

Black Garden

By Orian Morris

On “Locus Amoenus,” a recent show and body of work by Anat Betzer

1. The Trial of the Flower



p. N17 - Untitled, 2018, oil on canvas, 150x100 cm

Locus Amoenus – Latin for ‘the pleasant place,’ and among the denominations of heaven before The Fall – reveals itself, in a recent body of work by Anat Betzer, as a place of great ambiguity. At times it will manifest itself as a black flower, at others as a hemorrhaging accessory; it can be a bird or a text, a maxim added on to the picture. But actually, could this ‘locus amoenus’ not be the place we fall down to, from love?

There is this phrase that I used to play with: “It only takes a cockroach to turn heaven into hell.” Which is to say, this place of pleasantness is incredibly fragile. It’s static, devoid of motion, of temporality too. As an organizing principle, this certainly applies to Betzer’s flower paintings in the series, all of which embody a frozen moment, even where this moment reveals itself in its excesses – the flowers too open, the plants wilting and overgrown. This excess is due to the fact that this series, as a whole, is parody: a parody of paradisiacal representations. These are the postcards sent back from someone who’s been to paradise to visit. Addressed to the everymen, to the common person, the citizen, they retell the story of paradise, informing us that things are pretty shitty over there. Because the story of the heavens is always that of a falling from heaven. As is here, precisely, the case.

Why paint flowers? As with every other question in art it comes with several answers together, all flowing in simultaneously – which is crucial, since while a painting is experienced within an instant, all too hastily, then from the side of its making it is all drawn-out process and reflection: there is process and pause, drying and painting over, staining and coating, one layer after next. It makes sense, then, that this is how one should think and write about painting, too: from an acknowledgment of painting’s multitude of layers, of its polyphony, if you will. But back to the question above: Why paint flowers? First of all, because flowers are simply there, colorful and pleasing to the eye; already in antiquity their petals were used to extract pigments and paint, which already in itself lends them a particular place in art’s genealogy. Flowers, then, are the progenitors of

paint, which is a fundament of latter-day painting. They are an ancestor to painting, and an equivocal ally to the painter (because there's also the place painting's failure). And this is just one answer. Right beside it there is another – that of the long tradition, in art, of representing flowers. As flowers are appealing, aesthetically – an assertion that hardly anyone, supposedly, can contest – they had come to symbolize, over many years, beauty itself. In the language of painting, a flower takes the place of 'the beautiful'. This is why they are so often revisited, time and again; because art entertains this tense discourse over the question of beauty, over the thing it was always tasked, ostensibly, with representing: that which is beautiful above all else. This accounts for the steady fixation, in the tradition of art – in the Western as much as in the Eastern – with flowers and their representation.

To anyone trying their hand at painting, the flower is a trial. Images of flowers are so ubiquitous in the history of painting (think of all the Renoirs and van Goghs; one can even consider the totality of Pollock's oeuvre as one big flourish), that the flower becomes a trial of sorts. There you are, taking your place on the stage of the history of painting. From antiquity to the post-impressionists and hyper-realists, you are measured up against everything that came before you, over how you execute a flower. The flower, 'unwittingly,' communicates with the whole tradition of art, with every flower in the repertoire. We've said earlier that in a picture, a flower takes the place of 'the beautiful'. As an assertion, this would obviously sound reductive, as if a flower could singlehandedly substitute art all by itself. For isn't art concerned not *just* with 'the beautiful'? What about all the grisliness in painting, all that is mangled, offensive, disfigured and off-putting? (A whole category of things sometimes referred to as 'the abject' in a discourse no longer very new.) What about all that is blood-shedding and stench-exuding? Corpses, carcasses, decay and putrefaction are also codified topics in the tradition of painting, but even as such they appear as the obverse side of an equation whose other side is occupied by art's eternally sanctified and sublime: the thing of beauty.

