

INTERVIEWS

BRACHA L. ETTINGER

Bracha L. Ettinger discusses her life and work

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Bracha L. Ettinger, *Chrysalis*, 2016, ink on notebook paper, 6 x 5 3/4".

The most comprehensive museum exhibition in the United States so far of artist and theorist Bracha L. Ettinger's work is on view at the UB Anderson Gallery in Buffalo, New York, until July 29, 2018, featuring four decades of paintings, notebooks, and drawings, as well as three video works. Additionally, "Bracha's Notebooks," a solo show curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev at Castello di Rivoli in Turin, will be on view in 2019. Here, Ettinger discusses the eclipse of the female subject in historical abstraction, the relationship between abstraction and compassion, trauma, and the remedial potential of painting.

I DECIDED I WAS AN ARTIST IN 1981, at a moment when many feminist artists and art historians rejected painting because of its phallocentrism. I knew excellent women artists who refrained from

painting in the '80s, but I couldn't. I've painted all my life; it's like breathing. It's painful that we'll never know what women painters of the seventeenth and fifteenth centuries, and even the nineteenth century, could have given the world, and this requires lamentation, which implies intimate matrixial—a term I've employed throughout my work—alliances with the unknown that resist the idea of “purity.”

I understand that many women artists turned their backs on painting, believing it's impossible to bring major transformation in this realm, oversaturated with maleness. But the project of painting has a long road to go, still, to discover the uncanny compassion beyond figuration and empathy and beyond abstraction too, to feminize the subject. The artistic has a potential for humanizing because only there aesthetics breeds ethics.

Working on compassion and the spirit, the psyche within the cosmos, is a proposal to go beyond modernity with its “empathy versus abstraction” perspective. In Western historical abstraction, such a feminine-matrixial dimension was unimaginable; this abstraction rejected it a priori as it worked toward the flat surface, the nonhuman, the crystalline inanimate. Surrealism, working with the unconscious, missed what I call “subreality”—it was blind not only to the female as subject, but also to the affective strings that link our kernels. And that's why the almost failed geometries of Hilma af Klint—who was working before and then alongside the modernists but was omitted from art history for so long—are so important; a spiritual aspiration drove her beyond “pure” forms.

In my paintings, a kind of holographic depth and shadowy figures emanate, and the process reflects on the unconscious as a virtual diffraction of elements, transconnecting with the resonance that transcends them. Memory with oblivion in pentimento. To paint is to self-fragilize myself, to make myself vulnerable in accessing the other and the cosmos, to join as I differ, to witness what I give witness to. In my process, the abstract universe encounters the one we live in—a world absorbed by pain and violence—and offers itself up to it in a kind of trust after the end of trust. In the past ten years, my methods of abstraction have engaged the quivering moves of the butterfly and the jellyfish, its hovering tendrils in the water—ocean, spring, and womb.

I don't start oil paintings with blankness. The first brush touch is already an encounter with traces. I work with tiny color lines toward light and translucency, to give witness—in the feminine—to the spectral ashen traces of catastrophe, imprinted, transmitted, transformed, and cross-inscribed. During the day, I work with oils on my “Pietà,” “Eurydice,” and “Medusa” series—layer upon layer, painting over a long period of time in various transparencies. I continue working at night on my “Chrysalis” series and in notebooks, where I draw with ink and write down ideas.

The question of how to keep humanizing the subject remains. My process, pregnant with affects, brings about a crisis of the flat surface and suggests non-perspective depth. By weaving a space of passage, its symbolic domain opens, and its “phallic” appropriation becomes impossible. As we re-own the potential and specificities of the body, its joy and its pain, its differences in jointness, painting as materialized consciousness gives new definitions of subject matter and of subjectivity. Painting becomes a wound space and a healing space where I carry, where I miscarry.

For me it was crucial to work the abstract with certain found images that testify to the killing of Jewish women, mothers, and children in Mizocz, Rovno, Ukraine, on October 14, 1942—which echoes the massacre (including of members of my family) in the Ponary forest in 1941—in the “Eurydice” series. The “Medusa,” “Chrysalis,” and “Pieta” series refer also to the massacre of women in the Baltic Sea in 1945 by fire in the water, in resonance with my own shell shock. I was wounded during a long night when I led an operation to save drowning young people (the Eilat shipwreck in 1967). Forty years later, I found myself trying to find the meaning of the gasping mouth and the burnt smell. I didn’t expect this nightmare to reemerge; I had to struggle with images that came forth in my paintings. As my matrixial abstraction meets the residuals of trauma in its search for light, it also offers the sublimation of/from the specificity of the feminine, and it offers the shocks of the archaic maternal a relief. The subject-depth space is symbolic, but also corporeal. And the name of the truth it carries for me, as it transpires and inspires, is beauty.

I once wrote that I hoped neurobiologists would discover resonance neurons, but artists are not going to wait for the science. I believe in the passage from art to science, from art to politics, from painting to the cultural, even if this can’t be immediate.

— As told to Annie Godfrey Larmon