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In the Bowels of Painting

I am standing, alarmed, in front of one of Gilad Efrat's new paintings from 2016 (p. 128). The monumental painting looms high above my head, its sharp shapes hurled at me from all sides, its fiery colors – cadmium red, cobalt blue, yellow, and black – assaulting my eyes. Space is collapsing around me – nowhere to run. I recall the emergency instructions: *If you cannot run to an open area during an earthquake, take shelter next to an internal wall*. Hey, I say to myself with the sudden clarity of a survivor, painting is just such an "internal wall"; instead of running away from it, go up close, seek refuge in its surface.

The surface of painting is a safe haven; in the shelter of its suspended time my breathing gradually returns to normal, my eye strokes the rich layers of paint, my mind starts working again. The collapsing space of Efrat's painting reminds me of something. Yes – in 1532–4, Giulio Romano painted *The Chamber of the Giants* (p. 130), an illusionistic fresco encompassing all four walls and the ceiling, depicting the havoc wreaked by Jupiter upon the Titans who dared challenge the gods and try to take Olympus from them. The defeated Titans flee in terror under the torrent of Jupiter's arrows of lightning, crushed by the rain of boulders and building parts collapsing upon them. But it is not only the Titans that are crushed here; the *trompe-l'oeil* technique that Romano used makes the viewers part of the illusory image, themselves Titans overwhelmed by the avalanche of representation.

There is a certain affinity between the early sixteenth-century artists known as Mannerists and the artists of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first

century known as Postmodernists. Both were destined to work in the shadow of the conceptual and formal perfection achieved by the artists of the preceding generation. Just as Romano, Tintoretto, Parmigianino and Bronzino were obliged to take apart and distort the harmonic values of the High Renaissance, painters today must violate, contaminate, and break down the reflexive purity of High Modernism, and to use the linguistic and ideological ruins of the Modernist utopia as building blocks for their alternative language.

The landscape of Efrat's painting is indeed strewn with ruins: archaeological sites, destroyed European cities, bomb-scarred battlefields. His cratered landscapes of the Moon and Mars, and his close-ups of ancient ape faces also appear to us as ruins, albeit ruins created not by human history but by cosmic erosion and evolutionary time. Even his paintings of the Ansaar detention camp can be seen as ruins – political ruins of the Israeli self-righteousness.

However, at the foundation of Efrat's painting lies not this or that particular, changing image, but the permanent infrastructure of his paintings from the outset – a more total ruin: the ruin of painting itself. Already in his first solo exhibition at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art in 1998 (curator: Dalia Levin), Efrat chose to present two, equally prominent, sets of works: "figurative" paintings of archaeological sites, alongside "abstract" paintings of monochromatic color layers. How should we interpret this strategic decision, repeated also in Efrat's exhibitions in Rome (Galleria Oredaria, 2005) and at the Mishkan Museum of Art in Ein Harod (Curator: Galia Bar Or, 2010)? A partial explanation would be the influence of German painter Gerhard Richter (p. 121), who in the latter half of the twentieth century showed an entire generation of painters how to break free from the tyranny of style and work simultaneously on several different language tracks. A more profound explanation would stem from the very roots of Efrat's artistic thought: where he stands, there is no fundamental difference between images labeled "figurative" and those labeled "abstract." As an artist who began his studies in the early 1990s, a decade after Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*[1] went viral and took over the international art discourse, Efrat took for granted that both are empty signifiers – hollow forms that long lost their status as representations of a real world, remnants of sign-systems that once carried conventional meaning and now lie like broken fragments in the archaeological mound of painting. His point of view, therefore, skips over the historical categories of "figurative" and

[1] The book first came out in French in 1981 and was soon translated to English. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

"abstract," and sees them both as varying states of two elements without which – and without the dynamic space created between them – there would be no painting: matter and time.

