

Commentary on *Big Bang*

I met Dr. Hava Aldouby “by chance” at an airport in the midst of canceled flights; we became fast friends. We spoke of many things, of our love for our families and the humanities, of her interviewing artist Ori Gersht in London, how an exhibit was opening soon in Boston, near my home, and how I *must* go to experience his extraordinary art.

At this time of sisterhood connection, I did not know that a malignant tumor would soon invade my husband’s brain and our life, that within this nuclear holocaust, a new unrecognizable life would emerge. In May of that year, smashing our life to smithereens, my husband, Mark Weiner, MD, a neurologist, saw “the other side of brain cancer.”¹ He underwent 7 hours of resection surgery, then 6 weeks of daily radiation and chemotherapy including a clinical trial. A month off, then 13 more months of chemotherapy. He survived and began the arduous task of adjusting to a new reality, rehabbing within limitations. As a caregiver, I wandered in a PTSD-like state, trying to manage medical appointments too numerous to count, doing all the driving, cooking uneaten meals, and—on the toughest chemo days—spoon-feeding a formerly healthy, athletic, vibrant man. In August, I remembered Ori Gersht’s exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.² Hava had told me.

I entered the exhibit looking to art for beauty, meaning, distraction from the unfairness of life. Gersht, “interested in oppositions” I had read, captures “beauty, tender and fleeting, amid history’s ire.”³ But we make art our own. We do not approach art as a blank slate; we bring who we are and let it work on us. I was present.

I arrive at *Big Bang*. The title seems ironic; the video introduces a tranquil image, modeled after an 18th-century still life by Jan van Husysum: an orderly flower arrangement against a dark background. But as I stand there watching ...

smoke slowly starts to billow from the flowers as a siren sound builds to an operatic crescendo. An explosion then blows glass and petals and smoke across the picture plane in all directions. Jewel-like shards fall in a silent slow-motion cascade, protracted and meditative.³

I had experienced that explosion—the impact of sudden catastrophic illness on a patient’s life and the family’s life. On my life. The illusion of a carefully crafted life had blown up. Gersht’s explosion resonated with my own image of shards of glass falling all around me: the horror of the words “brain cancer,” the months of chemo, the painful effort, with cut and bleeding hands, to pick up the pieces and try to reassemble, reconfigure some semblance of a life with a new shape and form.

The beauty of the body and the violence of illness—this is how *Big Bang* spoke to me. Coexisting incongruities. The vulnerability of being a human being. “All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Mark together again.” And yet... For Gersht, the moment of destruction in the exploding flowers becomes the moment of creation.

Remarkably, one flower stem sways within the motion of the blast and remains intact—even though, according to a museum docent, the planned detonation was supposed to totally destruct. I try to focus on that resilient stem (or soul as I see it) and I derive hope from the unfolding image of the blown-up flower and vase fragments reassembling in slow-mo. I do not move from the repeating video, watching, mesmerized, again and again as *Big Bang* explodes and then returns to its original state.

How I yearn for a return to that original unharmed state, but with many serious illnesses including the effects of treatment, a return is not to be. An illness bomb explodes, with ensuing physical, psyche, and relationship damage, and the wounded warriors have no choice but to try to create anew within that strange, uncharted illness universe, one that I could not ever have imagined. The narrative of my life that took a detour, a turn from the story I had written in my mind, the way it was “supposed to be.” Unlike Gersht’s *Big Bang*, our lives do not return to wholeness; raw, jagged edges remain.

Months later, I attended a narrative medicine conference in London and felt compelled to contact and connect with Ori Gersht. We spoke of *Big Bang* as well

as his other powerful works, and I heard about his creative vision. I learned more about the intentional tension infusing his art: “The longer I manage to suspend the tension of not being able to resolve what you’re looking at,” he’s been quoted, “the more successful the work will be.”³

“We must tolerate the intolerable within brain cancer,” I traveled a long way to tell Ori Gersht, “The ‘still life’ in my real life is that I am still unable to resolve what I now see.”

He had not heard of such an interpretation of his work, he told me, and pondered it. We connected within a synergy of words and visual artistry, then silence. Contemplative, we walked down the street, and he shielded me from the light rain with his umbrella. As I approached my bus stop, I expressed gratitude for Gersht’s art, which captured my experience of our life’s “big bang”: my husband’s illness and its impact on all of us—a life of creation, now with destruction. Yet a never “still” life, destruction now with creation.

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References

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- 2 Aldouby H. Courting absence, restoring presence: Ori Gersht and the moving image. In: Aldouby H, Chandler D, Miner A, Petra-Wong M. Ori Gersht: History Reflecting. Boston, Mass: MFA Publications; 2014.
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See facing page for stills.

Big Bang

[Stills from the video]

Ori Gersht



Ori Gersht, Big Bang, HD film, duration 5 min 33 sec, 2007. Stills reprinted with permission of the artist. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBIU2cosqEw> for abbreviated version of the video. See facing page for commentary.