So the flower is a longstanding trial, one that Betzer has now undertaken to subject herself to, of being measured up against the classics. It is a trial, then, of blooming and vegetation. To that, however, it should be said right away: Betzer's flourishes are, for the most part, black. Her growths are adverse, excessive, their proliferation malignant. Occasionally the paintings show thick, unsightly spills of color, too reminiscent of blood. The plants seem to grow flesh, too much of it. And then there are these sarcastic-ironic comments, on nature and culture, that sometimes appear on a painting, empty platitudes that make art's monumental endeavor fall flat. A flower is indeed a trial to the painter because it is a hard subject to imitate. Go paint a flower: everybody knows what it looks like, how it feels to the touch. But how to evoke smell with brushstrokes on a canvas? A flower is a trying thing to depict because a flower is *process*, it is an instance of a potential fulfilled. And the flower is the high point of that process: it was sown and it sprouted, it germinated and grew, and only then, for a short moment, did it bloom and open to show its face. And so, a painting of a flower embodies dialectic between the flow of time and a momentary instance. Beauty is but a moment, frozen – as we've already said – and the painting of a flower is the process that had brought us here. This is what makes the flower such a difficult subject to paint. It bursts with connotations, and so it takes a seasoned artist to dare confront it, face to face – canvas to hand.

Which is why these paintings of Betzer's are so replete with defenses; because in the 'locus amoenus' too dangers are lurking everywhere, the slightest gesture there is already tantamount to a fall. This is why Betzer's *Locus Amoenus* is so completely 'after the fall,' post-cataclysm, after the

blow. It is all defenses, sarcasm, cynicism and irony. It is playful, witty, flat, a postcard. It is parody, schmaltz, kitsch, artfully accomplished, well-executed for execution's sake. It is rhetorical brushwork, letters unto an image, a place of over-saturated auto-interpretation. It is frustration and discontent – but most of all, perhaps, what it really is, is parody: the great parody of the heavens; of the Western tradition of flower paintings. It is a batch of postcards sent from a paradise that never was; that never will be. And this, perhaps, is the greatest defense it contains; the assurance that it “never will be” – from fear of falling down from it.

2. The Trial of Vigor



p. N2 - Untitled, 2014, oil on canvas, 75x100 cm

The trial of the flower, then, is likewise a trial of painterly skill, of performance and vigor. And there's nothing like a painting of Betzer's of Samson, his hands tied together, to confront head-on the question of vigor. *Painting No. 2* is the re-painting of a detail – or better yet of a chunk, since these are issues of the flesh we're dealing with here – a chunk, then, from *Samson Breaking his Bands* (1784), a painting by the little-known John Francis Rigaud, an Italian-British painter from the late baroque. Rigaud paints Samson with Delilah during one of her repeated, and as yet unsuccessful, attempts to hand him over to the Philistines. The story of Samson, as we know, is the tragedy of potency and might – a potency so great it falls back to impotence. Rigaud chooses to paint Samson not at the scene of his eventual capture, but in one of his feats of strength, where he still has the upper hand over his numerous persecutors – a peculiar moment to paint, since despite the spectacle of male vigor that put on display, prevailing over the feminine treachery and cunning of Delilah's, we know how the story ends. So in a sense, this vigor we see is already held in dialectic tension. The physical might put on display is only transient – as is youth, the body and its muscles. Nevertheless, what body is this, what muscles. Hence the territory Betzer enter to in offering up her own version of the subject matter is a charged and equivocal one to begin with. Conspicuously, she has resorted to two main actions to tamper with the original: reframing and masking. In the original composition – as one would expect – a whole drama unfolds, and, given our prior knowledge of the biblical story, we also know what had preceded this moment and what is still to follow. With Betzer's painting, however, it is the opposite: movement and action have been stilted and there's only flesh to be seen, in abundance; a flesh subjected to tethers and torments, tied to itself in a bond that seems to double the identical twins of the hands. This is the focal point of the composition as reframed by Betzer. And there's no escaping from it. Another outcome of Betzer's reframing is that Samson, now anonymous, no longer has his head; and in the absence of a head, this could just as well *not* be Samson, his identity now lost. These are the first transformations that Betzer's act of re-framing subjects the story to. The second act, far less subtle than the first, is the giant black circle painted over Samson's loins – the loins of this body of flesh, rather, anonymous and tied to itself. In a sense,

