

## Shall We Accept the Flowers of Goodness and Reject the Flowers of Evil?!

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Once in a while, intentionally or unintentionally, we encounter old houses that have been restored, frozen and preserved for the sake of future generations. With pleasure or demonstrative boredom, laughing an embarrassed laugh that camouflages our anxious thoughts, we enter or are led into an area designated for protection against dissolution and oblivion. This site may be the outdoor yard of an early kibbutz, the study of an important writer, the studio of a well-known painter, or perhaps a vast palace whose elaborate rooms we wander through as if momentarily transformed into princes or servants. Everything in these spaces is ready for life, yet life is absent from them. Each is nothing but a stage set for life, while life itself has long vanished. Everything appears real until we bump into the cord that prevents us from sitting on the chair, lying on the bed, eating the porridge. At times a cord is not enough to protect the rooms enshrined in the style of Pompeii, and the door is blocked with a glass partition that diminishes our pleasure and transforms the room into an aquarium, remaking even the most important study into a cardboard model. All this is supplemented by explanatory plaques and warning signs, headphones, uniformed guards, and many other details that do not belong in lived spaces. A stage set without a play. One could argue that the stage set itself is the play. A play without actors whose message is: What once was can be studied, yet no longer is.

It should be noted, however, that human beings are not absent from these familiar realms: there are viewers that can be observed by the furniture, guided tours that can be enjoyed by the ceiling frescoes, guards and cleaners who may come together at night to play king and queen or male and female pioneers. At night the servants may become the masters of these houses, the slaves may be transformed into tyrants, the guides may miraculously become religious scribes. The orphaned beds may themselves perhaps imagine the unfolding of various activities. The incredible effort invested in stylizing these restored houses leads above all to producing thoughts about absence, lack, and the limits of documentation and remembering. These spaces have listened endlessly to the joyful cries uttered by the fear of death.

We are guests in any house that is not our own. Strangers to a larger or lesser degree. Nevertheless, we are invited in; we sit, are entertained, eat and drink, converse and argue. When we are invited into the spaces mentioned above, however, all we are afforded is a frontal gaze for the purpose of becoming acquainted with them and studying them. It is an invitation that lacks intimacy, bereft of any promise or attempt to establish a relationship. The façade and the interior are the same. It is a place where being itself is a stage set, and people become doubles.

The circumstances in which we are invited to enter these spaces also include instructions on how to exit. It is a structured trajectory – no room for spontaneous diversions. Do those exiting a house that is nothing but a façade feel cheated? Not necessarily. Yet they doubtless have many reasons to feel the depth of their solitude. To all the forms of anxiety known to us from popular psychology, it is worth adding the fear of flatness, which is in fact the human emotion experienced in places that are not enclosed, and which contain no hiding places. Perhaps this fear has a more alluring name, such as: Fear of façades.

These thoughts crossed my mind as I observed Ella Amitay Sadovsky's series of paintings at the Open Museum in the Tefen Industrial Park. The exhibition features rich, large-scale compositions saturated with color and matter. These are collages that combine oil painting with fabric, lace, needlework, and additional materials that reinforce the deceptive dialogue between these different components and the illusion of pictorial space. In some instances the painting is an extension of the collage, while in other cases it imitates it in order to create an illusion of continuity or, conversely, to increase our doubts. The painter's frequent use of floral wallpaper, carpet samples, needlepoint, and other types of samples offers the viewer a promise that is immediately undone: the paintings momentarily seem to invite us in by creating a sense of depth, while immediately preventing this virtual entrance due to the flatness produced by the very same elements. Depth and flatness alternate rapidly in the same manner as complementary colors. Complementary colors create a maximum contrast, and as such pressure the eye in a manner accompanied by optical illusions, provoking a sense of doubt concerning what one sees and perceives. Doubt and deception flow through the veins of these paintings. They produce a sort of piston that is constantly at work, pulling in what approaches and pushing away what is close. As a result, a cacophonous form of disquiet is concealed behind and among the silent flowers on the wallpaper.

Ella Amitay Sadovsky's paintings all have photographic roots. Some of their sources are familiar and originate in family albums. Others were torn out of magazines, books, or other sources. These trivial images are subsequently treated by being "immersed in flowers" and/or "exhausted by stripes," and/or "transformed by means of needlepoint." Their simplicity and everyday quality is covered with a patina of real or fake opulence, with a formal and chromatic richness that transforms the paintings into a patchwork whose skin is like a leopard's skin. One becomes aware of one's fear of petit-bourgeois values alongside the pull of that world, which contains a natural, numbing desire for quiet, security, and comfort. Yet Amitay Sadovsky does not truly enter the worlds of the authentic or false bourgeoisie. Falsity, in these paintings, is thus not an obstacle but rather a tactic that enhances our sense of doubt. We will never be able to determine the difference between the original and the imitation; between opulence and the false appearance of opulence; between wealth and the semblance of wealth. This ambiguity soon paves the way for questions such as: What is happiness and what is apparent happiness? What is love and what looks like love? What is memory and what is deception? What is seemingly sorrowful and what is sorrow? I cannot help but thinking of a truly beautiful observation once made to me by a friend: "You plant a forest in order to camouflage a tree."