Matter is the primary raw element of painting, the mud from whence it comes. Despite all the new digital imaging technologies, painting today still thrives in the quicksand of pigments, mediums and solvents. James Elkins, in his book *What Painting Is,* berates art historians who refer to paintings merely as images and ignore the thinking through materials that is unique to the painting process itself. "To an artist," he writes, "a picture is both a sum of ideas and a blurry memory of 'pushing paint,' breathing fumes, dripping oils and wiping brushes, smearing and diluting and mixing . . . every painting captures a certain resistance of paint, a prodding gesture of the brush, a speed and insistence in the face of mindless matter."[2]

Time is the fluid, elusive, and paradoxical element of painting. On the one hand, it takes a long time to paint a painting – to imagine it, plan it, prepare its support, mix paints, apply layers, get excited, get desperate, erase, add, erase, add – but on the other hand, it takes no more than an instant to view it. Even when a dedicated viewer comes along and devotes long minutes to the painting, repeatedly gazing from close and far, the painting itself – the congealed pigments on canvas – remains static, frozen in the perpetual present tense of matter. Romano's Titans, painted on the wall in the few hours between the application of the damp fresco plaster and its drying, are forever trapped between the physical time of the painting's materiality and the imaginary time of its mythological story. The space of painting is born in the gap between the static nature of painting as an object and the dynamic nature of the time of its making – and of the time of its viewing. Tricks of the trade, such as perspective and contrasting warm and cold colors, certainly help, but the significant space of painting lies in the distance between tangible material and abstract time – an unbridgeable distance that unravels as space in the mind of the painter and, more importantly, in the mind of the viewer.

I turn back to look closely at the surface of Gilad Efrat's painting. Since his early "archaeological" works, the surface has been the significant site of his painting – a membrane of matter into which the time of painting and the time of history are compressed. The source photographs he used as points of departure for his paintings brought with them yet another temporal dimension, it too compressed

[2] James Elkins, *What Painting Is* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 2–3.

into the surface of his paintings: the fleeting moment of the camera shutter's mechanical blink, cutting off and embalming a single instant of life. Moreover, when Efrat began regarding the human body itself as a surface, something that could be called "body time" was also compressed into the "skin" of his paintings. In a conversation between us in 1998, he said:

> The work . . . stemmed from the perception of the archaeological site as a physical surface, and of the painting surface as a crust or a skin. Body colors entered into the paintings of archaeological sites, and my palette turned into skin colors; paintings dealing with the gap between the lack of materiality of photography and surplus materiality and physicality began to crystallize . . . I work through groping, wiping; I touch the surface, I feel it, I work with my sense of touch. I can easily describe this process as touching the body.[3]

Efrat's brilliant move at the start of his career was to "contaminate" the reflexive aesthetic of High Modernism with elements foreign to the fantasy of a pure and hermetic painting – the vulnerable human body, deep mythological time, the political quality of the photographic document. Taking his cue from the New York School painters, Efrat used a grid and an all-over composition for the uniform color fields he applied across the length and width of his canvases. But already in his choice of hue and materiality of these color fields, he rudely deviated from the purist Modernist standard: his colors were those of human skin, blends of oil-paint that he mixed after the color and tone of his own skin. When he applied photographic images to these layers of paint, his paintings' postmodernist somersault was complete, as though Moshe Kupferman's strict process ethic, Moshe Gershuni's concrete materiality, Gideon Gechtman's vulnerable physicality, and Roi Kuper's and Gilad Ophir's documentary distance were all compressed at once into their surfaces.

On the surface of the Efrat painting I'm looking at now, conversely, there is not even a trace of skin. Its tissue is exposed, as through the protective outer membrane had been peeled away. Gone are the layers of flesh color of the archaeological paintings, and of the landscapes and apes that followed them. Instead of the warm tonality of raw umber, burnt sienna and Naples yellow mixed

[3] "The Archaeologist, the Photographer and the Painter's Neighbor: A Conversation between Larry Abramson and Gilad Efrat," in *Gilad Efrat: Surface*, exh. cat. Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art (Herzliya, 1998), n.p.

