

TOBY HAGGITH

ORI GERSHT – *THE CLEARING*



Ori Gersht:
untitled from
Liquidation 2005
Courtesy Andrew
Mummyery
Gallery
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Toby Haggith discusses filmmaking traditions based on pilgrimages to sites of conflict and war in a new work by Ori Gersht.

The artist Ori Gersht made a series of trips to the villages and forests of the Carpathian Mountains in southwestern Ukraine. There he took a number of photographs and shot footage that formed the basis of his recent exhibition at the Photographer's Gallery. Gersht was drawn to the Ukraine to explore the past of his father-in-law Gideon Engler. During the German occupation of the region, Engler, together with his brother and father, survived by hiding in a hole and later an attic. Thus they escaped the fate of Gideon's mother and many other Jews who were rounded up and shot in the woods or sent to the death camps. Barush Engler (Gideon's father) wrote an account of his ordeal, which Gersht read before making his first trip to the area.

The work displayed in the main gallery consisted of ten photographic images of which six were of blurred farm buildings, the vision distorted as if the scene had been viewed from a train. These have a painterly quality, but the evocation of a half-remembered or muffled past, was too obvious. More successful and sugges-

tive were the focused landscape pictures: a single farmhouse, an anonymous section of forest, a copse on a hill, a field – landscapes that are meaningless and inscrutable.

In an antechamber to the gallery was installed a video loop called *The Forest*, shot inside the Moskolovka forest. Visitors entering the gallery were disturbed by a loud rumbling mechanical sound, with an explosive crescendo. Before realizing that this was a recorded sound leaking from the screening room, I actually took this to be the noise from an underground train running beneath the gallery, which is a rather appropriate and chilling connection given that trains played such an integral role in the Holocaust, as is so powerfully related in Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985) and Steve Reich's musical composition *Different Trains* (1988).¹

But strangely enough, the sense of foreboding instilled by the sounds overheard in the gallery was not matched, at least to begin with, by the mood imparted by the video running in the screening room: a series of slow pans, in mid-shot, range across a beautiful and even serene vista of dense forest. Every sequence in the loop begins or ends with a tree being

felled. This violent action disrupts the timeless serenity of the scene, with the ambient hum of the insects and birds temporarily drowned out by the creak, roar and crash as the trees fall slowly to the ground.

Many of the themes Gersht is tackling and some of his visual approaches were recently examined in a two-part season in the Imperial War Museum's cinema called *Memory, Film and War* (September 2005-January 2006). The 'Landscape' strand brought together cinematic tours of First World War battlefields made in the 1920s with recent works by video artists in which they have explored war torn or militarised landscapes. The most striking contrast between the two generations of artists is that those working in the 1920s had no qualms about directing the viewer to the meaning they wanted to be drawn from the landscape, and in doing so used heroic and portentous terminology that most artists would not feel comfortable with today. In the 'Forward' to *Eight Years After* (1924), the filmmakers invite the viewer to join them on a pilgrimage to the battlefields of the Western Front, a landscape that has been given great meaning by the war:

"History, that has made famous, tiny hamlets, woods and rivers – made more than famous – *sacred*."

But in other ways there are parallels. Despite the confident assertion expressed in this quote from *Eight Years After*, that man's activities have given meaning to nature, there is a common anxiety about the forgetfulness of nature. As Gersht reflected, in connection to this new body of work:

"When I was looking at the landscape in the Ukraine, I was seeing all these houses and trees that were there 60 years before and living there now with total indifference to the human horrors that took place, but somehow bear within them the memory of these events."²

On the landscape of the Western Front filmmakers have often been assisted by the memorials, grave markers, relics of war or obvious indentations and marks in the ground that reveal the history of the land to the viewer. But even in such a well sign-posted landscape, in a relatively short period after the war had ended, the process of nature and scavenging by the local inhabitants had begun to remove many of the obvious indicators of the ferocious struggle that had taken place. To 'memorialise' adequately we need inscriptions and grave markers that explain the significance of the mundane and commonplace scene to the