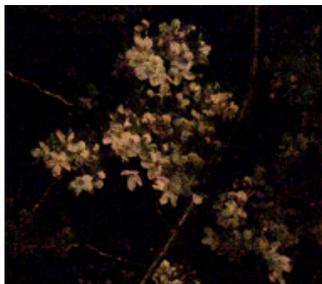


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Ori Gersht: This Storm Is What We Call Progress

**Ori Gersht**

This Storm Is What We Call Progress

25.01.12 - 29.04.12

Imperial War Museum / London / England

Ori Gersht: This Storm Is What We Call Progress / Reviewed by
Camilla Brown / 15.03.12

In Ori Gersht's photographic series, *Chasing Good Fortune*, taken in Japan, his subject is the iconic symbol of the cherry blossom. With their alluring beauty and brief lifespan, in the Second World War cherry blossoms became associated with young Kamikaze pilots, who were to paint the blossom on their planes. But, as our journey through Gersht's exhibition, *This Storm Is What We Call Progress*, unravels, we come to see this flower has much wider symbolic significance.

**Ori Gersht**

Chasing Good Fortune Tokyo
Imperial Memories, Memorial
Garden 01 (2010) © Ori Gersht,
courtesy of the artist and
Mummery + Schnelle

Ori Gersht

Still from *Will You Dance For
Me?*, HD Film, Dual Channel
Projection (2011) © Ori Gersht,
courtesy the artist and
Mummery + Schnelle

The notion of a journey, and connection to war, is continued in the first film *The Evaders*. Shot on location it takes us on the Lister route – a path through the Pyrenees – used by many to escape Nazi occupied France. The journey is played out on two screens with large, impressive vistas of the mountains shown alongside close cropped shots of the main character's arduous journey across them. The project re-enacts Walter Benjamin's final journey, which became a struggle with inner turmoil and nightmares, and would end with him taking his own life, just at the point he was going to escape. This film continues Gersht's fascination, seen in *The Clearing* (2005), with the sublime beauty of landscapes that have borne witness to appalling human atrocities. For the first time in this work Gersht has worked with an actor, Clive Russell.

In contrast, the second film, *Will you dance for me*, is a first hand account by Yehudit Arnon. Captions at the start of the film tell us that when she was 19, and a prisoner at Auschwitz, she was asked to dance for her SS guard captors. Surrounded by soldiers with machine guns, she said 'no'. As punishment she was made to stand barefoot in the bleak and snowy landscape. Surviving that experience, she resolved to dedicate her life to dance. The film keeps us in this early and definitive moment, whilst filming her as an 85year old woman. Sitting in a dark room, with a light shining down on her, she rocks to and fro. Moving to music, and at times seeming enraptured in the moment, she appears alongside the snow covered landscape.

Both works are dual channel films which combine close up portrait shots with views of landscape. One is about a survivor reflecting back on her early experiences, the other concerns a hugely influential writer who was to sadly succumb to despair. Gersht has long wanted to make a work with one of the holocaust survivors, who remain a living connection between the present and a dark past. However this connection to the past will soon be lost as the survivors are reaching their final years. What does it mean when the first hand witnesses are gone? Will their suffering seem more remote, more like fiction than fact? It seems the combination of these two films wrestles with this quandary, which makes its context at the Imperial War Museum seem even more fitting.

In between these films we see a new series of smaller photographs of cherry blossoms; some taken at the Tokyo Imperial Memorial Gardens, others in Hiroshima. The cherry blossom seems to symbolise how beauty can thrive on the site of trauma. Shot at night with a digital camera and long exposure times, the images fragment and almost dissolve in front of us. They uncannily look like 19th Century autochrome prints, yet we know they are contemporary works. With these photographs there is a startling conversation between the photographic past and present.

In this show Gersht demonstrates how he is able to tackle dark episodes of history and yet produce a poetic, moving and beautiful series of works that give us pause to reflect.