with titanium white to compose a layer of skin-color, the eye now encounters a writhing tangle of color that appears to have just been exposed to the light of day. The act of removing layers of paint – which in the previous paintings had been done with meticulous wiping, grid square by grid square, in keeping with the source photograph – is performed here with broad shoulder strokes and giant squeegees. The layers of applied and removed paint reveal an endless range of hues and sub-hues that, from a distance, are rendered invisible by the fanfare of the large forms. What looked from afar like cadmium red turns out, on close inspection, to be a burning vermilion supported by browns, grays, and blues, with an acidic mixture of alizarin crimson and white showing through here and there. What appeared at first to be cobalt blue turns out to be a more greenish blue, almost cerulean, that mediates between the oranges and the yellow halo glowing behind them. The blacks, which from afar looked like falling silhouettes, are broken down into grainy half-tones by the masses of shoveled paint, appearing as X-ray scans of the painting itself. In fact, the scraped painting tissue reveals that all the colors visible on the surface are also compressed throughout the deeper layers, each detail a fractal echo of the whole painting (pp. 133, 134). In the top, full-bodied sections, a desperate effort to halt the cycle of application and removal of paint can be seen, in the form of blue lines leaping between the patches of color, and traced contours scratched around them with the tip of the squeegee, making tentative mappings of the composition.

Devoid of a skin, this painting has no conclusion, no exterior, no image. It only has an interior. It is all tissue, all tactility, all about "touching the body." The painter has not stepped back, measured and weighed, balanced a red patch against a blue. At the sight of Efrat's frenzy of simultaneity, it is clear why psychoanalyst Itamar Levy likened his new paintings to a hallucinogenic trance.[4] However, of all the metaphors struck to describe the creative process, Bialik's words seem to be the most accurate characterization of Efrat's painting process. "The masters of poetry," writes the poet, are likened to "one who crosses a river when it is breaking up, by stepping across floating, moving blocks of ice. He dare not set his foot on any one block for longer than a moment, longer than it takes him to leap from one block to the next, and so on. Between the breaches the void looms, the foot slips, danger is close."[5] Indeed, in Efrat's new paintings there

[4] Itamar Levy, "A New Beginning: On Gilad Efrat's Paintings, 2014–2016," in *Gilad Efrat: Paintings, 2014–2016*, exh. cat. The Genia Schreiber University Gallery, Tel Aviv University, curated by Irit Tal (Tel Aviv, 2016), p. 17.

[5] Haim Nahman Bialik, "Revealment and Concealment in Language," in *Revealment and Concealment: Five Essays*, trans. Zali Gurevitch (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000), p. 26.

is no leisurely philosophical contemplation, no critical distance. Everything is unstable, everything is in motion, the void looms, the foot slips, danger is close. All that is "constant and unchanging in the language"[6] is breached, the contiguous membrane of representation has burst. There is no skin.

Since he began exhibiting twenty years ago, Efrat has gone through many themes, one after the other and concurrently: archaeological sites, moon craters, apes, swamps, ruined cities, color fields, detention camps, trees and paths. Yet, despite his images varying, the surfaces of his paintings remained constant, their skin unchanged. Now, in the new works, his paintings appear to have changed their skin. No more distant aerial views, no more comforting and reassuring surface; the painter has been swallowed up by the body, from wherein he is now fated to paint, to paint his paintings from within the body of painting itself.

The helter-skelter of Efrat's shapes and colors send my thoughts whirling. "The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about," echoes the cry of Jonah, the reluctant prophet who was also swallowed up by a body, three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. How curious: three days and three nights is precisely the time that Efrat's new paintings allot him; in that time, he covers a large canvas with four or five layers of oil paint, in various hues and varying degrees of viscosity, and then, before they have dried, he digs into the wet layers, violates their order, scrapes away tissues of paint and reapplies them, turning bottom to top and top to bottom, again and again until, after three days and three nights, the oil paint dries and the painting seals itself off to the painter, vomiting him out to the dryness of land.[7]

Efrat's painting process is wet, like the mucous membrane of the intestinal wall. Unlike the external epidermis, which seals the body and repels fluids, the inner mucus bubbles and seeps, eager to draw in and absorb everything that comes into contact with it. Efrat's painting lives as long as its materials are moist, as long as they respond to the pulse of squeegee and brush. Like Giulio Romano's Titans, trapped in the layer of dried plaster, Efrat's time, too,

[6] Ibid.

