

Two Conversations with Orit Hofshi

Timna Seligman

First Conversation

Timna Seligman: When we entered the studio, you wanted to turn on the radio.

Orit Hofshi: Yes, it's very important.

T.S.: The more I look at your works, the more I feel the music in them, and I go back to your roots, to Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák, the Romantic Czech composers. I've never heard you talk specifically about your connection to music, and we have never discussed it as an influence, but I feel that it breathes deeply in the works.

O.H.: Yes, that is true. I'm trying to figure out whether this stems from my love of music in general, or whether it is the influence of my parents' home. I think I'll give the credit to the home in which I was raised. My mother would listen to classical programs on the radio every Saturday morning. Among all the composers, Smetana and Dvořák play in my mind more than others, and their music is reflected in my work. I clearly remember my mother's excitement at hearing works like the *New World Symphony* or the string quartet *From My Life* by composers who stood for the home both she and my father came from. The same is true of literature. I didn't hear as much about Czech painting. How does it affect me in my daily life? I suppose it does so unconsciously.

T.S.: You mentioned your mother, which brings us to the group of works from the past couple of years (*Vis Vitalis*, 2007, and *Resilience* [Holesov, 1944], 2008) where we suddenly begin to see a direct connection with the Czech Republic, with your parents, with history.

O.H.: I must say that for years I've avoided, or even consciously denied myself direct visual expression of private family events, being aware as I was that all families have moving stories. It's a fine, delicate embroidery which exists in every home. Even nowadays, the main thing for me is to speak about the essence or the core of events, rather than tell a personal story; that is, I attempt to observe, through these personal stories, a wider phenomena which is not necessarily private but is also public.

T.S.: And that is why it would be interesting to discuss these two works. In *Vis Vitalis* your mother and a good childhood friend of hers are depicted walking into the unknown, into a forest. The work is in the shape of a cross, reminiscent of an altarpiece. It is very Christian in character, although more so in form than in content.

At the center of *Resilience* (Holesov, 1944) are the remains of a synagogue, rising phoenix-like from the tempestuous rocks and ruins that surround them.

O.H.: There is a sense of ambiguity there too. A non-Jew may not recognize it as a Jewish object, because the building may look Christian as well, or carry Christian associations.

T.S.: Because the style of the façade is quite Baroque.

O.H.: Yes, it's very Baroque in style, Czech, except for the large dome that had covered it. Its façade definitely looks like a Christian chapel, and perhaps this is what allows me to free myself from the Jewish sphere and turn my gaze outwards – that is, refer more broadly to difficult historical events, not necessarily in the context of Judaism but in a universal human context. It is a phenomenon that interests me, the ability to refer not only to Jewish suffering, although I am very aware of it, including the Holocaust. I have been pondering this a lot lately, realizing the sufferings of millions of Christian families in Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, all over Europe, some of whom supported Nazism, who lost many of their sons. It is a very widespread tragedy.

On the other hand, my mother is 85 years old. I wanted to leave a mark so that all this would not be lost. This wall [of the synagogue] in Holesov no longer exists. The Czechs destroyed it at the end of the war. To me, the wall symbolizes being part of the historical thread of a community that has existed for thousands of years, a chain in which we form one

more link. I wanted to document this through the personal aspect of my mother's history as well as in a wider Jewish context.

T.S.: Speaking about these remains of the syna-gogue in Holesov, I see in my mind's eye the ruin of the abbey in your work *Upon this Bank & Shoal of Time* (2006).

O.H.: There is a direct link between these two works, both of which express my outlook. Both portray remains of houses of prayer that had contained people of a certain culture, which someone wished to annihilate because of differences of opinion and religion. The pain of losing millions of Jews is tremendous – it is uncontainable. Whole families (as in the case of my father and mother) were annihilated. But I also try to be attentive to other historical events. For instance, this ruined abbey, which is a Christian house of prayer.