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'We have a responsibility to hold on to dark memories'

Artist Ori Gersht's Imperial War Museum exhibition uses rich imagery to explore themes of the Second World War

By **Julia Weiner**, February 16, 2012
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Ori Gersht's images of cherry trees planted in contaminated soil in Hiroshima.

This promises to be a busy year for Israeli-born, London-based artist Ori Gersht. In August, there will be a major survey exhibition of his work at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and in the autumn, his work will be included in a group exhibition at the National Gallery.

But to start the year off, there is the small matter of an exhibition at the Imperial War Museum - his largest solo show to date in a British museum. It might strike people as an unusual venue for contemporary art but as curator Sara Bevin explains, "We were drawn to Ori's work because he uses rich, beautiful imagery to explore how we relate to complex and often dark subject matter, particularly war and conflict." The two films and series of photographs selected have references to the Second World War, a period with which Gersht is fascinated.

He explains: "I see the events that took place between 1939 and 1945 as so significant that they have shaped our lives ever since. They completely changed the world we live in today making it a lot more pluralistic. They raised the bar in relation to our moral standard as human beings. Time is passing and slowly these memories are transforming into myth. I feel that I have some responsibility to hold on to them."

One film explores the story of a Holocaust survivor. "It has to do with a childhood memory that I had," Gersht recalls. When I was young and I was wandering the streets of Tel Aviv, I used to see many people with numbers tattooed on their arms and it was very much integral to the demographic landscape. I still visit Israel frequently and I became aware that all these people are just fading away and disappearing.

EXTERNAL LINKS

[Imperial War Museum](#)

[Review: The Recruiting Officer](#)

New era starts with restoration



[Review: Adam Resurrected](#)

This may not be the best film ever made about the Holocaust but it is almost certainly the most surreal.



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Israeli-born Gersht who now lives in London

"I started to search for people who had numbers tattooed on their arms. I wanted to preserve this moment that soon will disappear forever."

He found 85 year old Yehudit Arnon who had been a prisoner at Auschwitz. "In the winter of 1944, a German officer asked her to dance for him. She refused so they punished her by leaving her standing in the snow for a long time. She made this promise to herself that if she survived she would dedicate her life to dance. She turned her life into a triumph and formed a successful dance company. There was something about her personal story, but also her inner strength and physical fragility that made me respond strongly."

The film shows the elderly Arnon dancing for the last time by rocking in her chair and moving from darkness to light. Gersht says: "I saw it was some kind of tension between the disappearing and re-emerging, between something that is fading away but always returning. It is a meditation about the resistance to letting everything go but also the ephemerality of life. It summarises many of the thoughts in my work, the dialectics between something that is tangible and solid and something that has already gone."

The second film, *Evaders*, explores the mountainous path of the Lister Route, used by many to escape Nazi-occupied France. One who followed this path was Jewish writer Walter Benjamin who made it across the border to Portbou in Spain but was then told he would be returned to France. He committed suicide rather than fall into Nazi hands.

Gersht explains his interest in Benjamin. "He is very interesting for many artists because his writing had tremendous impact on postmodern thinking and contemporary practice. His writings are for me profound in my development as a photographer."

But he also feels a close cultural affinity with Benjamin, who did not leave Europe until it was too late. "I was attracted to Europe for similar reasons to Benjamin. Culturally, my roots are here. I often think that being Israeli is the abnormality in my family tree. For so many generations, my ancestors lived in Europe and only my parents and myself were born in Israel. I perceived the Israel of my childhood as a sort of European colony, all the cultural inputs that I was fed had to do with European literature, art history, music." Indeed, this affinity with Europe is the reason he now lives in London. "I feel that Israel is changing and slowly integrating into the region. It is part of the Middle East and I don't see myself as part of the Middle East."

"In *Evaders*, although it was filmed in the Pyrenees, I wanted to make an association to German romanticism. In doing this there is an element of displacement and it suggests the cultural force that the figure in the film is trying to struggle against and that those forces keep on pulling him in."