[7] In Christianity, the three days and nights that Jonah spent in the belly of the fish are linked to the figure of Jesus. See Matthew 12:40: "For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." The myth of the hero entering and leaving the belly of a fish features in many cultures. See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 90.

is allotted, determined by the ticking clock of the oxidation of the oil paint and the evaporation of its solvents. For Efrat, the belly of the fish-painting is not a punishment; its raw and stirring space is a coveted site of change and creativity, while land is, as its Hebrew name – *yabasha* – suggests, a dry, bleak, and entropic place of doom.

The story of Jonah has been the subject of many paintings over the centuries, but most of these focused on the prophet's entreaty to God and his salvation. An exception is the painting *Leviathan* (1983) by Michael Sgan-Cohen (p. 136), one of the first Israeli postmodern artists to cross conceptual art with Jewish thought. In this large-scale painting, the figure of Jonah – based on that of the artist himself – sits cross-legged in the belly of the whale, engrossed in reading, immersed in stoic calm (as is the whale). Both Sgan-Cohen and Efrat upend the biblical story by presenting the belly of the fish-painting not as plight but as sought-after haven. However, there the similarity ends: while Sgan-Cohen regards the belly of the fish-painting as a monastic and still place of spiritual introspection, in Efrat's view, it is an alert space of physical and sensory energy, and of dynamic movement in matter. The painterly languages of the two artists also underscore the difference between them: Sgan-Cohen's language is dry, schematic, and pictographic, while Efrat's is moist, sensual, and indexical – "body painting" in the full sense of the words, literally and proverbially. In the spirit of pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, who argued that "From earth, water comes to be; from water, soul,"[8] one might say that Efrat's new paintings are not about this or that image, but about the ever-changing relationship between matter – the land, the body, the stone that is ground up to make the painter's pigment – and the nebulous soul; a magical and wondrous relationship possible only in the fluid and dynamic environment of water, oil, or any other of the painter's means.

For all its imposing size, Sgan-Cohen's whale is described from the outside, enveloped in a contour line that outlines it as a figure within the horizontal rectangle of the canvas. Efrat's "whale," on the other hand, is painted from the *inside* – it is an interior with no external boundary, all-encompassing space stopped only by the arbitrary edges of the canvas. In her essay for the *Moby Dick* exhibition she curated at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2013), which centered on Melville's white whale as a sign of the "unrepresentable," Dalit Matatyahu

[8] Heraclitus of Ephesus, in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy from Thales to Aristotle*, ed. S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C.D.C. Reeve, fifth edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2016), p. 23. With thanks to the poet Zali Gurevitch for the reference to Heraclitus, and for his translation of Heraclitus into Hebrew.

alludes to the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and his passion for the medium of painting. "Maurice Merleau-Ponty," she writes, ". . . considers painting not only his favored medium of art, but also a space of sensitivity facing the world. Painting could provide the example of attaining that primal worldly contact . . ., the contact of the 'savage eye' that reveals a visibility independent of language."[9] It seems that the enigma of Efrat's new paintings is the same enigma that drives Merleau-Ponty's "Eye and Mind": "That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself."[10]

Whereas in the early 2000s Efrat applied layers of "flesh color" on photographic images of his own body, in the new paintings he is no longer dependent on the binary distinction between photography and painting and between flesh and oil paint: his "fleshly eyes," to use Merleau-Ponty's words,[11] have closed the distance: they are part of reality, seeing and touching themselves and the world at point blank range.

The distinction between interior and exterior is possible only in language. In the body, as in painting, inside and outside are a living paradox: the intestines – the guts, or innards – are the innermost part in the body, the imagined seat of our most instinctive and visceral feelings, yet at the same time they are the most external organs, the ones that come in close and direct contact with the outside world, exposed to the food and other foreign substances we ingest, including the bacteria and viruses that come with them. The same is true of painting: its paint tissue is right up against the body of the painter, swallowing it up and responding to the slightest motion, while at the same time it is forever also a public domain, a picture on display, exposed for all to see and subject to every passing interpretation.

Jonah found himself in the bowels of the fish after attempting to avoid delivering a prophecy of wrath that was imposed upon him. What is the mission that has led Gilad Efrat into the bowels of painting? Wim Wenders' film *Until the End*

[9] Dalit Matatyahu, "Suspended Attention," *Moby Dick*, trans. Tamar Fox, exh. cat. Tel Aviv Museum of Art (Tel Aviv, 2013), p. 17.

