

The Situations of Orit Hofshi

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Much has been written on the printing techniques employed by Orit Hofshi to compose her extraordinary images. The technicalities, history and characteristics of her woodblock printing have been thoroughly explored, so in this essay I wish to deal more directly with her imagery, her content.

There is both a tacit and explicit duality in her work. The woodblock depending as it does on inked and non inked areas of surface boldly denotes dark and light, as her landscapes are proposed as places, occupied and unoccupied, touched and untouched, places full of feeling and places devoid of meaning.

In *Pahoehoe*, 2002, we are presented with an escarpment of rock. Etched in a decreasing intensity on the diagonal from top right to lower left, we flicker between beholding the image and comprehending its manufacture. For the latter, the vertical planking of the wood used to gouge upon and the uneven sepia inking at times crumble into their materiality leaving all image behind. And conversely, the surface recovers to show an attentive study of a rocky landscape. We search for feature, something to redeem the image from the non-descript, the generic. Is it a cliff face? Is that the sea? But such definition eludes us. Like American artist Vija Celmins' drawings of waves mid-ocean, Hofshi's featureless rockscape offers nothing but our own perception of it, eschewing the viewer's search for meaning. The sepia ink with its associations of nostalgia is a tease, a rouse to expose our reflex to dominate the image, the landscape, with stories of human history, personal or mythic. But this geological study evokes geological time, a chronology in which human history is reduced to a sliver.

The artist's sense of audience is acute. In *Datum Collectanea*, 2005, she engages her viewer on an operatic scale. The work is both monumental and monument, though quite what is it a monument to is ambiguous. If monuments are public acts of remembrance then Hofshi's *Datum Collectanea* serves by reminding us of just how insignificant our presence is in this world. For most of its eighteen panels (each panel is built out of four wooden strips) is devoted to a blighted landscape, and mankind, when it does appear, is a tiny group of thirteen figures confined to one hundredth of the surface area. The figures are contemporary and urban, they seem dislocated from the landscape, like a group of tourists without a guide. There is an aura of waiting about them, of ennui. Hofshi's vision of the world pitches planetary time against human history and subverts human vanity in the process.

In *Trail*, 2004, we are again struck by the incongruity between figure and scene. A suited man walks away from us into the landscape. The artist invests much of her labor in realizing the scene but the figure is sketched out in a few moves. It is as if following his exit, it is his absence that is perceived as important. And this notion of what remains, what the land holds in mute witness, is underlined in the wailing female figure in *Flash*, 2004. The woman with her arms raised seems to be berating the landscape itself to give up an answer. Hofshi makes an important conjunctive here, between woman and the landscape. Note how in *Flash* the attention to etching out the rocky surface is also applied to the female figure. When we look at *Resignation* from 2005, a combination monotype and woodcut, the same figure re-appears as an intense woodcut to continue her lamentation whilst a wiry child caught in a turning movement is rendered in the looser monotype medium. Here we equate the wailing woman with the child and can only suppose a tragedy, whether in the past or in the future. The figure of the child is used again in another work from the same year, *Extricate*. Hofshi gleans her figures from photojournalism, creating a cast of characters that she can deploy again and again. For a printmaker this collecting and re-assigning of characters makes a great deal of sense, the American artist Nancy Spero based much of her practice on the repetition of figures, using them in different ways from work to work to create new aspects and meanings. In *Asunder*, 2004, a male figure with a side holster walks away from us while facing us a veiled woman stares at us. These two figures are not sharing the same space: the female figure, in a detailed woodcut, is larger and the monotyped holstered man smaller and more generic. Tragedy pervades both of these works, *Resignation* and *Asunder*. Embedded in both female figures is a sorrowful witness to the inevitable. In *Disillusionment*, 2005, a crouched male

figure occupies the bottom left of the image, the rest left to rock and night. The landscape again is given greater presence through the cut woodblock, the male figure portrayed in the quicker more ethereal monotype. Again Hofshi seems to be insisting on the temporality of human events and feelings against the immensity of time. And in *Silhouettes*, 2004, she returns that crouching male back to the world of events: in a haze of *sfumato*, the disillusioned hunched figure has his back to two columns of what look like military police and in the far corner a crouched male is either coughing or vomiting. In any case, all these figures are framed together on the same surface but are isolated in their separate events, their own traumas.

In *Upon this Bank & Shoal of Time*, 2006, Hofshi returns again to operatic scale and again she frustrates our expectation of the epic as she had done previously in *Datum Collectanea*. Whereas the topography of *Datum Collectanea* excluded the presence of history, *Upon this Bank & Shoal of Time* puts it at its center. Hofshi suggests both an historic and a personal narrative. An additional binary is articulated by her adoption of two separate techniques, woodcut and drawing on paper and wood panels, and presented on a vast twenty-four-panel piece. She has left the pre-historic primordial mountainscape of *Datum Collectanea* and moved down into the valley, down into history. The scene is European but eschews the Romantic, the picturesque and the mythic. It is an impoverished landscape where nothing much grows along a stream bank but scutch grass and thin trees. Within this blighted scene only three of the twenty-four panels animate the narrative – in the top left a ruined Romanesque abbey, and to the right of center a suited portly middle-aged man.

This two-panel portrait of the man depicts a character deep in thought. There is a melancholic disposition to him as his right hand grasps his lapel and his head is tilted down. He seems to melt into the landscape, his crumpled trousers disappearing from definition below the knee. His inward reflection offers sense to the artist's use of two tones and two techniques within the work. The warmth of the wooden panel woodblock printing and the contrast within the drawing indicate the flickering of memory itself as it grasps to recall and fix the ever-shifting details of the past. The relationship of this individual to the landscape is ambiguous and the work offers the viewer no clues to unravel this mystery. The work returns us again to the artist's obsession with time lived and time recorded. We sense that if the figure were to completely dissolve this anonymous landscape would remain untouched by the trace of his human presence.

The abbey in the top left hand corner of the panel lies ruined, its roofs collapsed, its bell tower crumbling. A once majestic building that housed a Christian faith has succumbed to the ravages of time. That faith, which offered comfort and explanation for all of the difficulties of life and the reality of death, has itself proved mortal. Even its residue is marginalized, a pile of ordered stones at the edge of a bleak landscape, one panel amongst twenty-four.

Time pervades Hofshi's work. Personal time, topical time, historic time – these times are pitted against planetary time itself. It is the artist subverting our vanity and our self-importance, asking us to review how our values and beliefs stand in relationship to our short mortal lives. When I first saw Hofshi's pastel portraits of individuals I was perplexed by their verisimilitude. What relationship did these brightly colored accurate portrayals have to the bleak rigor of the woodcuts? But now I understand, these images fix a person in time, and not just any person, for these are Hofshi's family and friends. And this act of capture is an act of love, a tiny cry against the ever-churning progression of Time itself