However, Gersht emphasises that the film is not a re-enactment of a historical event. "The connection to Benjamin is that we were mapping and filming the same route. But the figure in my film is not pretending to be Benjamin. He is just trying to survive and walk through this journey in these extreme circumstances. There is one significant difference which for me epitomises the film. When Benjamin made the journey, he reached the border and could not cross and this border decided between life and death. In 2009, there was no border as such. All the checkpoints were deserted. So our journey was an absurdity because there was nothing to cross."

The exhibition concludes with a series of photographs of cherry blossoms taken in Japan. In these, he explores the symbolism of these trees and particularly, their link to kamikaze pilots whose deaths in their prime were compared to the fall of the flowers. Some of the trees he photographed are planted in contaminated soil in Hiroshima, other older examples resemble the mushroom cloud from a nuclear bomb. Says: Gersht: "The old symbolism of the cherry blossom is to do with the cycle of life, with death and rebirth, but during the war it was more

to do with death."

Ori Gersht: This Storm Is What We Call Progress is at the Imperial War Museum until April 29; www.iwm.org.uk

Last updated: 11:57am, February 16 2012

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theguardian

Ori Gersht, David Shrigley and JMW Turner – the week in art

Gersht's powerful new show uses film and photography to bear witness to the second world war, while a great British wit hits the Hayward – [all in your weekly missive from the art frontline](#)



Jonathan Jones

guardian.co.uk, Friday 27 January 2012 14.49 GMT

[Article history](#)



The beat goes on ... a still from Ori Gersht's *Will You Dance?* Photograph: Ori Gersht/Mummery + Schnelle Gallery

Exhibition of the week: Ori Gersht – This Storm Is What We Call Progress

The face of 85-year-old Yehudit Arnon glows in darkness, marked by time and suffering but also by achievement and triumph. As a child she was ordered to dance for guards at Auschwitz. She refused. Her punishment was to stand outside in the snow – she does not know for how long. She told herself that if she survived she would become a dancer – and she did.

Now on screen in Ori Gersht's film about her, that strong face grows smaller then bigger again, as memory recedes and flares into life. It is 67 years since the end of the second world war, but the archive of witness must never close. Beside her, the other half of the split screen shows expanses of bleak white snow.

In the exhibition's other, equally haunting film, a man treks through similarly harsh conditions as he follows a path through the Pyrenees used by refugees from occupied France in the 1940s. The words of the critic Walter Benjamin, who killed himself while trying to escape on this mountain route, are read on this film's soundtrack. Benjamin's words speak of progress as a storm: the storm drags the backward-looking angel of history ever forward.

The walker in the mountains becomes a tiny figure in a snowstorm.

The most murderous war in history gets more distant as we start to lose living contact with so many of its survivors. Yet the past lives, it flames up, through works like these.

And what of more difficult memories still? A series of photographic works by Gersht depicts blossoms in Japan, and invites us to meditate on Kamikaze pilots and Hiroshima.

Gersht proves himself both an eerie landscape artist (with a camera) and a passionate portraitist. The three strands of history that his works at the Imperial War Museum relate are three threads of memory that his films and pictures keep alive. Dignity and sorrow make for a powerful exhibition that answers the military hardware in the [Imperial War Museum](#) with flowers and snowflakes.

- At [Imperial War Museum](#), London SE1, until 29 April

Also opening this week

Turner and the Elements

The seascapes of Turner on the shore where he was inspired to paint them.

- At [Turner Contemporary](#), Margate from 28 January until 13 May

David Shrigley

Wit of our time, and one of the best British contemporaries never to have won a Turner. Maybe this year?

- At [Hayward Gallery](#), London SE1, from 1 February until 13 May

Sean Scully

Abstract painter of quiet and earthen power.

- At [Timothy Taylor Gallery](#), London W1, until 11 February

Migrations: Journeys into British Art

How migration shaped our art history. Absorbing or repellently theoretical? Let's see ...