these operations of Betzer's only work to highlight the disguise mechanisms that were already in place in Rigaud's original. Rigaud's means of disguise, however, were diagetic – that is, appropriated from the representable world – and hence far more subtle: a piece of cloth is used to safeguard his modesty, even if the lines of this cloth delicately draw the contours of his masculinity. So Betzer, in effect, continues an existing tendency; yet in pointing to these disguise mechanisms she just as well disrupt them – and not with the white of a white lie, or a thin veil, but with a devouring, emasculating black that violently eclipses her headless Samson's genital area in its entirety. Betzer is out to tell us something about the times – times so filled with principled interdictions and political correctness that they leave no room for a feat of heated passion, not even for a tragedy of potency to run its course. Vigor here is bound, tormented. Nothing budes, nothing is said. Everything's thwarted, except from the tracks of irony and parody; the tracks of any instinctual, urgent meaning have all been closed off. And still, how painstaking the work of this parody, how tremendous the effort of repainting an old master. And at close range at that: in a close-up, or a blow-up. Especially that the whole notion of enlarging, so tied to the procedures of photography – and digital photography in particular – goes counter to the art of painting. How ironical, then, to resort to this procedure in an art of the hand. But these are things that hyper-realism has already looked into, to be more photographic than even photography itself. And this is not exactly where Betzer is headed either, since for her scaling-up is as much abstraction, diverting as it does the curvaceous mass of the muscles, the toned contours of the body, to a realm of color and light. Her brushwork is certainly evident here, and not as a transparent means of copying but rather as a confessional outlet for art, allowing it to divulge itself in other realms of this painting. This is also true of the brown undertones absorbed into the canvas, like watered-down coffee, which likewise complicate the image's counter-balance of artificiality. Even so, it is hard to deny this spectacle of flesh – a spectacle that, on account of its close proximity, and of its framing, surpasses the original; even on account of its masking, which at the same time is parody, defiance and homage. Tradition and subversion reside side-by-side, they are held together, counter-balanced and evened-out. Samson is perhaps Samson no more, figuring in a painting that is perhaps no longer a painting. Rather, it is a critique of painting, of society too – no less than it is homage to a painter informed by the great masters of the Baroque, by the drama of *chiaroscuro*. At the same time, it is an act of bravery on the part of Betzer's, who takes on the challenge of being measured up against the classics, of trying her hand against that of a predecessor's: Can she withstand the grip of the classics? Can she match the hand as painted by the hand of another? An artist put to the test, then, to the trial of painterly vigor.

3. Faithfulness



p. N26 - Untitled, 2017, oil on canvas, 50x40.5 cm



p. N37 - Untitled, 2017, oil on canvas, radius 30 cm

Why the rooster? This, I think, is the first question that confronts us in seeing *Locus Amoenus's* series of rooster paintings. Puzzled at first, we then succumb to the richness of its color – especially given the rarity, in Israeli art, of outright *coloristes*, with Betzer herself included, as she too is better known for her use of black-and-white, and all the grays in-between. And so, where could this series have come from, so not of the moment, and out of place? One possible explanation arises – that these roosters provide an opportunity to dabble in color – but still this subject matter, obstinate and unrelenting. For why the rooster, and not just one but many? That the rooster is, in fact, a stand-in, a replacement for something else, is hard to circumvent, given that these roosters stand before us, parading. Still, any conversation with them would prove utterly frustrating, one-sided. Fragmented, too. In their refusal to partake in our art discourse, they are intensely defiant. And the non-compliance they embody is also one of provocation: they are well-aware of our gaze, yet choose not to return it. The parading rooster is one hermetic kind of animal.

That a rooster's portrait is, in fact, the portrait of a non-human, of an *un-human*, is also hard to circumvent. It is a forfeiture of the obvious subject matter one would expect; which is why it points to it, inevitably. A would-be human being, yet so utterly impenetrable, and whose only presence is outwardly, wordless, with no flow of consciousness; one whose presence is sealed shut, and shuttering. But soon all this will turn into comedy, a comedy of impenetrable arrogance: *Is this a man?* And then, as soon as these painted roosters begin to multiply, into a comedy of manners, of mores and intrigue: roosters in groups of two, paired together, or yet in threes; a foursome, double-dating, and ultimately five or six of them – a society game of greater nuance and complexity. But muted all the same: a muted comedy in subtle, exotic hues, going from greens and reds to whites and maroons. And all the while a silence that lingers, an impermeability.

The painter challenges us with her subjects – these roosters that, defiantly silent, are putting on an elaborate show of profiles, angles and vectors. Never are they frontal. Clearly, the painter speaks to us through their mutedness. Ultimately, it is not them she pokes fun at, but us – for the roosters here come to replace man. Because in the end, in looking at them we are looking at ourselves – which comes at the price of an exponentially-growing foreignness, once it becomes clear that this species, far removed from anything familiar to us, is not native to our local climate. These are pageantry roosters, a display breed, pastoral competition roosters from the American Midwest, from the century before the last. These roosters have emerged from a golden age of classic Americana – like the family portraits of farmers by Grant Wood, painter of the famed *American Gothic* (a painting that, in its grave solemnity, is no less comical). Are these not the same farms that we see in the background?

