



## ART AND VIOLENCE

*Carol Armstrong*

What could be more anodyne than the subject of still life, that mainstay of advertising photography and the history of Western illusionist art? It is its stillness, after all, that gives it its Dutch and English names, and its stillness that has long guaranteed both its longevity and its low status on the social ladder of art subjects. Concerned with low-lying inanimate things that stay put through all eternity, it has long been positioned at the opposite end of the spectrum from the important topics of newsworthy reportage and history painting, with their focus on the violence of human affairs. The only faint stirrings that have ever ruffled its calm surface or unsettled its owners and viewers have been the hints of fleetingness and mortality that have been silently suggested in its lovely objects, its vivid flowers, and its enticing foodstuffs, scrupulously depicted in their every sumptuous detail. (Those hints crystallize in the occasional skull and time-piece, and the more morbid French term for the genre, *nature morte*.)

And in the history of still-life painting, what still-life painter could be more concerned with decorous middle-class decorativeness, with the safety and comfort of bourgeois domesticity, equal parts good taste and good manners, than the French nineteenth-century painter of fruit and flowers, Henri Fantin-Latour? So it is perhaps strange to find the contemporary London-based Israeli photographer Ori Gersht selecting some of Fantin-Latour's prettiest still lifes to detonate with explosive devices carefully woven into the bouquets, and then photographing them as they burst into smithereens. It is one thing to have chosen the work of the early seventeenth-century Spanish painter of austere vegetables, Juan Sánchez Cotán, to which to do similar things in both still photographs and moving film. For once done, the transformation of quince into bleeding pomegranate seems somehow given in the monkish overtones of martyrdom and the eerie, outer-space suspension of Cotán's uncanny still lifes. But to blow up the harmless, genteel flowerpieces of Fantin-Latour: what else but modernist hostility to the decorum of the aesthetic domain and the pictorial tradition could lead a gentle photographic artist like Gersht to do such a thing?

*Pomegranate* (film still), 2006

If it were that, however, I wouldn't be writing about it. No more would I be writing about it if I believed it to be some kind of easy denunciation of the fetishism of the beautiful thing, and its implication in the elided violences of the spectacularized world of the commodity. No, I was drawn to these exploding beauties in the first place because of something rather more thoughtful that seems to be taking place in them. I was drawn to them, not only because I too am a lover of still life—some of the very same still lifes as those that preoccupy this artist—but also, and more importantly, for reasons similar to those that drew me as well to Gersht's film of trees being felled in a forest, and his ghostly, almost disappeared photographs of Eastern European scenery whose lyricism is underwritten by the invisibility of the Holocaust events that took place there. I was drawn to them, that is to say, because of their double-edged poignancies: the poignancy of loss, and the poignancy of



the futile effort to retrieve and retain, to freeze time and hold on to what passes, in the face of the world's indifferent goings-on. And there is a third poignancy to which these works address themselves most delicately, for all their destructive pyrotechnics: and that is the poignancy of beauty, and of aesthetic sensibility itself.

Each of Gersht's still lifes begins with a frozen re-creation of a previous still life from the history of art: in these cases, bouquets carefully composed to mimic either a specific Fantin-Latour or a generic Dutch seventeenth-century painting, cryogenically preserved so that when blown up they will produce sharp shards that fly in all directions. They look, when photographically suspended, something like Cornelia Parker's blown-to-bits installations. Except they are flat and pictorial, and much more beautiful. And the logic of their freezing and suspension is photographic, not sculptural. Which is to say, their freezing is not merely a technical device that produces the desired aesthetic effect. Rather, it is a double freezing that speaks directly to the way the photograph attempts to stop time, suspending its flow by means of the medium's famous instantaneity, its removal of frozen moments from their temporal continuum. In this way, Gersht's

Juan Sánchez Cotán. Spanish, 1560-1627. *Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber*, ca. 1602. Oil on canvas. 27 1/8 in. x 33 1/4 in. San Diego Museum of Art, Gift of Anne R. and Amy Putnam, 1945.43

movement between motion and stillness in his films and still photographs, together with his exploding of the stillness of the still life, takes the old *vanitas* concerns of the Calvinist *stillevens* and gives them a modern, specifically photographic turn. It had never been a simple matter of nay-saying—to misuse Roland Barthes's photographic neologism somewhat, the *punctum* of the *vanitas* message had always involved that particular, bittersweet twist of the aesthetic knife in which one was drawn towards precisely those things from which one was supposed to turn away, seduced by their desirability while pierced by their evanescence. In Gersht's photographs, however, that old painterly *punctum* almost becomes literal. Certainly it becomes medium-specifically photographic.



