

Ori Gersht

Time After Time

Hotshoe, Dec/Jan 2008



Private views are not the best time to appreciate and assess a photographer's work, especially if you can barely get through the door, let alone see the walls, so I often return at a quieter time. This was the case with photographer Ori Gersht's latest show *Time After Time* at the new Mummery + Schnelle gallery. From his *White Noise* series of photographs taken from a train window travelling between Auschwitz and Belzec to his latest bodies of work *Time After Time* and *Blow Up*, Gersht has come a long way as a photographer and there is a discernible shift in his relationship to photography. Whereas his previous body of photographs *Liquidation*, appeared to provide the starting point for the 13-minute film, *The Forest*, in this case, Gersht's film entitled *Big Bang* appears to be the progenitor of these images.

Elaborate floral arrangements, which draw their inspiration from a still life painting by the 19th-century French painter Henri Fantin-Latour, are the exploding centrepieces of the work. Creating a kind of tripartite exhibition composed of related but different series of work, namely a 5-minute film, stills

from the film, and large scale colour photographs, the works were produced between 2006–7. *Big Bang* was created specially for last year's V&A *Twilight: Photography in the Magic Hour* exhibition using a camera capable of registering speeds of 1/6000 frames a second. For this exhibition, a second version is framed and set on the wall, alongside a series of seven photographs drawn from the film and depicting the flowers in seemingly random moments of destruction.

Gersht performs an act of deconstruction by extracting them from the film and exhibiting some in their original still image form, which not only unmasks the nature of moving images as composed of a sequence of frames, but also emphasizes the intervention of the artist. In another room, four large-scale photographs are displayed across from each other and appear within the confined space to be at once exploding in the image but imploding within the gallery. Marrying Old Master themes with cutting-edge technology, using the latest digital cameras and a production team, Gersht constructs a dialectical tension between subject and process. History collides with 21st century technology and Gersht scrutinizes it in a way that Walter Benjamin, who is quoted in the publicity accompanying the work, may not have imagined when he wrote of the "optical unconscious" in *A Short History of Photography*.

At 250×183cm, *Blow Up No 1, 3 and 4* are sumptuous Light Jet prints possessing velvet-like black backgrounds from which shards of flowers burst through the frame; sometimes as sharp details, sometimes as blurred confetti-like wisps. The red, white and blue combinations of natural and artificially coloured flowers speak of national flags, including the French, British and American. Whilst symbolizing aspects of identity and power, the use of flowers—another potent symbol—to carry the message, allows for rich and diverse readings of the work. In *Blow Up No 6*, the symmetry of the compositional elements combines to resemble a floral wreath aptly symbolizing death and memory—a memento mori in which the flowers losing their petals, albeit via mini explosions, are reminders of mortality.



The film masterfully uses sound in a dramatic and unsettling manner to reach a breaking point and there is a sense of relief when the denouement is finally achieved. Tensions are heightened and flexed to the point of snapping. However, in the large-scale photographs, the instant is literally frozen. The flowers were laced with liquid nitrogen—and around ten high-speed cameras capture moments the human eye cannot perceive without the help of technology. Time is trapped and preserved, and Gersht creates a sense of suspended animation. Romance languages use the term "nature morte" and "naturaleza muerta" to describe the still life genre, and in the case of the exhibition *Time After Time*, with its overtones of morbidity and opposition, the French and Spanish terms seem even more fitting.

When I make my return visit on the last day of the exhibition, it comes as no surprise to discover that some works have reached sell-out status, especially given the strong aesthetic appeal and less personal and harrowing subject matter than in Gersht's previous work. Andrew Mummery offers only that the show "went very well" but



is less inclined to divulge details. While I am at the gallery, a couple—who happen to be collectors—arrive to inspect a print that they intend to buy. As a result, I learn that both versions of the film, each produced as a limited edition of six, have been sold and that the large-scale prints are commanding around £20,000. Reading the visitor's book before I leave, one comment seems wholly appropriate for the exhibition. It reads simply, "Blown Away".

—MIRANDA GAVIN

A selection of Gersht's work including *Big Bang* (2006) and *Blow Up 1* can be seen at the Yale Center for British Art till the end of December. An image from *Time After Time* will be shown as a pairing with the artist Jan Breughel the Elder at the Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh next year from 22–29 March and a show in Honolulu is also scheduled for next year.