Against the precision of line, texture and color, it is sometimes the background that settles in, on final inspection, as the actual subject matter. See for example the abstract that sneaks in from behind the roosters in *Painting No. 26*, where the green texture in the back comes to assume an almost meaty consistency, beaming here and there as if it were the painting's true frontal plane, the dramatic nexus of a composition where two pairs are seen in profile. One could go as far as to say that the extent of abstraction – or better yet, of 'the painterly' – is a recurrent theme in this series. The color fields of the foreground tend to blend into those of the back, as again the painter appears to cheat on what should have been, ostensibly, her subject matter, reminding us that the interplay of color has precedence over the figures that populate it. (And this after it had seemed that the

paintings were striving toward rooster-like perfection, toward a feat of meticulous execution and figurative showmanship.)

This act of betrayal, then, is always twofold. It could be that every betrayal is such, since to cheat on the painted figures – with the color textures – likewise manifests itself as cheating on the beholder. This betrayal of Betzer’s of her viewers is doubled, multiplied over. Not just twofold, then, but tripled: first it is man who is cheated on, with the rooster figures at the front, then the roosters too are cheated on, this time with the background – a betrayal which cannot but bring us back to the most primary betrayal, the painter’s betrayal of her viewers, of artistic tradition, though she for one cheats *on* artistic tradition *with* artistic tradition. For these are paintings, after all, and self-referentially so. Or it might be that this betrayal is, in the final account, a call of allegiance of the painter’s to painting – no longer to man.

To what extent can man claim advantage over rooster, one might ask – and hence, the rule at play here is the Constitutional Law of the Dignity of Painting – no longer that of the Dignity of Man. And this, perhaps, constitutes the rooster’s ultimate significance in all of this, in that he is a representation of “man has no advantage over rooster,” being as it is that the only substance the painter is bound up with, and committed to, is painterly substance. Regardless of subject matter, a painting is a painting is a painting, and must remain so, given that the only God liable of worship, the only actual, enduring divinity here, is that of disruption and replacement – hence even this rooster of betrayal and forfeiture is betrayed by the painter in *Painting No. 37*, where both the rooster and the tree beside it have their heads cut off. The painter will cheat on the rooster with the rooster itself, remaining faithful to ‘the painterly’ alone. Faithful only to painting, then, she pokes fun, sneers and belittles; since these to Betzer are works of a relatively small format, they are intentionally small. And this is the final jeer the painter addresses its real subjects; the rooster-like cipher to man.

4. Staining and Incriptions, Beheadings, Disguises and Omissions



p. N5 - Untitled, 2016, oil on canvas, 150x100 cm



p. N12 - Untitled, 2018, oil on canvas, 150x100 cm

The paintings in *Locus Amoenus* can be said, as a whole, to be figurative: There are the American competition roosters, shown in their natural surrounding; there are the plants, intertwined and

making their way up the canvas; birds of different species also make their appearance – doves, owls, song birds. However, there's barely a single painting that isn't tainted with a disruption of some sort – staining, color spills, censorship marks or heads that have been cut off: in two of the rooster paintings, the painter seems to have forgotten the roosters' heads altogether. Everything else in the painting seems natural and easy enough – except that the heads are missing. So it is with the re-framing of Samson, which happens to omit the hero's head, as well as the censorship of the black circle placed on his loins. But it isn't just these circles that, either in black or white, show up in many of the works and are put into action, eclipsing what's underneath them, whether humans or plants. There are also the color stains – a disguise strategy in its own right, which reaches its peak in *Painting No. 5*, where the painting's hemorrhaging heart is splattered over with a reddish-black so intense that it barely allows a glimpse into the inscription underneath, in English, at the heart of this heart: *MY HEART*. It is a cry emitted from within the painting, which, admittedly, wasn't too pastoral to begin with, with its thick red vegetation and flourishes. Still, a painting such as this, with its intricate decorative elements, would have commanded considerable skill, precision and technique. It's true that the black foliage in its lower half already foreshadows the crisis that is to erupt at its midst – that is, at the bleeding heart – but nothing prepares us to this big gushing wound, torn open and agape. It calls for an interpretation, for emotional understanding and sympathy; but it is, at the same time, bold and literal in the extreme: the question of what had led the artists to unleash, so thoroughly, her rage on a work of painting so meticulous, and doubtless excruciating. Why would she go to such length, to such intricacies of line – in vain? – if she ends up splashing it with a bucket of bubbly red-black paint? The answer is right there, nearly encrypted within this mass of color, at the heart of the painting: *My Heart*. My bleeding heart. Which gives the complete answer.