[10] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. ed. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 124.

[11] Ibid., p. 127.

of the World (1991) revolves around a camera of dreams, and a heroine (Solveig Dommartin as Claire Tourneur), who becomes addicted to her dreams recorded by the camera and falls victim to the "disease of images" – a pathological state of sleep for the purpose of dreaming, and wakefulness solely for the purpose of watching the recorded dreams, and so on over and over again in an endless closed circuit of gazing at images and images of images, to the point of total detachment from the real world. Anyone living in this age of reproduction is vulnerable to the disease of images, this pandemic of visual information that floods our minds to the point where we can no longer distinguish between reality and fiction. In 1967, when Guy Debord stated that "Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation,"[12] it was a call to revolt against the tyranny of representations. Today, with Millennials bound to their screens more than ever before, and no longer even interested in telling fact from fake, we are indeed living in the "Desert of the Real" – that simulated reality that Baudrillard defined as "the generation by models of a real without origin."[13] Of all the addictions that characterize the late capitalist era, the subjugation to images is undoubtedly the most chronic.

In the final scene of his film, Wenders offers Claire a partial cure, by means of distance: he stations her as an ocean-watcher on a Greenpeace satellite, her gaze thousands of miles away from the object of its passion. Efrat has taken an opposite approach to tackling the disease of images: in his photography-based paintings, he chose to bring the images close, to give the bodyless photographic image an intimate body of thick and concrete oil paint. In his new paintings, he takes a more radical approach to the epidemic of images: Instead of presenting the image and the body of painting as opposing forces that counteract to balance each other, he now turns his back on the image and fully immerses himself in the body of painting. Rather than clinically diagnosing the disease, he opts to offer it a cure, to embrace the life force inherent in the very act of painting and through it to ward off the debilitating melancholy of flickering dream images. He has no illusions: in his new paintings, Efrat relinquishes both the representational figuration of photography and the abstract utopia of early Modernism. Of all the abandoned languages scattered in the archaeological mound of painting, he chooses to clean the dust off the most physical – the language which will most concretely capture the movements of his body, the dance of his "fleshly eyes." Although we call this language "abstract," devoid

[12] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* [1967] (Detroit, MI: Black and Red, 1983), thesis 1.
[13] Baudrillard, p. 3.

of the "pure" formal and spiritual values that established it, it becomes the most "real" painting language possible – that closest to the language of the body itself. Making marks of the body on a surface other than the body – a cave wall, or a canvas – is not only the birth of painting, but also a primary and foundational experience familiar to all from distant childhood.[14] In the face of empty ideologies and the collapse of language, Efrat surely is trying to save his soul, but at the same time appears to be driven by a more public mission: he invites us, his viewers, to awaken from the coma, to follow him into the bowels of painting, to connect with that magical moment before matter and image are separated, and, for an instant, to be whole again. "Painting constitutes a parallel, yet concrete, space in which to meet, exchange definitions, argue, and even agree," Efrat wrote in 2016. "Painting can reconcile differences, construct orders, and enable us to live in harmony in a chaotic world."[15]

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I am cast out of Efrat's painting onto the cold dry land of the exhibition space. How long was I in the belly of this painting? A minute? An hour? A day? A week? This is, indeed, a paradox: the matter of painting is inanimate and fixed, while its time is infinite, alternately shrinking and expanding, opening up within the viewer's eye the boundless space of an instant. Now, in the time outside painting, the present sends its cold fingers toward me, sinful Nineveh closing in from beyond the wall. How had I forgotten it while I was being jostled between cadmium and cobalt, my eyes flitting from shard to shard, the void looming between the breaches?

Help! Let me back into the bowels of painting.

[14] In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder attributes the origin of the art of painting to a Corinthian girl who traced on the wall a charcoal outline around the shadow of the boy she loved, before his departure. See Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), p. 11.

[15] Gilad Efrat, "Artist's Statement," in *Take Painting*, trans. Daria Kassovsky, exh. cat. Petach Tikva Museum of Art, artist-curator: Larry Abramson (Petach Tikva, 2016), p. 34.