I have often been asked, most emphatically, why would I choose to document a non-Jewish institution. My answer is given in my imagery: this is a house of prayer (whether Jewish or not), this is the holiest of holies of an entire community, and another group of human beings allowed itself to destroy it.

T.S.: I would like to talk about the size of the works, as in *Upon this Bank & Shoal of Time*. One may think of these works as being "on an operatic scale," to use Patrick Murphy's term, which also brings us back to music: these are comprehensive works whose totality envelops the viewer, which fits your character as a very total person. Your natural passion is transmuted into a work that is very expressive emotionally and yet does not fall into the trap of kitsch. You have the ability to create a very large, complex, sweeping "operatic" work which, at the same time, is in direct unmediated contact with the viewer. This quality of the works takes us into the world of German Romanticism (for instance, the painter Caspar David Friedrich) and leads to a discourse on the sublime, on light and on our environment.

O.H.: I would like to address a few points here. As an artist, I always seek to raise questions along two parallel axes: the axis of artistic language and the axis of content. On the thematic axis, the "operatic" space allows me to expand the narrative, as in a literary or cinematic journey. That is, it enables me to address not only a fragmentary, particular event but also an evolving narrative. In the periods of time in-between the creation of these "operatic" works – these large, complex works – I engage in works that are more like zooming-in, entailing a more restricted observation of space and time.

While these "operas" enable me to travel along evolving sequences of time and space, I try not to be emotionally swept away, not to allow uninhibited expressionism and unrestrained emotions over vast spaces. It's as if I tell myself: "Take a step back." I try to look with an open critical eye so as not to be swept by the flow, I take care to remain clear as to what I would like to say or ask through the image.

T.S.: Perhaps this is the origin of the contemporary archeological remains, sharp-angled geometric structures that often dissect your sweeping vistas. Everything in these landscapes looks like tempestuous natural elements, and suddenly a great concrete beam crosses the image and halts the flow. Maybe that is the moment of sobriety, in which you suddenly tell yourself: "Stop, take a step back."

O.H.: The geometrical elements are both a means of expressing sobriety and a testimony to man's creation. These are remains of buildings consciously built by man. In the process of creation, this geometric aspect allows me some focus in a space that may otherwise sweep me away.

I would also like to address the dimensions of these works, where the images are usually on a one-to-one scale. Naturally, the three-dimensional is converted here into a two-dimensional image, so it isn't exactly one to one. But in that space there are usually elements that both the viewer and I can refer to as being on a one-to-one scale.

T.S.: It is an anchor you can hold on to...

O.H.: It's reality, that is the anchor that saves us. There are artists who pursue fantasy or imaginary worlds. While my works also contain imaginary elements, they are always connected to realism. The works comprise connections, collages, no work is an exact documentation of an event or a place, but all have a hold in reality.

By the way, that is also my connection to the radio in my studio. It anchors me in reality. I listen to local news reports as well as to sociological and political discussions. These are important issues for me. They are in the background while I work.

T.S.: And that is also the function of the press clippings and photos you keep in a box file until they become relevant to you.

O.H.: Exactly. I got something for the file today. I cut out something almost every day. This image really killed me...

T.S.: The caption to the photo says: "Resident of Gaza cooking chicken over a bonfire due to lack of cooking gas."

O.H.: And this is happening in 2008. It seems crazy to me.

T.S.: This photo, which is amazing, shows rubble, debris. There are partially burned, half-charred branches – an image that appears in your works and is also associated with the charcoal you use to create the image.

O.H.: All the images I cull from newspapers are used in contexts relevant to me.

T.S.: In a year or two elements from this photo will appear in your works.

O.H.: Absolutely.

T.S.: Are you willing to discuss the titles of the works, which are all in English despite Hebrew being your mother tongue?

O.H.: Titles are a complex matter.

