

"I Might Be Painting Just To Emerge"

Thoughts About Anat Betzer's Works

Tsibi Geva

1. Anat Betzer's paintings of recent years focus on forested areas, groves, and snowy, dark and cold sceneries.

In an earlier set of works ("Wuthering Heights", 2005-2007), there is a hidden tree house emerging from between the trees as the core of the painting, a refuge, a shelter. The forested house (in some cases built on a tree like a childhood playhouse), like Hansel and Gretel's house, is a place of assurance and of danger, "a nest, a fantasy, a place in the world, a work of inherence".¹

In some of the works in this set, we see Robert Willson's Treehouse, imprisoned, disproportionate, closed and delineated among the trees. This is a conceptual house, "a model of a house" more than a warm and safe Home. Betzer's painting expresses an artistic comment on art, like an ars-poetic sally that sometimes appears in her work and expands its sources: books, web images, and the history of art.

2. Looking at Betzer's work throughout the years reveals an axis of action that seems as a development of a serial, consistent, methodological motive, from which mutational divisions derive, projecting the painting with new levels of meaning.

"When the true artist *works* on one of his favorite issues [...], he evokes - unconsciously - the data of all other issues. Even when his exploration seems partial, it is always complete. [...] The *issues* of the painting, the ones magnetizing its history, are often solved indirectly: not out of the exploration that led to them, but rather to the

¹ Gaston Bachelard, "Poetics of Space".

contrary - when it seems the painters, deep into the dead end, forget these issues, allowing themselves to be drawn to other places, and suddenly, in the midst of that same distraction, they rediscover them and flourish through the obstacle. This silent history, making its way in the maze through bypassing, breaking the law, trespassing and sudden urges, does not indicate the painter does not know what they want, but rather - what they want is beneath their objectives and means, and they control all our practical activity."²

3. In recent works of Betzer, we rarely see the house. Snow covers the branches, sometimes suppresses them heavily. The painting leads us into the Nothingness. It is an invitation to a retinal journey, where the eye is drawn into- and is blocked by trunks, by entangled branches, a locked garden of flows and smears. "I wander again and again, a trail in the forest, but it is clear, just a strip of sky seen above it, and otherwise it is thick and dark. Still, the wandering continues desperately, and besides: one step away from the trail and I am a thousand steps into the forest, alone, until I wish I could fall down and never get up."³

Sometimes there are also processed fragments present, cut from the forest of the history of art. As if by withdrawing our look to the German romanticism districts, Caspar David Friedrich's ring of oak trees appears, empty of any human figure and as luring as a hole in the history of paint. What is taken from there? The shadows of the trees, like arteries, veins or hair against a background of a clear empty sky. Now there is no more man watching the romantic menacing sublime view, no more "Shipwreck and Spectator", we are the spectators standing there, in front of these sights, in front of a painting, a picture that might actually be auto-figurative, "a picture that is an instance

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind".

³ Franz Kafka, "Letter to His Father".

of something, just by being an instance of *nothing*. Just by scratching the skin of things."⁴

4. Paintings that refer to another place, a distance place. A painting that is first of all - not in Israel, planted elsewhere, in Exile, out of conscious determined choice to be out of the local discourse.

"Real life is missing, but we are in the world - claims Levinas - Metaphysics appear and lasts in this alibi, it *turns over*, to the *other*. In its most general form, it appears as a motion out of somewhere familiar, out of the house we live in, and into what is beside ourselves, on foreign territory."⁵

5. A painting that lures you in: into the woods, into the paint. Into a subtle, magnetic intimacy, a pastoral *inscape*⁶, which gradually silences and withdraws into itself.

6. In "Catch 22" there is a man on a tree, his legs dangle, his work shoes untied; his shoelaces seem like heavy ingots, like Van Gogh's shoes. The man is Joseph Heller's Yossarian, a bomb-dropping pilot, sitting up on the tree, staring, Carved out of tree branches with heavy brush strokes. A Treeman, derived of the sequence of film and literature, sitting (where the old treehouse would be), watching, observing (where Friedrich's spectator would be), a silent witness to the silent forest, to the annihilating silence of the painting. "While I was in the forest, I often felt I was not the one

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind".

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "Totality and Infinity".

⁶ Coined by poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who also coined a twin term - *instress*.

watching it. I felt, on occasion, it was the trees watching me, talking to me [...] I wait to be flooded from within, buried. I might be painting just to emerge."⁷

7. And then, one tree, shining against the sky like colorful embroidery, painfully beautiful.

Roberto Conti, an Italian art critic who writes for Tema Celesta and FlashArt.

Saw Anat Betzer's work for the first time in April 2008, in her exhibition at Ermanno Tedeschi Gallery in Milan.

He has visited Tel Aviv twice since then.

⁷ Andre Marchand, a French painter, born in 1907 in Aix-en-Provence; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind".