



Becoming, Metropolitan Museum, (2021) 100cm x 300cm

ORI GERSHT

History and memory have often been major themes in the work of Ori Gersht. Here he talks to the writer Declan Long about his most recent series concerning the legacies of museum art collections and how it connects with his previous work.

DL: Your latest work adapts an approach you've taken before: methodically creating scenes that are then violently destroyed in front of the camera. In series such as *New Orders* (2018) and the earlier *Blow-Up* (2007) you physically restaged compositions from iconic still-life paintings, then photographed these exquisite set-ups just as they were either shot at or blown up. The new series centres on pre-existing photographic reproductions of works from major museum collections – 'postcard' imagery that you combine in elaborate arrangements and then smash. What prompted you to take the work in this direction?

OG: One of the things that interested me is that historic museums – although they are supposedly presenting an ordered narrative – are made out of wreckage upon wreckage, from fragments taken away from original contexts. I began thinking about museum shop postcards as an amplification of the same idea; when the original images of the museum are reproduced, they become memento mori, allowing people to come and take them away. Now, in a digital time when these images are free from museum walls and just floating anywhere, they lose con-



detail, *Wreckage Upon Wreckage* (2021) 100cm x 212cm

text altogether and become dispersed fragments of collective memory in Western society. We recreate an order out of these fragments, creating a constellation, allowing new narratives to emerge. So I decided to print postcards from museum shops onto glass, creating a glass 'wall' that is then shattered and captured by the camera in a state of flux. A new kind of visual space is created: a very photographic space where the past and the future are meeting; this is the photographic present. I shatter all this glass and movement sensors trigger the cameras to capture the moment. I can't photograph the whole thing in one go, so I created the wall in sections. With overlaps, I put all the parts together. The 'events' are fragments of events, but they are all happening in a grid so they all relate to each other as real events. In each photograph, there is a compression of time: the multiple events are captured as an almost epic constellation of chaos – and at the same time a new type of order emerges.

DL: Each completed photograph is an outcome of intricate, painstaking construction. How much actual work is involved?

OG: To assemble one of these photographs takes about six to eight weeks. Each finished work is made of three hundred postcards. First I have to find all the postcards and then to print them all on glass, then to build a 'wall' of pictures. It's a very laborious process, particularly during Covid, because supply is so slow. I did a lot of experimenting with the glass before we figured out how to do it: for about six or seven months we've been testing ways of shattering different types of glass and printing on

it, trying to find the right process. The first photograph is of paintings from the Metropolitan Museum in New York – and now I'm moving to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. I'm planning to work on a few different panels: still life, group portraits, landscapes, I'm aiming to create three based on the Rijksmuseum collection. Then I'll move to other museums: the Prado in Madrid, the National Gallery in Washington, the National Gallery in London. It's a long journey; it'll take some time to accomplish everything.

DL: Alongside the photographic experimentation, there's a kind of curatorial investigation too: you're exploring and re-configuring these collections, creating new combinations of artworks.

OG: The difference is that I aim to remove myself as much as possible. As a photographer, there are a few things that are important in this respect. Firstly, I like the relationship that the photograph has to an awareness of the world, to something that actually exists in the world and that the camera is optically recording. So when we break the glass, the moments are authentic moments: the camera is witnessing something happening in front of the lens. Secondly, with respect to the selections of pictures, the choices are to some extent already made.

At the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, I saw how the postcards were presented in the shop. When I went to the Met in New York, the starting point was to collect all the postcards, but then I went to the book of the collection and looked at how they presented the key works – so I didn't define the selection. What I have had



Wreckage Upon Wreckage, Monochromes Yellow, Blue and Red



Untitled 1-3 (2018) from the series *New Orders*



Untitled 2 (1998) from *Afterwars*

to define is the shape of the grid, the grid on the wall. I started to analyse the strategies that museum shops use and often I found them quite eclectic. I like the fact that the form of presentation in the shop might correspond to the way the museum originally extracted or stripped down objects from a plurality of original contexts, then brought them together into one space, under an imposed order. In the museum shop there is an eclectic arrangement, but also an appearance of order in the horizontal and vertical structure of the display system.

I'm trying to start with how the museum defines its collection, how the historical story is being narrated – then the postcard represents another level of fragmentation. In the displays constructed for the photographs, I layer postcards together in combination with the glass version of the image – so when the glass is breaking there are cards behind and you get uncontrolled relationships between figures and faces that are falling apart. Across the grid, there is an avalanche of fragmented imagery – a phenomenal form of beauty emerges but it is also an extremely violent visual situation.

DL: The idea of an avalanche – this powerful wave of imagery and historical information – is interesting in relation to some of your earlier work. In some cases, you've addressed photographic subjects that might be overwhelming while also suggesting that there is always information and experience that can't be accessed or captured by the camera.

OG: One connection – thinking about the grid structure – is to my early work in Sarajevo (*Afterwars*, 1998). My compositions can be quite forceful: the framing is incredibly tight. There is a desire to gain control – and then within the frame, there is a type of controlled chaos. In Sarajevo the modernist buildings were very formal, but on the surface, within their structures, there were bullet holes, shrapnel marks and other traces of destruction. The new photographs – and other series such as *Blow Up* – connect with the tension in this work. I'm very much aware of my own entropy – a desire to keep everything organised, knowing that this effort is doomed. There is a frustration to keep things in order out of the understanding and awareness that if you let it go then everything is about to fall apart. This also true in regards to my own existence – an understanding that eventually, as soon as I let go of order, my life will pass away.

In all my work there's a tension between a desire to hold on to something, to feel that it's certain – to have some form of eternal assurance – and then a submission to the ephemeral, to the awareness that things fall apart. It's in the Sarajevo series. It's in *White Noise*. It's in all my work.

DL: *White Noise* (2000) is certainly relevant to questions of artistic control and intervention – and to the potential of a subject being overwhelming. The photographs in this series were made on a train journey you took between Belzec and Auschwitz – and you've written about how, at the time, you were aware of 'the impossibility of the subject'. The resulting photographs were quite abstract: hazy images of snowy landscapes, taken from a moving train. As you held the camera, snapping one fleeting view after another, you didn't quite



White Noise 7, A Train Journey From Cracow To Auschwitz (1999)



Untitled 1, *White Noise*



Ghost Olive 21 (2004)



Fragile Land, Cyclamen D 1-3 (2018)

know what kinds of images would be captured. The content of the photographs was partially beyond your control – to some extent you removed yourself from the process. And yet in other series, the opposite applies: you act and intervene very forcefully, constructing scenes with incredible care, then deliberately destroying them. This dialectic between withdrawal and engagement seems very important.

OG: It's always a process of discovery. I think about the restrictive nature of my own perception. When I made a series focusing on olive trees in Galilee (*Ghost Olive*, 2003-4) I used a very long exposure and my initial intention was to destroy the film with light; but in the darkroom I tried to rescue details. It was a combined process of erasure and recall – in a way that might be similar to the way memory and the mind work. The resulting images were so removed from what I saw when I stood beside the camera, looking at what was there: something that had real physical presence in the world. Every one of us who were there saw something completely different. In various ways, all my photography is about this situation: I'm standing and I'm looking at something and I don't have a clue what it's actually going to look like as a photograph. The event of taking photographs reveals something that I had no way ever to experience without the camera.

DL: I wonder could you talk a little more about the role and representation of violence in your work. Acts of destruction are recurrent features of your process. In the new work, as you've described, you smash glass prints of iconic art historical imagery. In previous projects like *Fragile Land (2018)* – in which flowers native to Israeli and Palestinian landscapes are shot at with a customized air rifle – you use elaborate equipment and hire expert help to enact highly specific forms of violence. These works are startlingly forceful, but you

also often refer to forceful situations of power, authority, oppression or control. There is a relationship in the work both to artistic acts of violence and to historical realities of violence and conflict.