T.S.: It seems to me that the complexity of the titles corresponds to the complexity of the works, which combine monotype and woodblock printing, and it is also related to the shift between two- and three-dimensionality. But speaking of the titles: you have works that stand in their own right (such as *Cascade* or *Edifice*, both of 2007), but since they are part of an ongoing process you also bring them together under another title. I am referring, for instance, to *Terra Incognita* (2007), which includes both *Scoria* and *Telluric*. This threesome contains all the elements we have talked about: humankind, nature, destruction and the hope that something may grow in the future.

O.H.: And bearing testimony.

T.S.: The meaning of "terra incognita" is "unknown land." In order to know the meaning of "scoria" I admit I had to open a dictionary. It means "a rough vesicular lava"; it refers to matter that emerges from the very bowels of the earth, which at the critical moment of eruption becomes frozen in time. Mighty, flowing and frothing as it is, the moment it reaches the upper layer and comes into contact with light or air the process comes to a halt. The word "telluric" also has to do with the power of the earth, denoting its natural electric current.

O.H.: I am constantly engaged with time; both past and present. But I believe that in these three titles, and this is also true of other works, I go beyond this, seeking to put humankind in its place, so it may observe itself in relation to the rest of the world. Only from a position of humility can a person understand his place, his relation to other people and to the world around him. It takes a measure of modesty and respect for society and the environment.

These titles may be an attempt to allude to a place where power and control are ineffective. They suggest a place that is unknown and undefined, a place where aggression is of no use.

T.S.: And yet you accomplish this by means of words that are very powerful. *Scoria*, *Telluric*, *Cascade*, *Edifice*, *Vestige*, *Torrent* – these are all powerful words, even if one doesn't understand them.

O.H.: That's right, I think it's some sort of defense mechanism.

T.S.: It's not just the power conveyed by the words; they are all in high, almost lyrical language.

O.H.: When I look for titles, I check my Thesaurus in search of titles that will evoke a feeling without providing the viewer with a concrete solution.

When you were reading the list of titles I was suddenly alarmed, because it did sound very bombastic and aggressive. But this existential dialogue, this ongoing dialogue between the dark past and the throbbing present, between the energy to live or even optimism and the fragile aspect of existence – this dialogue is powerful and possible and exists, despite events and despite the unknown.

T.S.: *Vis Vitalis* is an unusual title. High English is replaced by pure Latin here.

O.H.: That's not surprising, since I grew up with a mother who bandies about Latin expressions. Whenever she wanted to discuss an essentially philosophical issue, she would say it in Latin.

T.S.: It's interesting to note that the work is a portrait of your mother. The human figure isn't swallowed up by the landscape here, but is rather the hub of the work.

O.H.: That hub is the life force, which is what the expression "vis vitalis" means.

T.S.: And while the image is of two slightly bent elderly women walking towards a black, unknown shaded area, the work also conveys the hope you spoke of, the power of the future. This image, which at first sight can be read as conveying hopelessness, in fact contains much hope and life. It emits a lot of light, more than your sweeping landscapes.

O.H.: That is the delicate balance I constantly pursue, between happiness, will and power to live on the one hand and observation of history and of the present on the other hand. The seesaw motion inwards and outwards allows me to achieve this balance; it enables me to avoid being swept into total despair of all that's happening in Israel and abroad, to live with an intense, firm inner power of survival. This perspectival outlook allows for optimism, for an ambition to march forward, to see, to enjoy, to create and to express my views.

Second Conversation

T.S.: Looking at your large works one senses that process is a notable dimension in them. Time is a central theme in these works, but it is also an integral part of the creative act, manifested not only in the image but also in an actual physical manner within the works. I could liken your work process to a tree: the trunk is the same in all the works, but as the tree grows its branches spread in different directions.

And yet the tree is more than a convenient metaphor. The actual tree trunk is present in your very first encounter with your work – in the wood blocks and panels that constitute its support. You begin by drawing on wood, always in hues of black (we will return later to the great variety within that black). At times a layer of color remains on the wood, but sometimes the physical process of marking the drawing in the wood in preparation for printing wounds the wood, and that is something I would like to hear more about.