The figures she paints are sometimes fully Israeli, while in other instances they radiate a distant European aura. Yet taken together, her scenes seem to represent neither Israel nor Europe, and are infused with a colonialist touch. There are the vestiges of a mobilized culture, a world transferred in containers from one place to another. We witness the unfolding of various activities, yet there is no sense of place or home; there is, perhaps, even the sense of an impending mission... a mission that must be undertaken in the colony. I detect an exoticism suffused with sadness, a sense of detachment from the world, echoes of leave-taking. At the same time, the danger of atrophy hovers over the transpiring events. From a visual perspective, this colony is characterized by a combination of beauty and putrefaction, a striking allure and estrangement, order and hostility, discipline and fear. Even more importantly, in our specific context, colonialism is also a form of cultural rape.

A person whose car is destroyed in an accident receives a replacement car from the insurance company. Yet is there also a replacement home, a replacement family, replacement love? This is a question I cannot answer. Yet I see and understand that Ella Amitay Sadovsky is concerned with the production of spare parts. Her studio is like a car disassembly plant where she cuts up parts of reality and endows them with a fictive identity. She also produces, for their sake, a fictive perspective and an illusion of depth.

Even experienced observers may be confused by the figures she paints and by their role in the paintings, and her portraits are especially deceiving. She paints people, yet these people are, to a large degree, pawns charged with various roles in service of the scene. Like figures in medieval compositions, her characters are not concerned with identity, but rather with functioning. They are neither emissaries nor angels, yet they participate in, and are assimilated into, a human experiment concerned with finding rest and solace. Yet why is she in need of such indifferent figures, and why does she silence their steps with soft carpets? This tactic is surely not due to an inability to paint individual portraits. Rather, it enables the secondary characters to write the play. Her goal is thus not to camouflage the nature of what is being painted, but rather to suspend it until it is fully formed, until it surfaces cohere from within the process of deception.

The observer must also feel he has a role, succumbing to the rules of camouflage without hastening to remove its nets. If he attempts to enter this world several times, and experiences his own repeated rejection from it, he will gradually sense the work growing clearer before his eyes. If we enable the object (the painting) to exist without being noticed, we will see how it speaks without being heard, is painted without being seen, tells a story without being revealed.

When one speaks of these paintings, one must speak of the laws of camouflage and its purposes. The confusion created by the various patterns itself acts as an inherent form of camouflage. This material and chromatic multiplicity creates a cacophony that disrupts the viewer's concentrated attention, diffusing it over the entire surface. What could possibly be the goal of this attack? What is it striving to reveal and what is it trying to conceal? What can be

gained from such a lack of focus and state of diffuse attention? Can one believe in the meditative value of the labor-intensive process? Or in the therapeutic nature of the ritual? Is a labyrinth a path of sorts, or simply a form of torture? As is often the case, many of the answers lie in the questions themselves. Absence and presence speak of one another. The wound is invisible, yet much can be gleaned about it from the size of the large bandage. It is worth adding that camouflage and deception are also the source of adventures, complications, and dangers, of navigation and guessing, of enigmatic states and their resolution. These elements all season the complex world of the paintings.

In contemporary art, patterns have often been treated as soft, decorative elements chosen to produce extreme, tough, large, powerful forms of abstraction. In this case, the pattern creates a support soft enough to absorb what will be flung at it. It functions as a shock absorber. This state sometimes creates the impression that the painting's center of gravity lies outside its own frame. Patterns can exert a hypnotic power. When they are exploited correctly rather than out of weakness, they also have a feminist thrust. They possess the ability to say: Don't touch me or come close to me. Like natural organisms, they grow their own protective mechanisms.

There is such a sense of place and such a world in these paintings by Ella Amitay Sadovsky, yet the identity of this place remains unknown. There is so much domesticity in them, and so little domestic warmth; so many people, yet there is no way of knowing what they feel. So much is being postponed for a later time. Where do they belong and why are they assimilated into the walls of their homes? So much matter that at times it is difficult to know whether it is real or collaged. So much depth that is so quickly flattened. Such is the nature of camouflage. And if the screens were designed to create an illusion, what is the role of this illusion?

Strangely enough, the subjects of these paintings provoke thoughts about Intimisme. Something about their continuum reminds me of those remarkable paintings by Édouard Vuillard, as well as of Pierre Bonnard's bathing wife. Yet in this case there is no intimacy, for what appears before us is merely a stage set. The intimacy has not vanished. It is simply suspended, waiting for a viewer who will prove his seriousness. Perhaps the viewer must actually cease to make an effort before a more intimate interpretation emerges, as in a séance. One conjured up not by faith, but by patience. One must stand before these paintings and wait patiently until their beauty, softness, and richness are transformed into a restless force. And as for the title of this essay: "Shall We Accept the Flowers of Goodness and Reject the Flowers of Evil?!" the question is, of course, a rhetorical one; in a true work of art, the flowers of evil and the flowers of goodness are gathered together into a single bouquet, and cannot be separated from each other.

It seems fitting to conclude this text with the following quote:

He did not want to play. He wanted to meet in the real world the unsubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld. He did not know where to seek it or how, but a premonition which led him on told him that this image would, without any overt act of his, encounter him. They would

meet quietly as if they had known each other and had made their tryst, perhaps at one of the gates or in some more secret place. They would be alone, surrounded by darkness and silence: and in that moment of supreme tenderness he would be transfigured.

He would fade into something impalpable under her eyes and then in a moment he would be transfigured. Weakness and timidity and inexperience would fall from him in that magic moment.

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1 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), pp. 64–65.