

Sculpted Photographs / Moshe Zuckermann

Observing Maya Cohen Levy's new works from a distance may be confusing: one is confronted with monumental photographs of Tel Aviv's Azrieli Towers, painted, as it were, with various patterns of white stripes – closed or freely scattered geometrical patterns – as a contrastive encounter between the three-dimensional photographic representation of the towers and the two-dimensional, flat, stripe-stain structures smeared on or attached to them. A closer look, however, reveals that the artist attached nothing to the photograph, nor did she smear any paint on it, but to the contrary – she cut it so that the surface of the photograph, the white surface of the paper, appears behind the photograph and through the black-white-gray forms represented in it. The resulting collage is not the outcome of an act of superimposition and addition, but rather one of subtraction: Maya Cohen Levy sculpts photographs – physically.

This is no trifling matter, for the paper on which the photograph is printed is thin, and the act of incising it and subtracting from it appears almost impossible, requiring, at any event, high technical proficiency. This, however, is not at issue here, but rather the transgressive act embodied impromptu by the technical act of physical manipulation applied to the work surface. For, this is not a case of leaving white stains on the painting surface by not covering it with paint, as is customary in modern watercolor technique; nor does it concern the photograph's processing by covering it with scribble-drawings a-la Arnulf Rainer's interventions in various portrait photographs, or montage compositions of diverse photographic details, as was done in countless photographic works since John Heartfield and Max Ernst. Maya Cohen Levy produces a visual appearance by physically penetrating what is commonly regarded as a material element that one must avoid injuring due to its thinness and ephemeral nature; she "carves" in what seems to be devoid of layers, generating a real physicality in something whose plastic quality lies rather in its illusory element – she sculpts a photograph. The transgressive act is embodied in the combination of two ostensibly irreconcilable artistic genres, in the transition from one (technical) logic of visual art to another.

It thus appears that the act of subtraction – in itself the source of a new visual image – is not merely physical; it also embeds the symbolization of an associative realm that re-signifies the dominant images of the towers presented in the photograph. This is especially conspicuous when the physical subtraction in the photograph generates the silhouette of an airplane within the uncut sections of the tower expanses: the threatening-dramatic association inevitably invoked since 9/11 by a link between "tower" and "airplane" is reinforced and more forcefully felt, despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that the silhouette of the airplane appears on the photograph as an empty image, a phantom of sorts, a constantly-present-catastrophic-possibility, or if you will: as a potential of destruction dialectically embodied by the seemingly solid firmness of the tower.

This combination of the proud protrusion of soaring structures (such as columns, towers and bridges) with images of their collapse has preoccupied Maya Cohen Levy in her previous works, mostly oil paintings on large-scale canvases. Alongside the spectacular expressive-compositional element of these works, their inherent consciousness-subverting element is discernible: a piercing civilizational critique of the unshakable belief in the accomplishments of modern progress, akin to a symbolic exposition of contemporary secular hubris – the "Tower of Babel" of a godless era. The experience of an impending catastrophe about to befall these structures, conveyed through the dialectic of existence and extinction that are fused into a unified image of wholeness and disintegration, acquires a certain development in the new incised photographs, by introducing therein the element of the imminent catastrophe's *evolution*. Maya Cohen Levy obtains this effect both by dynamization of the images (at times also by use of expressive means that seem to have been pulled out of the image arsenal of

American comics) and by the aforementioned effect of genre transgression, whereby the solid image of the tower is undermined, not only due to the contextual or expressive images incorporated in it, but also as a result of the very act of cutting and wounding the real materiality of the tower image itself.

What appears in the large-scale incision works as a series of gigantic visual monuments of subversive threat to architectural monuments in an urban landscape, transforms in Cohen Levy's small incision works into a celebration of the constant undermining of the convention of perception and reception of diverse images and subversion of their particular fixation in our consciousness. In this context, it does not matter whether these are photographs extracted from the Intifada (Palestinian Uprising) reality of recent years, pictures of "prevalent" cityscapes, "desert" vistas, or a series of variations on the sculpture of some Christian saintly figure: Maya Cohen Levy's incisions alter not only the aura of each and every image (a distinct outcome of the "aggressive" de-formation she performs); they also generate the effect of a threat on the self-evident, an effect which is inescapable precisely because the artist's technique does not settle for a transformation of the image by way of some unified expressive logic at its core, but – to the contrary – it inflicts real "aggressive"-physical injury to the image.

