The Treachery of Romanticism:

Image and Text in Anat Betzer's Art

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Anat Betzer's foray into the art scene began in the conceptual realm. Her first exhibitions presented elaborate installations, which deconstructed the domestic sphere, setting the scene for continued examination of the potentialities and limitations of home, both as a metaphor for the seat of the individual's soul, and as a theater in which the domestic is enacted in all its potential for calm and storm, transcendence and ruin.

Houses, cabins, treehouses are a recurring theme in Betzer's art—always secluded, dark and impenetrable, often deserted and foreboding. But Betzer's work only rarely lends itself to its full dramatic rendering. Betzer shuns the figurative drama. Like a policeman encouraging stray passersby to move away from the scene of the crime, "Nothing to see here, nothing to see," we are egged on by the artist from canvas to canvas, trying to assess the essence of the drama taking place. Are we in the midst of a storm, or are we leisurely travelers in a winter scape? Are we lost, or are we found? Are we out of the woods yet?

Betzer's work constantly destabilizes. It is unnerving in its blending of meticulous figurative rendering—the honing of an elaborate, idiosyncratic technique for relentless detailed representation—and the outright rejection of the validity of this representation. Her refined command of painterly skills, technical mastery, and aesthetic sensibility are constantly threatened by annihilation.

The drama, therefore, is not thematic, but rather representational. It is enacted through recurring pictorial mechanisms, which undermine both general hermeneutical expectations, and ad hoc signification. The most striking of these mechanisms is arguably that of omission, either direct, such as in the case of the missing chicken heads, or indirect, through the blocking out of strategic areas of paint by gaping black or white circles. Superimposed disruptions in the form of color leaks and smudges, outright interruptions to the canvases' perspective and congruity, also thwart any attempt at realistic resemblance. A third mechanism is that of textual references and allusions which sidestep the original images, or underscore them with contrasting layers of significance.

Intense Cognitive Tension

Text and textual allusions figure often in Betzer's oeuvre, in varying roles and to different ends. In their most concrete manifestation they appear in the image of books, books being read, or rather in the image of readers immersed in books. They show up as titles, ominously prominent in an otherwise *Untitled* landscape, and as written inscriptions within the body of the work, impacting focus and interpretation to great effect.

Placing words and images in the same perceptual space has a long tradition in art history. Medieval manuscript writers in Christian Europe, Dadaists, and Surrealists, as well as American conceptual artists used image-text relations to evoke meanings beyond the power of words or pictures alone.

It is not a coincidence that the artist's only self-proclaimed self-portraits depict her in the act of reading. We are cued into a literary sensibility here that serves multiple functions within the body of work. The words, sentences, and allusions line the visual with an extra referential layer, pulling signifiers into the visible that are both external to it and significant. The artist critically engages the relation between what one sees and what one reads, creating intense cognitive tension. Image and text stage a categorical ambiguity that destabilizes what is perceived as the object in question.

Among Betzer's undermining mechanisms, the textual rhetoric is especially brutal in light of the greater action that seems to be taking place here—the artist's active rejection of the romantic throughout her oeuvre. Betzer's work contemplates classic romantic themes—nature and the wild, solitude, the ideals of romantic love—only to renounce them outright. Not coincidentally, the two literary masterpieces evoked by Betzer—*Wuthering Heights* and *Madame Bovary*—both feature heroines whose quest for an idealized, all-engrossing love is doomed to a tragic end. But these and other textual references are used by Betzer as a knife in the back of the Romantic endeavor. And as a knife it is doubly harsh as it employs writing—the more modern and further from the conventions of nature depictions—to stab the life out of the ideal that would do without it. Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote:

> And as we stray further from love
>
> We multiply the words,
>
> Words and sentences so long and orderly.
>
> Had we remained together

We could have become a silence.[1]

Split Potentials and Possibilities

The earliest textual reference in Betzer's work appears as the shared title of the two series dated 2006 and 2009: *Wuthering Heights*. Comprising a total of ten paintings, the focal point of this array is a solitary cabin, set in deep, foreboding woods. The scene is depicted from different angles, in different seasons, and by the changing quality of yellow and blue monochromatic light. Surrounding the cabin are woods, lovely, dark and deep; ancient in their massive trunks and tangled tops. In their midst, the cabin seems almost superimposed; in several depictions it appears to be floating slightly above the ground, transitory, lacking the deep-seated roots of its surroundings.

