



## BREAKING THE SURFACE

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Of all the media employed in art, photography is arguably the one that has undergone the most change over the past few decades. Ever since its invention in 1839, photography was hailed as a truth-revealing tool capable of capturing and reproducing reality in a detailed manner unknown until then, thus igniting a chain reaction whose consequences in the art world are still unfolding today. Unlike painting and sculpture, photography was a medium that relied on a mechanical device, the camera, which was subject to revisions, readjustments, and developments designed to increase its visual precision and speed of reproduction. Over time, inventions such as changeable lenses, microscopic cameras, concave mirrors, strobe lights, and instantaneous printouts all made significant contributions to this cause. But no one anticipated the giant leap that would take place at the end of the 1990s with the proliferation of digital imaging. Suddenly photography was not just more accurate than ever, its images were also easily accessible, reasonably affordable, and, even more relevantly, immaterial. The intangible screen image replaced the physical print, with the added value of being immediately available for consumption and dissemination.

Today, digital photography is a visual language practiced by an unprecedented number of individuals, for purposes ranging from the professional to the personal. In a curious twist of events, the shockwaves generated by the development of this phenomenon have relegated the art photography camp to a position similar to that in which painters found themselves in the mid-nineteenth century. As with painting, photography's quest for realism is now shifting towards abstraction. The imaginative is replacing the informative. Moreover, while the viewer may claim a profound familiarity with photography, this presumption is continually challenged through deliberate attempts by art photographers to filter their work through a sensibility often indebted to painting.

If one were to define Ori Gersht's art in a single sentence, it could be said that it is an art of contrasts. Socially engaged yet partial to beauty, it is conceptually dedicated to exploring established forms of representation, such as drawing and painting, while dealing with the possibilities and responsibilities that come with the constant technical developments of film and photography. This powerful dynamic is not immediately perceptible. As with every multilayered entity, it slowly emerges after attentive examination and is proof of how the most complex scenarios are best represented through simple ideas.



Even the most casual glance at Gersht's work reveals his profound interest in the history of art, and in the history of painting in particular. As the artist himself has acknowledged, this has a lot to do with his frustration with photography. In Gersht's opinion, "Photography is too preoccupied with information. It has this phenomenal ability to instantaneously register an infinite number of details, but the problem is that it can easily become anecdotal. When you see a photograph, you process the information and when you know what it's about you often don't desire to look at it anymore. It's a very different experience from looking at a painting. With painting there is something about the way the information is revealed that makes it impossible for you to digest it in one look and be fully satisfied. You can stand in front of it for hours every day, and still it will evade you."<sup>1</sup> His subjects are traditional—flowers, landscapes, still lifes. Occasionally framed within a wooden structure designed

Jean-Siméon Chardin. French, 1699-1779. *A Mallard Duck Hanging on a Wall with a Seville Orange*, 1720-30. Oil on canvas. 31 ¼ x 25 ½ in. Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris, France / Archives Charmet / The Bridgeman Art Library International

to highlight their domestic if not Flemish quality, and positioned before an austere, dark background that reinforces their chromatic value, his still lifes are deceptively reassuring and serve the purpose of creating the proverbial quiet moment before the storm.

Works such as *Pomegranate* (2006) and *Falling Bird* (2008) are emblematic in this sense. Inspired by the work of old masters such as Juan Sánchez Cotán's *Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber* (ca. 1602) and Jean-Siméon Chardin's *A Mallard Duck Hanging on a Wall with a Seville Orange* (1720-30), and influenced by the studies of the pioneer of the stroboscope, Harold E. Edgerton (with particular reference to *Bullet through Apple*, a groundbreaking high-speed still photograph he took of a projectile slicing through an apple in 1964), Gersht's works adhere to a regular narrative pattern. The initial sensation of tranquility is abruptly interrupted by an explosion. A bullet suddenly enters the picture—an unexpected object from a modern and more

violent age—pulling apart the composition in slow motion so that it can be experienced frame by frame. The resulting fragmentation is almost hypnotic, as the beauty of the falling pieces creates a momentary distraction from what has just happened. The startling contrast between the innocence of the subjects and the manner in which they get twisted sets up a tension between attraction and repulsion.