O.H.: First of all, it is quite true that my whole creative concept stems from drawing. I consider myself to be drawing in all stages of the work: I draw on the wood, I draw on paper, and then I draw into the wood block with cutting knives.

It is interesting that you say it "wounds" the block. I am trying to think whether I attempt to wound. Perhaps what I attempt to do is to flow in something that tries to resist me. That is, it isn't that I wish to wound the wood block, but I do engage in a sort of discussion with something that resists me.

T.S.: But unlike an attempt to flow in something that resists you – which is like swimming in a river against the current, where the ripples left behind quickly disappear – your every act of flowing leaves behind permanent traces.

O.H.: These traces are like those left by others in different cultures, archeological traces. It is my way of leaving the traces of time on my work, the traces of my hand, of my exploration, which are quite physical, palpable and visible. More than wounding, it is an attempt to leave traces. When you swim in a river, the trail you leave behind in the water disappears. In my case, these traces remain.

It is a challenge that I enjoy very much. Some-thing about this flowing against the wood's grain leaves an opening for me to have my say while I also listen to the wood. Sometimes the wood tells me "that's enough" and does not allow me to do whatever I want.

Then I transfer the image to paper, and in the process some of the traces disappear while new, unanticipated traces appear.

T.S.: In your prints, the wood's traces are evident on the paper. They contain the life of the wood, its eyes, its various marks and the rings that show its growth.

O.H.: I combine the whole texture of the wood into the prints.

T.S.: And it is in fact an integral part of the work, rather than a struggle between the wood's texture and yours. It is the combination of both that produces the image.

O.H.: I often let this texture, of the wood itself, govern as much as sixty percent of the image, while I have my say only in a specific area. That is, there is truly a dialogue here, in which the wood has a great deal of autonomy.

T.S.: How do you decide which wood block will remain as such and which is to become a printing block? Because once you have printed from it, the image carved into the block is filled with ink and can no longer be presented as a work in its own right.

O.H.: For years I was totally consistent in my choice to take the wood-cutting technique to its conclusion. People who came to my studio often said: "But the wood panels are much more beautiful," but I was adamant that the process should continue, taking the image to the point of being printed on paper. It is a key issue for me: handling paper, working on paper, the fragility of paper. I adore it, I study it and work lovingly with it. It was important to me to continue taking part in this tradition of wood-cutters and printers.

But, as you said, at some point the branches spread out. My need to examine the boundaries of the language of print, and the desire to extricate from these boundaries new questions – pertaining to both content and artistic language – opened up new horizons for me. I made a conscious decision to start addressing the space, seeing it as a relief, a type of protrusion, where the cut block of wood is the finished work. I knew right from the start that I regarded such a work as a sculptural piece that is not meant to become a print on paper.

T.S.: There is, of course, the whole issue of positive and negative, which must be predetermined. While your work could possibly be read both from left to right and from right to left, still only one direction is the proper one and there is an inner dynamic to the composition, which is dictated by you.

O.H.: What is more, many details are lost once the works are printed. Traces are lost. When I leave the block as it is, I

actually leave two things on the surface: visual traces of the cutting, and the preliminary drawing on the block; neither of them is lost.

T.S.: Between these two, between the wood block and the woodblock print, there is the rubbing (for instance, in *Rally*, 2007). If I understand correctly what you have said so far about your work process, the rubbing is revealed almost as an intermediary in the inner debate that is part of that process. Neither printing nor drawing, it is somewhere in between. When making a rubbing, the block underneath remains clean, it isn't damaged in the process. While it is a reproduction of sorts, it is a unique one, like a monotype, because it is your hand that determines the outcome.

O.H.: Yes, it is a testimony.

T.S.: The testimony is born from the traces left by the hand.

O.H.: It is an expression of the need to document time itself (both formally and physically). In fact, I repeat the process twice: once when I cut the block, and once again when I do the rubbing over the surface, with limited hand movement. It may be an attempt to attest to the passage of time, to sharpen my testimony about it, as my work always combines the physical and the conceptual.