But more prominently: it is closed upon itself. The door is shut tight, perhaps even nailed in place: it seems not to have a knob, or a keyhole. And even if it had—who could enter or leave through its slender proportions? The windows, five on each side, share the door's unnaturally restricted structure, and even their seeming transparency is limited and opaque.

Who dwells hither? Who has been shut inside or out of this secluded abode, at the end of a road, which no one approaches, wrapped in a silence that is near tangible? In stark contrast to most of the artist's work, these series bear a title—one that goes a long way towards context and interpretation. Here, Betzer does not split straws. She supercharges this recurring silent scene with all the impregnated connotations of Emily

[1] Yehuda Amichai, "Quick and Bitter," trans. Assia Gutmann, in Yehuda Amichai, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 46.

Brontë's dark and brooding masterpiece. A classic of Romantic literature and one of the most emotionally charged works in the English language, it is the setting of intense longing and unrequited love, the epitome of immortal passion and the ravage it wrought.

Wuthering Heights is indeed a novel of houses. Its dialectical landscape is represented respectively by life at the two homes in which it unfolds: Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. The novel's eponymous lodging, stationed on the edge of the moor, is ragged and weather beaten, the scene of much calamity and neglect. Thrushcross Grange, on the other hand, with its wide drawing room windows and visions of light and luxury, set among majestic parks of hazel and oak, is inviting and accommodating.

Within their walls, the protagonists are driven by irresistible passion-lust, curiosity, ambition, intellectual pride, envy. The emphasis is on their desire for transcendence, to overcome the limitations of the body, of society, of time, rather than their moral transgressions. They yearn to escape the limitations inherent to life and may find that the only escape is death. Heathcliff's longings cannot be fulfilled in life.

As in Gothic fiction, buildings are central to meaning. The protagonists are caught between two losing propositions: the strangling social conventions and institutions of family and home at Thrushcross Grange; and the wild nature, dream and madness, physical violence, and perverse sexuality of Wuthering Heights. Initially, this may create the impression that the novel is two books in one. Ultimately, though, Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights fuse.

Betzer's cabins are similarly split between potentials and possibilities. Half lit, half shrouded in shadows, either naturally or in a stark halving by unnatural diagonal lines,

they are neither the Heights nor the Grange. They do not lend themselves to malleable interpretation. Rather, in their loneliness and enclosure they encapsulate the dark passions and stark solitude evinced by the titular novel. Brooding on their secrets of shameful sins and sorrowful misgivings, they shy away from the onlooker, closing in upon themselves, declaring—much like Heathcliff's pronouncement to Lockwood at the outset of the novel: "Thrushcross Grange is my own, sir,"—this is our own unknowable lot, and we shall bear it, unconsoled.

Lightning and Thunder

The *Wuthering Heights* series gives way to a lengthy exploration of monochromatic landscapes: A large body of solitary wintery scenes. It is as if the marshy moors of *Wuthering Heights*, with their billowy winds and winding woods, have spilled over from the original canvases and taken root outside their designated abode. As they multiply and become increasingly intricate, we almost feel we are destined to travel them forever, to circle about in the silent and sinister snowy vistas, simultaneously closing in on us and stretching as far as the eye can see.

And then—in one fell swoop—beauty is upon us. Fully fleshed, carefully curated, meticulously manicured. The muted grays and greens, the almost-black purples and blues give way to nature's joyous, flourishing palette. Betzer's flowers are exquisitely intricate: leaves and buds, thorns and tendrils and petals and branches, painted layer upon layer in exacting detail. The execution references the long tradition of floral paintings, from the great masters through botany almanacs to Romanticism laid bare.

The sheer size of the canvases is arresting. The compositions are blown far beyond their natural size. Grand white magnolias unfurl their delicate petals. Forget-me-nots innocently offer their cornflower-blue blossoms. Elegant lilies sit beside naïve daisies. Pink roses (pink roses!) bow their heavy heads. Spring is in full bloom. We are out of the woods. Or are we?

