

Roni Baroth / Dance of the Double Hemispheres

Marie Gallery, Jerusalem, November 2020

I feel an attraction to desolate places,” painter Roni Baroth confided to me during a ¹ studio visit, referring to her custom of remaining in the subjects of the space and time explored in her paintings. I identify the roses she paints as a kind of abandonment that shelters in her studio. The roses, picked some time ago, are now placed on the windowsill, at the onset of their process of natural decay. Baroth continues to keep the company of the roses even when they can no longer slake their thirst. At that point, she places them in vessels, allowing them to slowly abandon the tissue that connects them, to bid farewell. The artist’s gaze, which distinguishes, examines, and lingers, does not neglect the view. “If you see their carcasses... even when they are dry they are beautiful,” she states, as she places a dish of little dried leaves on the table.²

Baroth photographs her own figure in the home environment with the images of the rose – at the various stages of both her and the rose’s life – before she places their likenesses on the canvas. In this way corners invisible to the eye are reflected while details simultaneously detach themselves from the environs, parts of herself. “I pluck you from the earth, and from up close I shall observe you from afar,” ³ as Fernando Pessoa wrote. As in Pessoa’s poem, Baroth plucks and brings the objects from her own self to her own self. She frames them through the mirrored reflections in and the act of photographing, but to do so she distances them through to another layer of frame and lens.

Baroth’s own figure is reflected in one of the works connected with the “dance of the double hemispheres” – a phrase taken from the artist’s book of poetry⁴ – seated, facing the mirror, dressed in red velvet pajamas whose folds seem to speak the language of the roses. One of the roses is in a vase on the floor, its open surface representing its

¹ In conversation during my studio visit, November 2020

² Flower imagery is prevalent in the history of western religious as well as secular art, commenting and eliciting metaphors commonly perceived as part of *Vanitas* paintings – a sub-genre of still life paintings with philosophical contemplation of the transience of life and its vanity, symbolized by paintings with *memento mori* - symbolic objects urging viewers to remember death. Flowers also symbolize the secrets of youth, erotic connotations, the female body, life cycle, fertility and birth, decay and death. Historically, the rose has been perceived as the symbol of perfection, the ideal of beauty and attraction, eternal love, a means of transforming matter to spirit, and as an infinite cycle embodied inside of the velvety, scented delicate petals enclosing it.

³ Fernando Pessoa, Poem no. 49, from Poems by Alberto Caeiro.

⁴ Roni Baroth, *Kemo* [like]: *Poems by Roni Baroth*, (CITY: PUBLISHING COMPANY, 2006).

fatigue, expressing its impending withering. The artist's face is hidden by an iPad which acts as a kind of persona, a mask, revealing the act of photographing when facing the mirror, and thus baring the stages of the work. - a mask revealing the act of photographing facing the mirror and thus baring the work stages. The distant easel leaning against the wall narrates another stage in the work, disclosing fragments of its identity.

In another work, Baroth is seen wrapped in that same velvet housedress, facing the mirror, with the open-mouthed rose standing in water in the vase on a bench to her side. Behind it, light flickers in the opaque windowpane, painting lively reflections on the floor. The artist's hands and neck are visible in the painting, raised upwards in concentration as if in prayer.

What is actually happening is that the mirror is cutting off the moment of taking the photograph on the iPad as well as the artist's face hidden behind it. Baroth explained to me that the mirror is "like the lake of the house," bathing her body in it. If I continue the idea of the mirror as Baroth's source of water, we can borrow Maurice Merleau-Ponty's words: "When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it despite the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them."⁵ According to Merleau-Ponty, the vitality and power of the watery essence which reflects and oversees becomes clearer, and it seems that this is the same power that is concretized in Baroth's mirror-lake.

For Baroth, painting is "a process taking place between the outside and the inside that emerges onto the canvas," speaking about her image that "comes out of" the process. She continues: "It is, all in all, an element, since I am totally inside of the painting." The artist who sees and is seen is grasped inside the painting; together with the other objects, she reflects the emergence of the inside to the outside. Along with the revelation and reflection to the interior, there is also a need not to show everything, to select what to release onto the canvas, and to keep something secret. "Secrets provide a great deal of power," Baroth explains, while referring to the elusive depth and the concealed that is part of what is revealed. Her works bring people closer to the visible but they themselves draw nearer to the mystery, as well.

In her book "A story about life," Baroth clarifies the transparencies and reflections in her work processes. One of the artworks tells the story of two pears: one stands upright near a decorative pane of glass while the second reclines near it, turning towards the former with all its might. In the play of light and shadows they are doubled, while their purplish color charges the glass and seems to refract through it. Referring to reflection as an action on two planes, Baroth states, "When you have a reflection, it speaks about

⁵.Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind* (1961).

the object as if about a memory; and it is also like painting.” The object-as-memory is doubt, and Baroth’s painting is a kind of proof doubling itself in a grid of reflections.

Some of the paintings on view are based on Baroth’s photographs of objects taken from above. The “over-seeing” is like a parable of the overall picture, actions that Baroth executes through the camera, the supporter of memory. The word “overseeing” implies both looking and seeing. In Hebrew, the source of the word is the Aramaic word meaning to beat or to hit the top of the doorframe,⁶ the structural element in the upper beam that ensures the proper state of the door and windows. The different meanings merge in her paintings, the reflections doubled like echoes of memories and a yearning for a supervisory gaze to encompass everything. In her view from above, Baroth focuses on one of her paintings on a rose lying on its side, cut off from the water in the vase, long since having used up its use as the object of living beauty, or, in the artist’s words, “like an unfulfilled promise between content and form.” Baroth doubles it, wakes up its shadows, seemingly asking them to come back and wake it up to dance with it “the dance of the double hemispheres.”⁷

Nava T. Barazani

⁶ Rashi’s commentary on Exodus 12:7

⁷ See n.4.