- At [Tate Britain](#), London SE1, from 31 January until 12 August

Masterpiece of the week



Godhead ... the

bronze head of Apollo known as the Chatsworth Head, discovered near Tamassos in Cyprus

Bronze Apollo, known as Chatsworth Head, Ancient Greek (c 460BC), at British Museum

Gaze into the empty eyes of this bronze head and you feel the power of the god Apollo, who killed the monster Python and flayed the satyr Marsyas. Reason and classical calm are associated with Apollo, and yet he could be driven mad, like any of us, by love – when he insulted Cupid, the love god sent him on a wild goose chase after reluctant Daphne.

Ancient Greek sculptors made many of their best statues of bronze, but very few bronze figures from the classical period survive – so this work from the best age of Greek art is a very precious glimpse of the original beauty of the gods. Gaze on Apollo. He gazes back, sightless but all-seeing. This head is, in every sense, divine.

Image of the week



Religious education ...

Kader Attia's Black Cube, part of the British Museum show Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam

What we learned this week

[A lot more about the Hajj](#)

[That LS Lowry snubbed being made a sir no less than five times](#)

[That Charles Dickens was obsessed with interior design](#)

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ArtFund

27 January 2012 3:55PM

Hello!

Great selection there - very excited about David Shrigley at the Hayward.

If you'd like to watch artist Ori Gersht discuss his video work Evaders (ArtFunded for Towner Art Gallery), watch our short film shot at his studio here:

<http://www.artfund.org/whatson/21428/ori-gersht-this-storm-is-what-we-call-progress>

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Ori Gersht: The storm is what we call progress

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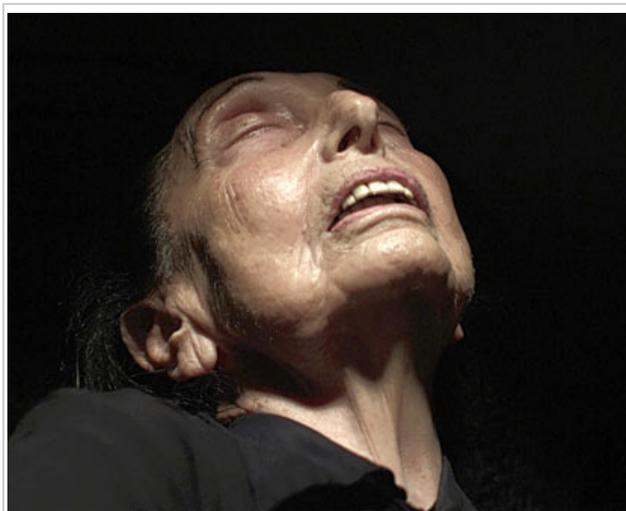
By Sue Steward
25 Jan 2012

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"Scars created by wars on our collective and personal memories" is how Ori Gersht describes his inspiration, and scars permeate this his first UK solo exhibition.

The series Chasing Good Fortune focuses on the historical symbolism of Japanese cherry blossom revealed in digital photographs shot at night. Exaggeratedly enlarged images resembling pointilliste paintings mix with the more literal, their beauty disguising the flowers' significance in Japanese history, from badges of honour for kamikaze pilots to trees growing in contaminated Hiroshima soil.



Moving memories: 85-year-old Yehudit Arnon's thoughts shift between life in Auschwitz and as a kibbutz dancer in documentary *Will You Dance With Me?*

In contrast, *Will You Dance With Me?* is a moving documentary about an 85-year-old Israeli, Yehudit Arnon. Gersht focuses on her dignified

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attempts to dance in her rocking chair, its movement swinging her face in and out of the light like her memories shifting between life in Auschwitz and as a kibbutz dancer.

Time and memory are key to Gersht's work and permeate The Evaders, a re-enactment of philosopher Walter Benjamin's failed walk to safety during the Second World War. Beautifully filmed, its repetitive tension is, however, less convincing than the portrait of Arnon.

The accompanying Artist's Book is an exquisitely produced addition.

Until April 29. 020 7416 5439, iwm.org. uk. Artist's Book, photoworks.org.uk.

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