of a Zionist romanticism. The landscapes, portraits, situations, materials, themes—the light!—all these modelled Zionism, responded to Zionism, and vibrated with Zionism, whether pro or con. Making art that draws away from this genealogy, art that refuses to operate within and against the political-thematic-material confines dictated by the dense, dramatic reality in Israel—means deviating. In the case of Anat Betzer, it means to be a step-daughter, one who knows who her biographical, art-historical parents are, but lives in a

slightly different home, in a different family; she leads a different life, makes a different art—art that actively deviates.

Since the early 1990s, when she began exhibiting, Betzer did not engage directly with Israel and Israeliness, neither with its local history nor with the ethos of the place. In the local art scene, such practice was only beginning to emerge as a valid option, which took root in Betzer's work, and became her artistic path. Throughout her career, the views, the landscapes, the scenes, as well as the titles of her works were almost always not from here. This "there-ness" is not only the subject of the works; the works themselves seem to come from "there."

Her 2004 solo exhibition at Julie M. Gallery, Tel Aviv, marked a turning point in her journey. Betzer, who until then created processed readymades, now presented paintings, some of which were painted on the inside of pizza boxes. The cardboard boxes, complete with their oil stains—among the most readily available, best known icons of globalization—became a painterly ground, a transitional object on the way to painting. Alongside horizontal watercolor landscapes, one such cardboard box was placed on the floor in the middle of the space, its lid vertically open; three more boxes were attached to the walls in the same position. Much like the landscape paintings on the walls, Betzer depicted woodscapes, lakes, and rivers inside the boxes; vistas that are certainly not from here—perhaps from Southeast Asia or Europe.

The choice of delivery boxes was accurate. These boxes were intended for delivery or takeaway, concealing something that is neither personal, nor from here—pizza—something that comes home, to one's private

space. The sides of the box, which was placed on the floor, carried the pizzeria's phone number, alongside the assertion: "Our place or yours? The best pizza in the world." The world, the best of it, in the palm of our hand. And since pizza is only a ground for improvisation—all that remains to decide is, how you would like to have "the best pizza in the world." The inside of the box lying on the floor offers a row of trees in reddish hue reminiscent of Margherita pizza, whereas the "triptych" of the three boxes on the wall lures the eye with a yellowish wood. The "standard" offerings inside the stained boxes, created from the leftover oil stains imprinted on them, evolve into landscapes which oscillate between the magical and the toxic.

The three series created by Betzer in the following years signaled not only her decisive transition to painting, but also her adherence to subject matter associated with places far away from here. From *Wuthering Heights* (2005–07), through *Caves* (2007–08) and *Purple Rain* (2007–12), one discerns a shift to realms of snow-covered forests, caves, and isolated, intimidating log cabins; to literary sources of inspiration, and rock and roll music. Although these series allude to the landscapes of Romanticism, primarily German Romanticism, they are not overwhelmed by the sublime, by the lofty majesty of the open space, as in the work of such painters as Caspar David Friedrich, Carl Rottmann, the Norwegian Johan Christian Claussen Dahl, and their contemporaries.

In Betzer's paintings, in contrast, the darkness of the landscape is no longer ambiguous. Her frozen vistas are no longer markers of an unmediated viewing experience, since they are conveyed through filters of horror. Betzer's landscape paintings from those years, in all their seductive glory, are an

embodiment of the Freudian "uncanny" (*unheimlich*).¹ It is a visual passive-aggressive, painting that lures the eye, but its shades are morbid, phosphorous, beaming with malignant radiation. The reflections and duplications of the log cabin, appearing time and again in the *Wuthering Heights* paintings, are distorted and distorting; in one of the paintings in the series *Caves* (*Untitled*, 2008), a black stain seals—or maybe envelopes—the cave's opening; the tree's branches in the *Purple Rain* series appear overly sharpened. The cabins, huts, and tree houses portrayed in these series, rather than inviting the viewer in, invoke an abandoned horror movie set. It shoots well and looks good in painting, but it is no place to be; a toxic place.

Named after Emily Brontë's renowned 1845 gothic novel, Betzer's *Wuthering Heights* paintings are freezing in their azure beauty, their blinding light, but also the passion imprisoned in them for a private female space, for self-expression and artistic practice. The desire to outline an autonomous territory is, at the same time, a longing for validation, for love. This tension wells up in the lyrics of Kate Bush's song, similarly inspired by Brontë's novel, when Cathy, doomed to roam the ex-territory of the spirit world, comes knocking on Heathcliff's window: "On the other side from you / I pine a lot, I find the lot / Falls through without you."