Human cognition dramatically favors image over text. While we are evolutionarily circuited to process images at a stunning speed (our survival has depended on it for eons), reading—a new invention in evolutionary terms, less than 6,000 years old—is not native to the human brain, which lacks an endemic reading faculty. Image recognition is an automatic, autonomous process. Decoding text requires the cooperation of multiple regions and operations, significantly slowing down our perception of the written word. The brain processes images 60,000 times faster than text.

And so, only after we are seized by the bright lightning mellifluous flowers, we tilt our head forward to make out the text, and hear—like a slap in the face—the rolling thunder brought on by the words.

Shit happens. Fuck.

I want to break your face.

I'm in my bed. I'm dying.

Forget me not.

The Dismal Futility of Love

The visual is deliberately compared and contrasted with the textual. The words blend with their blooming surroundings to produce meaning not inherent in either alone. We are forced to face the mysterious empty spaces between the two descriptive systems.

But although they come late to our perception, the words take precedence in our mind. In the vein of Michel Foucault's evaluation of René Magritte's iconic *The Treachery of Imagery* ("La Trahison des Images"), exercising semiotic conventions leads us to assume that there is more truth in the words than in the image; that the words can shed light on the image, but not vice versa.

The texts which come late to our cognition undermine our initial impression, but they stretch time in another dimension, too.

We have become unaccustomed to coming face to face with creations that have had time stamped into them through the concentrated wielding of time-consuming craftsmanship. Betzer's striking and much commented upon signature-layering technique, and immaculate, hyper-detailed rendering, confront us with time. In a sense, much of her work is a contemplation and a reckoning with time. But while the presence

of time in the image inflates its duration in our mind, the words are curt and abrupt. They stop time in its tracks.

The different textual allusions—short brute sentences, pop song lyrics—generate an array of interactions with the images. Some take an ironic stance, some create a detached distancing; others simply bleed in tangible pain, like a cry emitted from within the image. But as they loom over the idealized romantic scenes of voluptuous blossoming, at their heart they all speak to the futility of happiness, youth, and beauty. They are the fall from grace.

Floral depictions serve from antiquity as the acme of a moment frozen in time, a surge of beauty in its most elemental definition, harboring in its very nature the certainty of its demise. But Betzer's flower/text pairings are not a general recognition of the transience of life, in the vain of the *vanitas* or *memento moris* generously used by the Old Masters.

The texts here serve to contextualize a concrete setting. The words ground us. We know there is a woman here. And a love of grand passion. And we can feel the magnificent, horrible way it all ended. And no matter how hard the captions try to belittle or distance that end, they cannot all but speak of the dismal—we indeed feel a sort of resigned sadness—futility of love.

"O Rose thou art sick. / The invisible worm, / That flies in the night / In the howling storm: // Has found out thy bed / Of crimson joy: / And his dark secret love / Does thy life destroy,"[2] wrote 18th century British poet William Blake, who published books of his writing with his own illustrations, which evoked meanings beyond the power

[2] William Blake, "The Sick Rose," *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789–1794).

of words or pictures alone. In a dialectic trajectory to Blake, Betzer tells a very similar story. But while Blake's words and pictures affirm each other, the dissonance between what we see, what we are told, and what we feel here obtains a more unsettling, more concrete, and far less romantic rendering.

My Heart

And then, there is that one odd allusion, exceptionally placed in quotation marks, drawn from an altogether different cultural reference: "*Emma Bovary c'est moi*." This most famous of authorial sayings has cemented itself as an expression of the ultimate identification between the artist and his creation over the centuries. In the context of Betzer's art, it acts as a confession of the extent to which this whole oeuvre is the artist's self-portrait. This emotional exploration is not a detached existential or philosophical debate. The shame, shame, shame here is the artist's shame; the bleeding "MY HEART" is her own.

Betzer is fascinated by the romantic, but ultimately revokes it. She has a running tally with the promise of literary romantic ideals, which she explores with enchantment and a profound skepticism. But it is also a personal exploration, which channels the artist into her art. The artist—her body—is present in the empty houses, in the reading women, in the dialogue between the beauty, love, and time of the floral series.

This profound effect is achieved through a literary and textual sensibility that serves as a rhetorical mechanism, as a cultural reference, and a confession of the limits of the figurative representation of the human drama. Text underlines the persistent tension Betzer maintains between nature and artifice, storm and calm, art and fiction—which is one of the profound achievements of her art.