Henri Fantin-Latour. French, 1836-1904. *The Rosy Wealth of June*, 1886. Oil on canvas. 27 3/4 x 24 1/4 in. National Gallery, London, Great Britain; Presented by Mrs. Edwin Edwards, 1899, NG1686

Photo Credit : © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY

The troubling thing about these exploded still lifes is that the frozen explosions are almost more beautiful than the frozen bouquets with which they began. Once “blown up” twice over (in the explosion of the bouquet and in the enlargement of the image), the gorgeousness of the bouquet and the magic of its illusionist rendering are replaced by the all-over vibrancy of a quasi-abstraction, which evokes the exploding, colorfully patterned marvel of fireworks together with the childish delight elicited by them. That the tricolor palette of some of these bouquets (deriving from some of Fantin-Latour's color choices) calls up not only the patriotic rites of the French Bastille Day and the American Fourth of July, but also the violences associated with French revolutionary history and contemporary American imperialism, gives these floral fireworks particular evocative force. For it is by such means that Gersht makes us associate all sorts of human detonations with these still-life explosions. And therein lies the politics of these works: in forcing us to contemplate the beauty in violence, and our pleasure in it, by provoking and universalizing just that reaction, rather than allowing us simply to condemn, and thereby detach ourselves from the currency of carnage.

But neither are these exploded flowerpieces demonstrations of complicity. That does not seem to be their point. If we consider just the ending image of *Time After Time* (2007), with the single, pathetic stem surviving amidst the rubble of the glass vessel and its shattered blooms, we come to a conclusion rather different from and more complex than simple complicity: and that is our shared implication, yes, but also pity, a combined sense of the fragility of life and its endurance, a feeling for the unnoticed heroism of the small thing, and even a dawning aesthetic appreciation for its frailty, replacing the overblown delectations of the opening image. The realization that follows on that conclusion, at least for me, is that an aesthetic sensibility is all bound up with poignancy, rather than opposed to it or detached from it: with having, rather than avoiding, human feelings about things. As Immanuel Kant defined it (and as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, citing Kant, continues to

define it), the “beautiful science” of aesthetics originally designated knowledge gained from such feelings—it had to do with the links between sense, sensation, and sensibility. From portentous beginning to pitiful aftermath, these exploding still lifes activate that kind of responsiveness. At the same time, they prohibit the anaesthetized—which is to say, an-aesthetic—reaction to violence to which we have become so accustomed, by the ubiquitous photographic representation of it in the media of fact and fiction alike. In this way they give the lowest pictorial genre the ethical effectiveness of the highest, minus the limiting topicality of journalistic photography, history painting, and politically engaged contemporary art.



Jan van Huysum. Dutch, 1682-1749.  
*Hollyhocks and Other Flowers in a Vase*,  
1702-20. Oil on canvas. 24 ½ x 20 ½ in.  
National Gallery, London, Great Britain;  
Wynn Ellis Bequest, 1876, NG1001

Photo Credit : © National Gallery,  
London / Art Resource, NY

In the motion-film version of some of these bursting bouquets, the stillness of the still photograph and its stopping of time are countered in another way as well. Heard in the title of *Time After Time*, the event of the explosion is recapitulated over and over again. But not only that, the slow build-up to the explosion and the equally slow settling of the dust after the explosion are both repeatedly resumed and reiterated too, such that the heartbreaking aftermath of the explosion feeds quietly back into its suspenseful prelude and on into the explosion itself, ad infinitum, in the video-art trope of the endless loop. Of course, this is baroque, not minimalist repetition, and its effect is again more complex than the mere dulling of shock or the shell-shocked revisiting of the traumatic episode. It speaks to those things, but it speaks to them so slowly and beautifully, with such stealthy lyricism and quietude, that it produces contemplation more than the failure of affect. Setting stillness into motion, its repetition has the character of a musical refrain that is slightly different each time it recurs. Indeed, accompanied as the loop is by sound—such that the silence as well as the stillness of the still life is cancelled—it adds a minimal version of the familiar effects of movie soundtracks into the equation. We are cued into the fact that something is about to happen, that something is happening, and that something has happened by the sound accompaniment, just as the mutation of the slow into the quick, the gradual into the sudden and back again, and the transformation of thing into event, and of exaggerated stillness into extreme motion and back again, are underscored by the “score” and its pulling of our emotional strings.

The consequence of all of this, which hovers just on the exquisite edge of an aestheticism of violence, is a continual rethinking of the first reaction. Then, as we walk out of the darkened room, we realize that, although the world is indifferent to what goes on in it—and goes on going on in it—we are not. Anyway, that was my realization: as human beings, it is our fate not to be indifferent. We are affected, and that, finally, is the true business of a humane aesthetics. That is the cycle of human feeling that the double stillness of *Blow Up* (2007) and the slow motion of *Time After Time* together elicit. Bravo, and *Bis*.

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