As in *Wuthering Heights*, the paintings in the series *Caves* are entirely empty of human presence, which is only hinted by signs left behind. These are closed, desolate structures, which remind us that the turn to the forest—

¹ See Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" [*Das Unheimliche*, 1919], trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 2001).

much like Martin Heidegger's real retreat to his cabin in the forest—occurs against the backdrop of great darkness. The forest is not only beauty, serenity, and fresh air; it is also the refuge of the wolf, the villain, the recluse. The forest is intriguing and intimidating, enticing and dangerous. The forest, like nature, has a life of its own, and it is also a place of death. Who enters a cave on his own? The only redeeming gaze which the cave allows—as in one of the paintings in the series (*Untitled*, 2008)—is the one sent out, toward the light, back to the world.

Human figures were almost entirely absent from Betzer's paintings in those years. They only appear in two of the *Purple Rain* paintings: one features a naked man sitting on a branch wearing only shoes (*Untitled*, 2008)—a role reversal of sorts in relation to the Wolf Man's dream in Freud's case study;² the other presents a woman from her back, standing on a lakeshore jetty in twilight (*Untitled*, 2009). Here, too, the familiar scene from Caspar David Friedrich's painting (*The Monk by the Sea*, 1810–18) is reversed, and instead of the primeval majesty observed by the monk, the woman is confronted with a possibly golden, possibly toxic-rusty landscape of skies, water, and trees. The other paintings in the series are entirely empty of people, showing only structures and scenic expanses.

People—mostly men—emerged in the series *Run Betzer, Run* (2009–10). Based on photographs of men posing with their rifles and fishing/hunting spoils, these paintings are akin to selfie-era portraits—the selfie of a smug

² See Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (The Wolf-Man)" [1918], trans. and ed. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 1–122.

man. The photograph that set this series in motion was actually one of a woman, but it was never painted. In the summer of 2010, photos posted by former IDF soldier Eden Abergil to her Facebook page caused public uproar. In two of the photographs, which document the life in her military unit, she poses next to handcuffed, blindfolded Palestinian detainees with a smile on her face. Albeit denounced, it was decided not to press charges against Abergil, determining that her acts did not rise to the level of criminal abuse.³

Abergil's photographs, like similar photographs posted to social media by other IDF soldiers, are not the first of their kind—photographs that capture a humiliating situation, where soldiers smirk next to helpless detainees or prisoner of war. Outside Israel, one is especially reminded of the photos taken by U.S. troops at the Abu Ghraib prison where they served as jailers in 2003–04, staging the inmates in their custody in particularly abusive scenes.

In the *Run Betzer, Run* paintings, which are indeed based on photographs of legal hunting, Betzer indirectly highlights the pornography of violence built into this atrocious tradition, by pointing to its iconographic origins in depictions of hunters alongside their hunted game. The hunter is always a man, holding a weapon, one foot masterfully placed on the carcass of the bear or lion. At times, only the game is presented: pheasants and other fowl laid out on a table, a taxidermied deer's head on the wall, a bearskin carpet on the floor.

³ "The State Attorney's office decided not to press charges against Abergil, who posted [her] photos next to handcuffed Palestinians. Another [male] soldier who danced next to a handcuffed [female] Palestinian, and yet another [male] soldier, who threatened a handcuffed [male] detainee with his weapon, will also be interrogated"; Gilad Grossman, "Eden Abergil will not be interrogated, a soldier who threatened with a weapon—will be," *Walla News*, 16 June 2011 [Hebrew].

In effect, the series *Run Betzer, Run* consists of three sub-series: the first spans forest and landscape paintings, which spatially locate the events, introducing a narrative-topographic continuum of the landscape paintings from her previous series—we are still there, in the forest, whether physically or metaphorically. The second set of photographs focuses on the macho iconography of hunting, the weapons and prey. It features anonymous men—as well as Russian ruler Vladimir Putin—assuming the same poses of manliness: camouflage uniforms, rifles, bare chest, smug grin, dead animals; a catalogue of obtuse, self-satisfied violence. The third cluster shows only the victims of violence, those who survived it. One of these paintings (*Untitled*, 2010) portrays a group of youths, among them a boy and a girl, crying and hugging—the type of image published in the media after school shootings, which have become commonplace in the US. Similar images resulted from the Chechen siege of the school in Beslan, Russia, which devolved into a massacre with hundreds of casualties due to Putin's macho stubbornness.

