

## *SHOOTING PICTURES*

### *Following Anat Betzer: A Fragment from a Discussion between Galia Yahav and Tsibi Geva*

TSIBI: Yesterday I read an interview with Marlene Dumas, an artist who paints by photographs. She points that in photography the common expression is "to take a picture", while in painting we say "to make a painting", and she says: "all my figures were 'shot' by the camera and framed before I painted them". The camera shoots and hunts the image. According to Dumas, her work exists in the territory between "taking a picture" and "making a painting". Luc Tuymans, Peter Doig and their contemporaries struggle with the question of relating to the photograph as a source. Anat Betzer's works lead me to ask questions about the source, how this quest is undertaken and what it seeks, what are its motives, where it all started and where it's headed. I have a feeling that the group of works in this exhibition will be heterogeneous, that it will produce an interesting position.

GALIA: Indeed, there is a whole generation, or should I say a type, of painting-by-photographs, that allegedly asks this question, but I think that Betzer's painting includes a different relation between painting and photography. It is a painting that establishes its fundamental potential by recruiting photography to the needs of the artistic act in a manner that doesn't cancel the status of the photograph-by-itself, but vice versa. Nowadays, the manner that we obtain photographs is of critical importance, because the technical and distributional possibilities have a direct affinity with the photographs' truth conditions. For example, are these photographs on behalf of the American regime, or were they secretly taken by American soldiers or Iraqi civilians? Is this a Nazi image made to show the world that everything is fine in the ghetto, or are these underground materials that barely made their way out? Are these photographs a testimony, and on behalf of whom, or maybe propaganda, that is, representations that conceal, and so on and so forth. We can discuss the status of the source only by asking who controls the photographs, who distributes them, the victims or the hangmen, and by which tactics they do so. I feel that the dominant discourse of art tends to ignore these questions when discussing paintings based on photographs.

TSIBI: There is an approach that sees painting as a way to "get things done", a secondary act, a measure to be taken. I'd rather read these paintings through their modality, through the pictorial doing, which is allegedly the drama of the means. In a certain sense, the medium is the message, the "how" that charges the "what". And this is in no way a suggestion to cancel the "what". According to this perception,

painting isn't only a way to represent a motive, but is by itself a representation that confronts the motive, that tightens it and loads it with tension. The image gets its meaning not only from its source and from what we know about it but also from the material that forms it and from its very doing. This is an approach that places the current series in the historical context of painting, as a possibility of a contemporary realism that deals with the relations between photography and painting. It is from the drama of the act of painting, from the physical gestures, from the materiality, from the way that a painting reads, translates or interprets a photograph or an Internet image, from there the meaning arises. This is a kind of a subjectification of allegedly flat data, of an image that is actually already dead. The voyage of painting is analogous to a hunting voyage and to the "victory shot" at the end, the bear's corpse.

GALIA: The drama of the painting is usually possible only because the drama of the photograph had already been neutered and spayed, and the photograph is declared to be a "source" due to the production of political blindness towards it in the public sphere. Most photography-based paintings today don't manage to retain a tense debate about victory and defeat because they're born into a universe of images, and they accept them as self-evident. It's not a domain that is still under debate.

The move taken by the series we're dealing with is like a conceptual act of collecting in order to make a theme present. Through the endless zapping spaces, a Hemingwayish drama is taking place: there are men with guns and they're doing it, and for them it's a hobby. Where does it happen? It happens in the photograph. It happens in the ritual of self-photography at the end of the day.

What the series proves to me is not painting but a critical presence of photography. The construction of contemplation through moves internal to the painting and through the drama of the doing as the categories by which we discuss the exhibition is a construction that assumes its possibility by getting rid of the thematics or by adding them later. And this is already a political decision.

I want to suggest an additional possibility, to describe the evolution of the series of paintings of hunters (hangmen) from Betzer's previous series (painted but not yet exhibited) of paintings of hanged people (*Strange Fruits*, 2008). There, there was a focus on the victims, the damages, and slowly an accusatory profile of the hangman, the hunter, was formed. In this focusing process, some choices and interim decisions were made, and they have to be read and caused to speak in order to understand the ethical meaning of the project: there are no big scenes of hunting trips with horses and hounds in the series, no firing squads. There are no long shots and no photographic spontaneity. And there's also no inventor of hunting, no arch-murderer, mastermind, major hunting architect. There's no von Clausewitz or Hitler. There are only morons, simple men, who developed and refined their hobby to perfection, men who get things done, checkpoint soldiers. These are separate portraits, usually post-hunting, after the achievement, at the moment of satisfaction that purposefully displays itself. There's self-display. That is,

the hunt in the consciousness of the photographer is not only the act itself, it doesn't only take place in the waiting, or in the crucial moment, but also in the fabricated formality of the product, in the publicity. In this sense, there's a semblance between this allegedly harmless hobby and executions, since the feeling of accomplishment doesn't exist without the publicity of the killing. Without the "here lie our bodies", all we're left with is a painting of a man and his dog.

There are certain choices here that produce Betzer's unique story in this universe of "victory over the bear", including the gap between the presumed consciousness of the photographed and our own consciousness. Is Betzer producing a sad gaze upon the wretched or a horrified gaze upon the victors? Are we in the domain of a wonderful male hobby? Are we in a crime scene? Does overcoming the beast amount to a victory of the human spirit or to a bestial adherence to the food chain? In this way, I understand *Run Betzer Run* as carrying a double meaning (who says that? the hunter or the hunted? and who is the addressee?), so as far as I'm concerned this series deals with/ the personal responsibility of "he who gets things done". This responsibility could be tied to the work of painting, since it is also an art of getting things done that is situated at the ambivalent or uncomfortable position between the hunter and the hunted, proudly displaying an achievement while already being guilty, pushing realism into the domains of the symbolic, allowing an imaginary relation to the hunter.

TSIBI: Every reading that skips the drama of the doing as content might miss the essence, since Betzer's paintings aren't only a story. They have a body, an intonation, an emotional temperature, they radiate intensiveness. The painting's content cannot be separated from its surface. These are paintings that carry delay and amazement, time and wonder. Barry Schwabsky says: "even though photography taught us the modern concept of the image, it is painting that allows us to internalize this concept. It is a question of touching and of being touched". In a certain sense, from the way that information, the primary picture, is transferred through the system, and from what the artist's "digestive system" does to this image, how it emits it to the world – from there the meaning breaks forth.