Similar contradictions occur within the history of art—think of the graphic brutality of certain Christian iconography or the ambiguous gap between social achievement and human cost that characterizes paintings chronicling the epic struggle of wars for independence—but they are also related to our everyday life. Irrational as it may seem, part of our brain is invariably prone to detect the aesthetic side of things, even when we are confronted by violent happenings like the firing of a bullet or a house on fire. Gersht's film-related still photographs, for example the series *Blow Up* (2007), are a testament to this concept. By freezing the moment of destruction, Gersht temporarily isolates elements otherwise barely perceptible and represents them in a transitional form resembling the erasing and re-marking typical of drawing.



Harold E. Edgerton. American, 1903-1990. *Bullet through Apple*, 1964 (printed 1977). Dye transfer print 10 7/8 x 14 in. Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of Arthur and Yolanda Steinman, 1984.23.17.12

Photo Credit: © MIT 2011. Courtesy of MIT Museum

Immediacy and improvisation, elemental to the activity of drawing, are influential in Gersht's practice, and are visible even after the images undergo meticulous post-production treatment. *Chasing Good Fortune* (2010), the photographic series he produced during a recent trip to Japan, was shot early in the morning with a digital camera set at low-light conditions. Disturbed by the ambient blaze, the sensors could not properly register the image, eventually causing it to collapse. Mildly pixelated and dramatically distant from their natural color, the distorted trees and bushes in several works depict a strangely familiar reality. *Imperial Memories*, *Floating Petals*, *Tokyo, Japan*, for instance, reminds one of impressionist painting. In other cases, such as in *Imperial Memories*, *Night Fly* or *Against the Tide, Out of Time*, the images have a slightly sinister, post-atomic quality. This effect was not completely unintentional. When Gersht visited Hiroshima, his interest in the landscape was equally divided between investigating the lost innocence of cherry blossoms (once symbols of life, the flowers became a standard emblem on Japanese military aircrafts during the Second World War, developing a new association with death) and illustrating nature's ability to flourish on nuclear-contaminated soil.

The interpretation or meaning of a work of art is vulnerable to many imponderable factors, including the time in which it is experienced. In light of the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami that recently hit northern Japan, Gersht's *Chasing Good Fortune* series has assumed an even more apocalyptic tone. The initial premise of the series was to focus on how particular places can unexpectedly trigger determinate memories. This duality is also expressed in the series *Liquidation* (2005), Gersht's photograph of a mountain in Ukraine. In the early 1940s, the artist's father-in-law had been at the very same site in dramatically different circumstances, when he was forced to hide in a ditch only to witness the tragic obliteration of many of his acquaintances at the hand of German troops—an occurrence so traumatic that he swore never to return. Fifty or so years later, confronted with a picture of the same promontory snapped by his son-in-law during a quiet and sunny day, the man could scarcely believe that it was the very same place.

This episode is not just a testament to the power of an image and how it can produce multiple responses at different times. It also reminds us of the deceptive placidness of Gersht's exploding still lifes. Robert Smithson once pointed out that he did not have to respond to the volatile political climate of the United States in the late 1960s, because "sooner or later the artist is implicated or devoured by politics without even trying."<sup>2</sup>

Gersht's work is not overtly political, but the subtext of his conflicted compositions is clearly related to his background. A native of Israel, Gersht reflects, "Israel is a place with so much political tension. There are so many different ideological positions, but because they are so absolute, they all become convincing."<sup>3</sup>

Aesthetically appealing, politically engaged, perennially suspended between past and present, Gersht's work satisfies all. Impartial evidence and personal interpretation are incessantly at odds with each other, refuting the chimerical belief in the existence of a single, undisputed truth—in life or in art.

<sup>1</sup>Ori Gersht in conversation with the author, London, February 2011.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Smithson, "Art and the Political Whirlpool or the Politics of Disgust," *Artforum*, September 1970.

<sup>3</sup>Ori Gersht in conversation with the author, London, February 2011.