And there is also one deviant painting in the series, which belongs to none of these three categories, featuring an Arab man in profile, walking, his face hidden by a tree (*Untitled*, 2010); not yet caught by the hunter, he walks on. While the series as a whole is imbued with the feminist spirit of a woman depicting the ailments of a smug male violence, in this painting the politics is very concrete and quintessentially Israeli. "Here" is not "there," and there are no romantic allegories here, nor hunting fields. It is an unusual painting in Betzer's oeuvre, reminding us that the paintings of "there" are also created "here," and that our real Palestinian-Arab neighbors are behind the tree.

The hunter series was followed by several turns in Betzer's oeuvre. In the next series, *Forget-Me-Not* (2012–14), she turned her gaze inward, from the cold alienation closer to herself. For the first time, she incorporated text into the works. The title of the series was inscribed-painted over a meticulous rendering of the eponymous flower, implying the signification gaps between word and image, and the concreteness of the linguistic signifier superimposed on an essentially mimetic representation. On another level, the text alludes to the place which Betzer claims for herself as a woman in the world, and specifically—in the world of culture and art—a place that deviates from the gothic narrative, and no longer settles for the tragic and the melancholic.

For the first time, Betzer clearly painted her own likeness, in an intimate situation and in close up, creating self-portraits modelled with defiant seductiveness. In three of them (all *Untitled*, 2012), the artist is seen reading a book, externalizing and reinforcing the literary affinities interspersed throughout her oeuvre. In one of these painting she quotes-appropriates Gustave Flaubert's famous observation: "Madame Bovary c'est moi" (Madame Bovary is me), written here in the original French; in another painting, the "flip side" of the former, she declares ironically, this time in Hebrew: "by the way, my name is Anat Betzer" (*Untitled*, 2013).

This series too, takes on the thematic concerns of the previous series: here she walks in the forest, like a mythological huntress, with a bow on her shoulder and a pair of alert hounds at her command (*Untitled*, 2012). The streaks of paint on her naked back in one of the paintings, where she is seen reading, her gaze turned toward the viewer—trickle into the forest, which is no longer as dark and gloomy as before: it is a forest that opens up to the

interior-domestic world, to a domestic genre such as still life, to floral arrangements and a vase, and to Betzer-Bovary herself, sprawled on her bed. Like many other details in her paintings, the nuanced realism of the flowers' beauty is disrupted and tarnished by the inscription, at times by "low," defiant, spiteful contents. At the bottom of the painting portraying a bed of flowers (*Untitled*, 2012), appears the inscription: "Shit Happens. Fuck."

Another motif that makes its first appearance in this series, and recurs in the following ones, is that of a cocky, dandyish male fowl. Some of the paintings feature male peacocks whose extravagant tails are fanned out or folded. Another series, *Locus Amoenus* (2016–18) includes a painting of a falcon hovering over its prey (*The End*, 2016), as if it were replacing the human male hunters. The series also spans a group of small format paintings depicting a variegated assortment of roosters of different breeds, with breasts puffed out. They are marked by their vivid coloration, which appears exaggerated compared to the restrained coloration that dominates the rest of the series. In a parodic gender reversal of the "centerfold" convention, the rooster paintings echo the childish-macho boastfulness of would-be hunks who puff out their chests for all to see.

Betzer's works swing between the beautiful and the flawed, between the majestic and the deliberately idiotic, between the meticulous-exact and the negligent-scornful. In *Locus Amoenos*, she seduces the viewers with depictions of flowering branches, garlands, and meticulous, eye-catching floral arrangements, which she "damages" with myriad stains, color smears, and drippings. These are often supplemented by inscriptions, which include titles of rock songs and phrases drawn from other hits. The flowering,

decorative "pleasant place," is pitted against dramatic declarations and demands from iconic songs, mostly sung or written by and about women—a world whose reflection in feminine rock is all but pleasant or serene.

Betzer entices us to indulge in the pastoral beauty, only to expose the poison that lies within. Hints of that poison have been interspersed all along the way. We, the viewers, are called on to read between the lines, from within and beyond the thick woods, under the pleasant surface; to read the pain, the violence, and the loneliness, in the paintings as in reality.