Two other paintings in *Locus Amoenus* also seem to bleed, their soft smears of redness applied on a nearly white canvas. *Painting No. 12* appears as an exquisitely charming postcard, with, at its center, an English quote, surrounded by assorted attributes of “the place of pleasantness”: vines intertwined and abundant with fruit, two adorable-looking song birds and an oval, lunar-like shape shining its tender light from behind. At first, the soft reddish stains seem to fit in nicely with the decorative composition surrounding the postcard's central inscription. But on further inspection, blood seems to be shed down below from the speaking bird. The bird, then, is at the source of the stains here, smears that the painting had absorbed and soaked up like menstrual blood on a white sheet. So it is in one of the rooster paintings, *Painting No. 26*, where a light-red staining appears under the rooster, similar to this. It is unclear, though, what function these stains have in the context of the picture. On the one hand, they communicate with all the other shades in the painting's system of colors, taking part in its overall composition. But on the other, what are these stains, and where do they come from? This only the painter herself can know – or, as it turns out, not even she, since as the inscription in *Painting No. 12* tells us, likewise stained: *Go ask Alice, I think she'll know*.

More mysterious still are the circles of censorship seen across different paintings in this body of work, placed on unlikely areas. Greater in size, we sometimes see them at the bottom of a painting – as in *Painting No. 14*, where fruits and foliage in purple proliferate on a backdrop of white, shaded by still subtler smudges of purple. Two branches generate a kind of upward-moving, vertical rhythm to this composition. These, as before, are encircled by a postcard's thin rectangular framing in purple, which goes to point out, perhaps, the decorative status of the subject matter. But then we have this black circle of censorship, overshadowing something whose purpose is unclear. On further inspection, however, we see that the circle was placed over another circle, wider still, in white; white

on white, with black on top. What a strange arrangement is this. The principle behind it, we realize, is one of arbitrariness; actually, it's all about concealment, about taking away from the illusionistic power the painted subject, itself already compromised by its framing as ornament, as a decorative element, a bright-purple wallpaper on a white wall. The black circle, then, is an annotation by the painter, a comment; a painterly critique of painting. As are the distorted proportions of the shapes: circles in a rectangle, not quite circumscribed, unable to circumscribe either. They are out of place, purely mechanical. Yet the color that traces them is wholly uneven. There is a mechanical staining and signing of the painter's, manually applied. This is an artist's signature – but turned on its head, since the very thing that ought to have implied authorship, and ownership, to signal that the painting is its own property, is masked under this black circle, the property of none. And here is another statement on the state of things between viewer and painting, since if the latter isn't anyone's property – the painter's, one would have assumed – it surely isn't yours to have, either. Decorative as it may be, it is still defiantly autonomous. *I don't belong to you*, it seems to say.



p. N32 - Untitled, 2016, oil on canvas, 30.5x25 cm

5. Smudges and Drips



p. N7 - Untitled, 2017, oil on canvas, 100.5x67 cm



p. N8 - Untitled, 2017, oil on canvas, 100.5x67 cm



p. N9 - Untitled, 2017, oil on canvas, 100.5x67 cm

Another technique Betzer employs to upset and disrupt the viewer are the multitude of color drips she lets descend down the canvas, disturbances that are hard to miss in a series of white paintings (Nos. 7–9). In all three paintings, the dark blossoms of the branches are seen on a murky backdrop of white, smeared with splatters and spills that deliberately obscure – punk-style – the finely depicted detail of the foliage. Marked by the meagerness of their painterly material, the added grime in fact balances out the painting, toning down their essential bareness. The soiling intensifies the presence of the painter too, consolidating the overall materiality present on the canvas; bareness and evanescence are evened out by the negative discourse of drips and smears. And, the more murkiness is played up, so is the presence of the painter in the painting, setting an overall mood for the show that undercuts the perceived innocence of flower depictions, of sprouting and growth. Because growth here, as has already been noted, though it strives to rise high and above in these composition, remains, in the final account, adverse growth; it is always wilting back into the obscure, into a spirit of smears and soils.

