

Open Painting

Shunryu Suzuki, at the beginning of the classic book based on his lectures,¹ spoke in praise of the “beginner's mind” The real secret in the arts, said Suzuki, is always to be a beginner. Moreover, the aim of practice is to preserve the mind of the beginner, and not only, as many believe, to make progress, for in this mind, which has not yet been “locked” and fixed, lie many possibilities.

This idea of the multiple possibilities of the beginning consciousness seems crucial to me, beyond its relation to the personal path of these five artists starting out on their way. The multiple possibilities and the “open” quality of the beginning mind appear in many of these works as a certain specific quality of painting. This is seen in particular in some of the model paintings and portraits. These paintings could be classified as sketches or etudes. But this etude quality can be significant. One of the disturbing things in the western painting tradition is the treatment of men and women as “furniture,” in the words of John Berger.² Many paintings, in particular those of men and women, along with their technical achievement express a problematic and disturbing stance in relation to the most basic characteristic of man: his (or her) being a non-object; not a “thing” but rather a process, an event – both in the spiritual and the physical sense. In other words, man is always open and demands an open painting. At every moment something new begins in him. He is never identical to himself. Paintings which strive to freeze the the human figure may do wonderful service to the character’s skin, the texture of her hair or the spark in her eyes, but they miss her spirit.³

Here the “beginner's mind” of which Suzuki spoke joins with the motif of most of the paintings in this exhibition – women. Nearly all of these paintings can be seen as unfinished, as beginnings. But that is just the point. From the point of view which I present here, a good painting, especially one of a woman or man, must to some extent be the beginning of a painting: a painting in progress, a painting that is open.

In this exhibition there are open paintings, which do not close the women in them within a moment of the past, already focused at the future in which someone will look at the painting.

¹ Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, ed. Trudy Dixon, Weatherhill 1970, pp. 21-22.

² John Berger, Ways of Seeing, Penguin 1972.

³ I will not enter here into the discussion of whether there is anything inanimate in nature at all, as far as the art of painting is concerned.

Berger has written elsewhere⁴ of the uniqueness of the Fayum mummy portraits. He claims that these portraits are so vital today because they were painted then in the present, for the present. No career of visibility was planned for them. The gaze of the future, eternalizing, monumental, did not penetrate to them, because the Fayum portraits were pictures of the dead or the dying, and were intended for burial along with their models, as a sort of passport in the voyage to the next world.

The paintings in this exhibition are not, of course, tainted with death as are the Fayum portraits, but in common with the masterpieces of the Egyptian-Hellenic painting, they share the avoidance of thought of the future; the absence of the assumed anonymous observer, the stranger with a purse and a collection. They deal with the present moment of the human meeting. That is why they succeed in so many cases in trapping something human, despite or perhaps *because* of the fact that they deal not with details or visibility but rather with moments of relationship and of looking.

I suggest looking at these paintings and searching for the moments or the places (in the painting) where that which could have been said ceases; thinking about what is actually painted in relation to that which is missing or cut off, the empty areas, the broken brush strokes. In the examples which follow I will hint at the power achieved by the beginning, unfinished quality of the paintings in the exhibition.

In the painting of **Na'ama Berkovitch's** profile a woman stands against a bright light; the painting translates this light into a region of emptiness within the head. We pass from a small stain indicating the eye to a small stain within the empty "brain." Thus the painting catches a fleeting, bright moment, a moment of emptiness or perhaps embarrassment in her life. The painting looks at the consciousness, at the head, and does not see. This is its achievement. In another sketch of Na'ama, a green stain grows and bursts out in her hands, "exaggerated" as if all of nature had drained into her breast, surrounded by hints of charred trees. This is a very strong statement about the relationship between the inner and outer world, about the possibility of growth hidden from the eye within an opposing environment.

In **Avital Burg's** painting a nude woman lies. Beneath her is a brown stain and beside her a green stain and a sketch of a bird. The stains at first appear to be the beginning of a pastorate, a routine painting of a woman in nature. But at that moment, as it were, the growth of nature and paint are arrested in an instant, and an empty somewhat frightening space spreads out on all sides. In another of her paintings a woman stretches her arms out before her towards the

⁴ John Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket*, Vintage Press, 2001, pp. 51-60.

empty page like a blind person groping in the dark; and in another color drawing someone sits, perhaps in order to draw, and suddenly the landscape ends. The emptiness attacks from the right and touches, actually touches her hands, like a wave smashing on the shore. The unknown begins at the very tips of the fingers.

In another painting by **Inbal Marie-Cohen**, the swiftness of execution of the face becomes a sort of terrifying mask, sharply separating light from dark and face from skin, as if a moment of fear attacked the painting and it had to be stopped immediately. In another of her paintings absent palms of the hands of a nude in profile make a gesture indescribable in words, illuminating this woman in a whole other light, as if she grasped empty flame in her fingers.

In a painting by **Sophie Yogev**, closed eyes echo shoulders and upper chest which are nearly empty, and an overly dark stain on a shoulder emphasizes the absence of the other shoulder, which the wall seems to gnaw at and erode, pushing sleep into the arms of death. And in another painting, of a nude lying/hanging in space, a diagonal that has not been erased lends the painting a violent and disturbing aspect, which in the absence of the diagonal line might not have been there, but would have been covered up in the finished painting.

In **Gili Lev Ari**'s work the gap between the level of finish of the body parts and that which is beside them is shocking, as if in an instant the beautiful fresh flesh becomes chaos, mess, as if the body did not just end but was destroyed in one moment. So too in the still life with cup and clementine – the cup not only remains unfinished, but something bursts out of it which is in stark contrast to the wholeness of the orange fruit, and its presence has much to say about the difficulty of painting, of containing something on canvas.

Chardin⁵ quoted another artist who said that it takes the skilled artist thirty years to be able to bring back to the finished painting the quality of the preliminary sketch. It may be a pity to wait thirty years and then attempt to revive a skill which is at hand for the beginner. When Suzuki speaks of the practice intended to preserve the beginner's mind, he suggests taking care in advance, day by day, not to arrive at a state of excessive skill, not to become "locked," so that opening up or revival will require many years and perhaps a lifetime.

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