OG: There is a biographical element to these issues, to do with my upbringing and my Israeli background – all sorts of experiences from my childhood are relevant. But acts of destruction are fundamentally important to the work in many ways. The tension, the dialectic, between creation and destruction is constant – and I'm trying to create this tension in order to discover something new. In every moment, for instance when we chew food and nourish ourselves, we destroy something too: constantly, everything that we do, every step that we take is an act of atrocious destruction that allows us to move forward in a direction or destination that we desire. Even these sorts of everyday tensions are crucial: there is a very charged conflict that exists in every moment and every decision – and out of them comes this moment. So I see all my photographs as, in Cartier Bresson's term, decisive moments: they are decisive moments where the 'thing' is still there – something is present that you can refer to – and it's already somewhere else. This frozen 'thing' is like the Robert Capa soldier in the Spanish Civil War, or like Schrodinger's cat: it is something both alive and dead. There is a paradox there that only photography is able to reveal, no other medium can. The bullet is already in the body, but the body is still alive. Schrodinger's cat represents an impossible reality, the cat would be either alive or dead – but, as in photography, a paradox is present, and there is something about this paradox that I keep returning to, that's really attractive to me because it talks about the potential in these situations both for something new to emerge and something old to pass away. The photograph holds this dual position.

DL: In one earlier interview, you spoke about how there is a strong conceptual dimension to your



When Tom Come (2005) from *Liquidation*



Trace 2 (2005) from *Liquidation*

photography, but this is combined with a consistent pull towards the poetic. This emphasis on the poetic seems important. In your work, it's not a quality that can be trivialised, it has value and meaning through its relation to the conceptual and the political, but at the same time it can be distinguished from them. Does the need to register – and reflect on – the poetic power of images remain a significant motivation?

OG: Absolutely, this is the prime drive. Everything I do derives from the images, it doesn't come from ideas. You know, I can talk about the museum piece and what I try achieve as I immerse myself for a long time in the process, but actually images are the starting point. I was at the Kunsthistorisches in Vienna during the Peter Bruegel exhibition a couple of years ago and I saw a wall of paintings and had an impulse to photograph it; I came to the studio and I put the images together and for a long time thought that I wanted to do something with them. It's the same with the exploding flowers. I was driving with my wife in the car and I said, 'what would you think if I took a flower and I exploded it?' For me it was an image – and I couldn't shake it off; everything then comes from this image, all the words and the reasoning. It's the same again with the photographs of forests in Ukraine (*Liquidation*, 2005) – I just imagined a tree falling and it started with this single image and develop into a whole journey. So this response to the poetic effect of images drives everything. I never read a book and say, 'this is a great idea, let's make a photograph about this.' It will always be an image that occurred to me – that's what drives anything I have made to date.

DL: Your work has a strong historical sense too: both in your engagement with historical events, landscapes and images, and in your evident awareness of the changing historical conditions of image-making.

OG: Whenever I talk about my work and give it context, I talk about three moments of revolution. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth/eighteenth century, the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and then the digital revolution of the twenty-first century. And I think that each one of these is very significant to photography. Each one represents a technological breakthrough that changed our perception of reality and truth – and shifted our relationship to one another in the world. In the scientific revolution, Galileo looked at the stars and Hooke and Leeuwenhoek discovered microscopic life. Through the telescope and the microscope, the magnifying lens became an extension of the human eye. For the first time we could see things that were beyond the limit of our essential boundaries. It's a moment where the large and the small are becoming very close to each other. We could see from the microscopic to the astronomical; but at the same time there is the development of map technology – so the world can also be compressed into a small book; people can move much more easily, enabling and



Blow Up 6 (2007)

extending colonialism. And then also, eventually, the foundations for photography are established. The lens technology was invented – technology that has improved but not fundamentally changed. I think about the seventeenth/eighteenth century scientific revolution in terms of a compression of space and the nineteenth century industrial revolution as a compression of time. Everything started to move much more quickly: machine production, transport. People travelled faster, to many different places: times had to be correlated. With the invention of photography, a form of chemistry was found that could actually fix the passage of linear time. Now I look at the digital revolution and it's a moment where time and space are collapsing upon themselves. There is no distinction. Time is not linear. Space doesn't really exist. Here and now – via Zoom – you and I are talking in a unified time but in such remote space. In an instant I can watch replays of global events that happened yesterday. Everything is in a state of flux – and every moment of this revolution has profound consequences. Colonialism and genocide came about a results of the scientific revolution and the industrial revolution. These earlier eras saw the emergence of nation states, while our own era of globalisation has seen a decline in their influence. We have issues with diseases like Corona because in the global world everything spreads so quickly. With commerce, there are no boundaries. These conditions of flux are there in my work. I am constantly looking at the past – these images from the museum, from the Renaissance and after, from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – and in the present they become something new. A lot of my work is about this – it's not just about destruction but about a complete re-ordering.



Blow Up 12 (2007)