T.S.: But is it a need to document time by means that are themselves of long duration, that take a lot of time? Would that be a correct definition? You do not attempt to freeze the moment, but rather document a process.

O.H.: That's right. From the perspective of time, I go through practically the same process. It is quicker than cutting, because in this case it's a work on paper. The end result is completely different from the prints or the wood blocks: it is a return to drawing. Some detail is lost, resulting in a softer image, like a return to drawing by hand. It is not as concrete as the print on paper, and it is also less concrete than the wood block itself. When I do rubbings, there is a cycle that begins and ends with drawing.

T.S.: And so, through that initial and final act, you express a cyclical movement that informs both the movement of the hand and the work itself. Yet despite the cyclical nature of both work and hand movement that you refer to, there is also something new in the rubbing: I believe it is the flattening. Notwithstanding the depth, the layers, the various woodcutting planes, the final product of a rubbing is utterly flat.

O.H.: When you spoke of that cyclicity I pictured Richard Long walking across the desert and coming full circle, without any aids, to his point of departure. Long is an artist whose movement in space has influenced me, because it allows one to create something quite abstract, which then suddenly turns concrete through cyclical repetition and movement. It is a cycle whose starting point is quite virtual and vague, which then turns very physical through continuous, ceaseless movement.

I recall Long (in films about his work) reaching a point in the middle of the desert and starting to move in a circle, all the while noting the space around him. His movement is continuous; its rhythm quite regular and monotonous, like my monotonous hand movement while rubbing, but at the same time it is circular. On the third, fourth, fifth or sixth round, that circular movement becomes very visual. The uninterrupted monotonous movement both clarifies and creates a documentation. I see the similarities to the rubbing work process, but in the latter the image, having returned to drawing, remains vague and flat on the surface. That is what remains of the whole process.

T.S.: We have spoken of the physical process of the hand movement. I would like to speak about the materials: wood, a very specific type of paper (Japanese Okawara paper), a variety of inks, ways of inking the surface, the Chinagraph pencil, the diverse hues and textures of black. There is a great variety of blacks in your works, and strangely enough, the more monotone the black the more it is...

O.H.: Colorful.

T.S.: Truly colorful, due to the different hues of the support as well as differences in the work process and in the way you lay the ink on the work's support.

O.H.: Over the years I've eliminated color from my work, but I always think and see in color. I've filtered out the use of color because I felt that it deprived me of my ability to focus on what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. I wished to remain with the most direct method – and drawing is certainly a means of achieving it, in all its different manifestations: between dry and wet, and in diverse hues of black.

Just as I sometimes wish to express a strong or difficult image by combining delicate traces and textures, so it is with color. On some occasions I do without a variety of hues in favor of a strong, piercing statement in black only. On other occasions I prefer to speak a softer, broader language of grays, consisting of the entire spectrum between black and white.

T.S.: And you also draw with printing ink on both wood and paper. Thus, even though you speak of drawing and printing as two different things, they are in fact eventually connected; you return to the trunk of the tree.

O.H.: That's right.

T.S.: We are back to cyclicalness – things that seem distinct from each other but are in fact only different states in the same process. In this context, I was amazed at the possibilities offered by printing ink: on the one hand it may be fixed, and yet just by adding a drop of water you can carry on working with it. It seems to offer a wide range of long-term options. And so we return to the theme of time.

O.H.: It seems to me that technically no definitions can curb my attempts to examine how I may employ different media. No one has ever defined what I may or may not do, and I never ask that question but always seek new ways. Sometimes, for instance, I draw in ink I had previously used for printing. I start drawing with it, and since it's a water-based ink it continues to live forever (like watercolors). At times I may also print over that drawing.

All these things combine together as one great symphony, both conceptually and technically. All the different materials of drawing and printing surround me, each reaching its hand into the other and vice versa.