



ORI GERSHT: WAR & FLOWERS & THE LESSONS IN BETWEEN:

Ori Gersht is standing in front of a six-foot high photograph of an exploding flower arrangement. It is a test print for his new series, *BlowUp*, showing at the Mummery and Schnelle Gallery in October. The visually striking image, trapped in stillness and extravagantly detailed, seems a far cry from Gersht's earlier photographs, which were often blurred or over exposed almost to the point of obliteration. Gersht's images often evoke a sense of beauty, despite many of his earlier works having been taken in war zones. There is something incongruous about beauty and war, although Gersht's images reveal the uncomfortable truth that they often go together. As he says of his photographs, "There is a subtle tension between formal beauty and extreme violence." Gersht's work lives between tranquility and disaster; the flowers, violently ravaged by the blast, are no exception.

Born in Tel Aviv in 1967, Gersht grew up in a troubled land and this new series reminds him, he says, "of suicide bombers." But for the past 17 years Gersht has lived and worked in London; using red, white and blue flowers to create a vague nationalistic undertone as the red flowers shatter provocatively across the images. His photographs are captured at approximately 6000th of a second, a sight outside our normal field of reference, making it somewhat hard to believe what you are seeing. The frozen flowers, trapped in a moment, are transformed into a still image. "I wanted to create a suspension of disbelief," explains Gersht, who refers to the feeling he gets when seeing images of the mushroom cloud created by the atomic bomb. Perhaps this is what

is now referred to as neo-sublime, or as Gersht says, "greater understanding through doubtfulness."

However, little doubt has been allowed in the production of these images. The statistics alone make astounding reading: nine £35,000, 32 mega pixel Hasselblad cameras firing at 1/400th of a second between them; a team of 20 professionals, including a flower arranger, a pyrotechnics expert and a scientist specialising in liquid nitrogen, with the whole event stage managed by Gersht himself.

Inspired to make the images by looking at the 19th Century flower paintings of Fantin-Latour and the stroboscopic photographs of Harold Edgerton from the 1950s, Gersht describes what is for him the fundamental relationship between painting and photography. "Although my practice is informed by today's new technology, a technology that is as far removed from the image-making process of painting as possible, its formality is still influenced by the pictorial tradition of painting."

There seems to be something fetishistic in wanting to make a photograph look like a painting. What is the appeal in this painterly quality? Perhaps it is to do with a notion of honesty; painting is perceived as truthful, whereas a photograph can be corrupted. "New technologies take us further away from a sense of the real," says Gersht. "But then, what is real? I am interested in the gaps between what we know and what is."

In 2005's *The Clearing* Gersht returned to the place in South Western Ukraine where his father-in-law, as a small boy, had hidden from

the Germans during Nazi occupation. This area bore witness to terrible atrocities during WW2, during which time the entire Jewish population was wiped out. On one particular day, over two thousand Jews from the nearby town of Kosov were lined up and shot. Gersht, it seems, felt the need to make a pilgrimage to this site, as though he expected to find something there, or perhaps more importantly, he hoped he wouldn't find anything. In Gersht's film *The Forest* the camera pans slowly and impassively across a dense forest when suddenly a tree falls to the forest floor: it is followed moments later by another. The camera does not zoom in or track these events but merely carries on. "The panning does not celebrate or bring pathos to the event, it is almost oblivious, unemotional," says Gersht, "I wanted a sense of real disaster, but then life quickly settles back. Nature absorbs

disaster, order is restored." Perhaps also captured is a sense of the tragedy of how quickly an event is forgotten; "the photographic impossibility of the subject."

This new series of exploding flowers could be seen as an attempt to stem the frustration of getting there too late; it is as if on this occasion Gersht was determined to be there for the main event and not the memory. He has gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure this. David Campary coined the phrase 'late photography', the idea that photography comes to the scene late in war and brings the gravitas of memorial. Photographic stillness is the peace of the aftermath, whereas video is of the violent moment. Gersht's exploding flower photographs, however, are both the memorial and the violent moment. Flowers, traditionally left at sites of tragedy, become the tragedy itself. And

so we are caught in a perpetual loop between peace and violence.

There also seems to be something overwhelming about these images. "I wanted them to be cosmic in scale," says Gersht. "They have to be so overloaded that it is too much for the eyes to take in; infinity for the eyes. I want the images to be as rewarding close up as they are from a distance." Every explosion is a different flower arrangement but for an image to make it through to a full scale print "a tension must be held," he explains. There is also a sense that the camera finds the image. "The event would not exist without the camera," Gersht reflects quietly. In effect, the flowers are sacrificed for the camera and its audience. We are watching the violent execution of something that is already condemned to death; the flower's fate is sealed once cut, yet they die again each time

we look at the photo. The butterfly, another symbol for the transience of life, reinforces this memento mori effect.

But do these photographs transform what is not bearable into something that is? And is there a hope that beauty can be redemptive? Perhaps with these images it is more a liberating inevitability, more pragmatic than optimistic. Gersht hesitates however before jumping on the meaning train. "We are all striving for assurance in the world but this confidence is continually being shattered. Only when we accept this can we experience the world and reality in a satisfying way." <AL

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SEE

Sarah Douglas' powerful paintings perform a balancing act between representing something of the real world and picturing emotions that you can't quite put your finger on. See her work at www.sarahdouglas.net, in *Tamed and Framed* at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston until 15 September, and in the Jerwood Drawing Prize from 19 September (see www.jerwoodvisualarts.org/drawing for details of venues).

IF YOU COULD HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH ANY ARTIST, WHO WOULD IT BE?

It would definitely be the (now dead) American painter Philip Guston.

WHAT KEEPS YOU AWAKE AT NIGHT?

The confused London birds singing at night in the park next to my flat.

WHAT WAS THE FIRST PIECE OF ART THAT INSPIRED YOU?

The first contact I remember having with art was painting a picture of a parrot with my Dad that he had copied from a Picasso. I must have been about four.

WHAT SHOULD BE SCRAPPED?

The Olympics.

WHAT HAS INSPIRED YOU RECENTLY?

I've just come back from a trip to Sicily where I saw a fantastic puppet museum. Very unexpected and inspiring.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WERE NOT AN ARTIST?

I think I'd like to be a chef. Maybe there is a similarity there to do with mixing ingredients.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR SUPERPOWER?

To be in two places at the same time.

I KNOW
MY ART