Incidentally, something unsettling is revealed: Maya Cohen Levy's works are beautiful, at times ravishingly beautiful, even when the theme of the work (or the particular image addressed in it) is not only not "beautiful," but even ugly or truly horrifying. Are we concerned here with an inconceivable gap between form (beautiful) and content (horrifying)? With an improbable contradiction between "evil" and its attractive representation? To some extent, this is indeed the case. But this contradictive gap is not necessarily spawned in Cohen Levy's works; it is, in fact, embodied in the real "beauty" of the objects she treats artistically: the formal beauty of the Azrieli Towers is deceiving with regard to the contents of capitalism and its essence, embodied in them, just as the elegance of the various airplanes appearing in the works might deflect attention from their violent purpose. In this sense, the tension between the stylized beauty of the representation and the ugly-catastrophic of that represented in Cohen Levy's works, imitates the reality she sets out to address – albeit a fundamentally ironic imitation. While the beauty obeys distinct design principles and aesthetic standards of artistic arrangement of materials, it is allusive. One cannot yield, even for a split second, to the spectacular compository beauty of the works without feeling a certain sense of discomfort invoked by the very tendency for indulgent surrender. The beauty is disconcerting, just as the "production values" experience and the "special effects" association of the real plane crash into the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001 were contrasted blatantly to the horror of the catastrophe and the dimensions of destruction inflicted by the crash.

Having said all this – and in view of the fact that despite the use of the photographic medium, Maya Cohen Levy performs a quintessential painterly act by "sculpting the photograph" – the question arises: does the medium of painting "befit" her objects of artistic treatment? Do the expressive means of the medium often declared "dead" "correspond" with the actual "themes," with all their threatening, oppressive weight? The proclamation of the death of painting conceals several assumptions to which the proclaimers do not necessarily adhere; all this, assuming that the aforesaid does not concern a mere description of a situation, but rather an ideologically-oriented proclamation. First, the argument about the "death of painting" assumes, impromptu, that the history of art is founded not only on the history of genres, but also on the history of media, and that this is not a mere history, but one with a certain teleological direction, as obscure as it may be. Second, the perception of the "death of painting" assumes that painting has some extra-artistic function, a function that has become historically obsolete. The reason for the death of painting, according to this perception, is in the fact that it has been rendered anachronistic due to developments that occurred outside the field of painting itself. Third, the distinctive developments outside the field of painting pertain to the radical changes that occurred in the 19th century in the technological field in general, and in the sphere of the conditions of artistic production in particular. Photography is but one example of the revolutionary changes that occurred not only on the level of artistic reception, but also on the level of the deductive multi-mediation of art in general. Fourth, probably

unintentionally, the expression “the death of painting” assumes some progress in the field of art; otherwise one cannot understand the declaration about the medium’s anachronism. For the notion of anachronism assumes that something is no longer suited to its period. And yet not only do modernists and post-modernists alike share the totality of these latent assumptions, but painting itself is not dead at all – it never ceased to exist as a living, breathing and kicking practice that does not take heed of the necrophilic assertions of the high art discourse. Does it follow from this that painting is the false consciousness of contemporary art? Yes, if one adheres to the Hegelian perception of the “height of time” and the approach arguing for the adequacy of the artistic medium and a correspondence between that medium and the (ostensible) demands of the “*zeitgeist*.” No – if one rejects such a conceptual view and the deductive demands derived from it. Maya Cohen Levy’s works show how far-fetched the postulate of the “death of painting” is. Nothing can illustrate the jolting vitality of “the dead” – with the “height of time” and from the height of the towers about to collapse at any minute, towers whose visual representations have been so aesthetically “corrupted,” “injured” so beautifully, that the dialectic of the whole of modern civilization seems to sound its agitated cry from this artistic “anachronism” – more than Maya Cohen Levy’s photograph-sculptures.

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