6. Black Garden



p. N20 - Untitled, 2018, oil on canvas, 160x55 cm x 2

A diptych of two canvases, *Painting No. 20* could be the most confessional in the whole series. No longer concealed in acts of masking and disruption, negativity here is glaring and silent, like a great big depression laid out on a therapist's desk; except that here are neither desk nor therapy. What we do have is a devotional-ecclesiastical format, with the diptych's two elongated canvasses topped by arches, like the nave of a cathedral. Painted black on black, the canvasses are so dark as to struggle for their own visibility; so dark as to make us rethink the relations of color and light. The tendency toward obscurity was already signaled in *Painting Nos. 10* and *11*, likewise extremely dark, only that these had shimmering objects in them – a lunar circle or a pigeon's plumage that pop off of the black of the background, guiding the eye to other, similarly lit details. A painting of pigeons also contained a telltale sign, where one could observe, on close inspection, the dark contours of the painter herself traced in the black of the background. She is watchful, looking at us, as if to say *I am here, right inside the black, returning your gaze*. Taking this shaded atmosphere even further, the diptych *Black Garden* is wholly contained in darkness – yet this darkness is abuzz, it grows and proliferates as its branches of gloom spread out and intertwine in their discrete, uninhibited growth. And so we must go deeper into this darkness, we must adjust our eyes and wait for some clarity to emerge. But even this black symphony of hers Betzer injects with a stark counterpoint; with the bright glassy white of

the familiar song bird. Twice we see it – once shiny, seated on a branch, and again overshadowed and in pieces, made of three fragmented brushstrokes that add up to an odd contour. So this fantasy too, in a sense, is taken away from us. We can only know it as something that is no more: the bird of paradise as a set of brushstrokes, as the strange puddle of color that forms behind it, a secretion of some sort. And this painting, religious as it is, likewise breaks the figure into a series of shapes – three being the minimum required for a series. And a descending series it is, negative, in a black paradise, a place of pleasantness that is pleasant no more.



p. N10 - Untitled, 2018, oil on canvas, 150x100 cm



p. N11 - Untitled, 2017, oil on canvas, 150x100 cm

7. If there is, indeed, a heaven



p. N19 - Untitled, 2018, oil on canvas, 100x70 cm

This uneasy body of work concludes with the final painting in this series, signing off on a wholly different note. Not that it hadn't been hinted to before – the clues are there in the Samson painting, for one, and in another, classic-looking painting of maidens in a Bacchanalia. However, after returning time and again, it is here that the black circle finally begins to unravel its mysteries; *a secret garden*. There is a woman inside it, perhaps the painter herself, seated on a branch and looking behind her, at the secret garden; a first glimpse, perhaps, at the forbidden fruit, if not a late and retrospective one. And in this blackness a great big drama erupts, breaking out of the circle. A cream-white blossom is exploding like fireworks, bubbling from below and over the circular template

to spread out and across, finally to adorn the surface in its entirety, out of bounds, no longer enclosed either by the circle or by the thin rectangle traced in a darker shade. It seems as though every element in this series had led here, to a painting that responds to the classics in its own terms. Yes, *it is man* – a woman in fact, once more she can claim the center, not confidently perhaps, threatened as she is with decapitation, with her black hair, black-on-black, threatening to wipe out the remainder of her slender face, the one that looks away from us, to the heart of this painting's darkness. But the same pearly-white that revolves around the circle is also that of her body, the same color associated with this blossoming that bursts from every direction, rising up to explode this deepest black from within – the same shade as that of the garden in previous paintings. The evocation of gloom and depression is repressed no more, it is manifest, constantly, without becoming this painting's dominant force. This mother-of-pearl, this creamy-white is what comes to emerges here in its full extent, fleshed out like the flesh of the woman in the painting. If there is, indeed, a heaven in Betzer's *Locus Amoenus*, then it must be this black garden of hers, as seen here in all its glory. Her refined command of painterly skill she directs at the ancients, at the masters of lore, like a weapon, with fleshed-out blossoms that are no less carnal than the flesh of their exalted output. Hers is as balanced and measured as the calm restraint of the neo-classics, because balance is always a conflict successfully resolved in a compatibility of light and obscurity, of the plain and the colorful. And here Betzer achieves just that, in the show's final painting, whose exemplary technique makes the whole series seem as the long and fraught endeavor that have led up to it. Because in the end Betzer is center-stage – which is also the center of this painting, commanding it to be tested, here, for all to see. But here too she lets it be known, *my eyes do not seek out your gaze*; they are in pursuit of the lost gaze of the classics, of the old, venerable masters, from times immemorial; from the lost paradise of *the painterly*.