ORI GERSHT - THIS STORM IS WHAT WE CALL PROGRESS

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FIGURE 1 | Ori Gersht, *Evaders*, 2010, Still from DVD projection, Image courtesy of Mummery + Schnelle.

Ori Gersht has always been interested in World War II and postwar conflicts so it is not surprising that his new series of works is focused on three war situations. The three works in this exhibition refer to fear and violence but they do so through seductive and poetic imagery. As a metaphor of this sufferance, the subjects have in common, human suffering and landscape.

Chasing Good Fortune is a series of photographs that examines the symbolism of Japanese cherry blossom in relation to Kamikaze soldiers during World War II. This photographic work is the result of Gersht's visit to Japan where at memorials to Kamikaze soldiers, he photographed Hiroshima mountains and cherry blossom. The cherry blossom appears unexpectedly and after two or three days, when the wind blows, it falls and disappears. The Japanese have planted cherry trees in their gardens, since ancient times, along rivers and in temples.

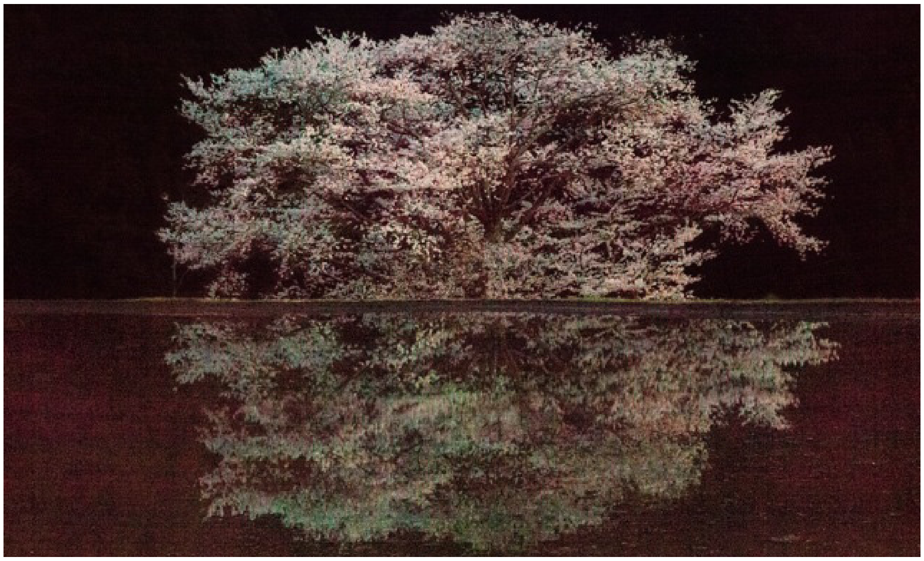
When Japan began its modernization and colonial expansion in the nineteenth century, at the beginning of the Meji era, the cherry blossom started to be seen as an emblem of nationhood and was adopted by the military forces. So when the Japanese saw their soldiers killing themselves for the homeland, they associated the act of bravery with the cherry blossom. Many of Gersht's images were taken at night using a digital camera, which explains the grainy texture.
The two-screen film *Evaders focuses* on Walter Benjamin's escape from Nazi-occupied France to Francoist Spain through the risky path of the Lister Route. Benjamin succeeded in crossing into Spain but when he tried to continue his journey, he was questioned by border officials. As he was afraid of being sent back to France he committed suicide at Port Bou, Girona. Benjamin is not only the main character in this video but his words also give the exhibition its title, *This Storm Is What We Call Progress* [1].

This reference is not casual, as Gersht uses Benjamin's history and words at the beginning of the video to raise questions about history and progress. We can see Benjamin's struggle not only to live but also to go beyond his own and nature's limits in traversing the Lister route. This route is seen as a symbolic place of transition, suspended between past and future. It is also an historic symbol of migration due to political and economic reasons.

Gersht places Benjamin's figure in photographs taken in the Pyrenees. The snow and windy images remind one of another German, Caspar David Friedrich and his monumental landscape paintings. It can be argued that Gersht's use of landscape is one of evoking a sublime beauty reminding the viewer of the romanticism of the nineteenth century.

Yehudit Arnon also went beyond nature and her proper limits when she refused to dance at an SS Christmas party at Auschwitz. She was punished by being ordered to stand barefoot in the snow without being told for how long. She promised herself that if she survived she would dedicate her life to dance. In fact, she survived and created her own dance company.
Today she is eighty-five-years-old and can barely move, rocking back and forth in a chair.
This video has the aim of evoking this memory:

> "It has to do with a childhood memory that I had. When I was young and wandering the streets of Tel Aviv, I used to see many people with numbers tattooed on



> their arms and it was very much integral to the demographic landscape. I still visit Israel frequently and I became aware that all these people are just fading away and disappearing” [3].

The two-screen video shows us Arnon trying to dance again, but this time in her chair, performing slow movements in an attempt to rebel against circumstances as she did so many years ago even though she now seems to be suffering. Accompanied by delicate piano music, we see Arnon coming towards and moving away from us at the same time as we see heavy snow falling on the other screen.

This exhibition is about memory, time and melancholia but disguised in a poetic manner. These subjects are not new for Gersht as his *Afterwars: Sarajevo* (1998) series of cityscapes from postwar Bosnia and landscapes of the Judean Desert demonstrate. We must not forget that Ori Gersht was born in Israel and for many Israeli people, knowing and understanding twentieth-century history and the Holocaust is a normal fact of life. As he recently stated:

> “Scars created by wars on our collective and personal memories are at the essence of my practice. In my work I often explore the dialectics of destruction and creation, and the relationships between violence and aesthetics” [2].

Gersht is very interested in the difficulty of representing violent histories through film and photography but he has found a way to deal with this difficult subject by presenting it from a melancholic and poetic viewpoint. His nuanced use of the medium is highlighted in the still life series where Gersht investigates the relationship between photography and digital technology. For instance, in *Pomegranate* (2006) Gersht takes, as his reference, Juan Sánchez Cotán’s seventeenth-century still life (*Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*, 1602) and Harold Edgerton’s stroboscopic photographs *Bullets passing through fruit* to subvert the genre and transform a peaceful still life into a violent one; a high-speed bullet is shot through the suspended pomegranate, bursting it open and freezing the moment when it explodes.

It could be seen as an awkward choice to hold the exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, as the museum tends to explain World War I and II in a very didactic way, Gersht, on the other hand, explores the recovery of the historical memory of people who lived and fought during those wars. Today, most of these people have died, so it is important at this time to remember what happened. Gersht’s exhibition offers an alternative to the museum’s instructive practice.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue in the form of an artist’s book produced by Photoworks. The book is beautifully and originally presented and is composed of three volumes, each taking a separate film as its subject; *Evaders, Will You Dance For Me and Offering*. The small and intimate books reflect on the creative thought process behind the making of each film. Together, they create a seamless visual narrative and an insight into the mind of the artist. Each volume combines sources that have influenced Gersht including film stills, screen grabs, music videos and historical art paintings. These are combined with Gersht’s own drawings, sketches, photographs and works from his wider oeuvre which he considers relevant to these recent films. All of the images are treated equally and have been edited into sequences by the artist. The relationships between the images are not intended to be didactic but attempt to create a new experience of Gersht’s ideas and to contextualize his working process.

[1] Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, Knopf, New York, 1969, pp 257–258

[2] See the Press Release from the exhibition.

[3] http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-features/63639/we-have-a-responsibility-hold-dark-memories, accessed on 5th March 2012

Ori Gersht, This Storm Is What We Call Progress, Imperial War Museum, 25 January – 29 April 2012
