

ON THE HOOK

Trauma, transference, and the art of Bracha L. Ettinger

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Bracha L. Ettinger, *Eros – Pieta n. 3* (detail), 2019, oil on canvas, 9 7/8 x 9 7/8".

AT A CERTAIN POINT in one's career as a psychoanalyst, transference becomes a rare and longed for feeling. Constantly in the position of negotiating the transference of others, one struggles to muster that great and passionate illusion for oneself. Bracha L. Ettinger is one of my last teachers. I've had a sense for some time that she knows something very precious and particular about the most obscure and complicated aspects of psychoanalytic work, which she investigates not only in her self-analysis and work with patients, but in her art. She is the only psychoanalyst I know who is also an artist continually exhibiting in galleries and museums across the world. Her ongoing show at Andrew Kreps gallery in Tribeca is the first time I've had the opportunity to see her oil paintings in person.

Having had a daughter just four months ago, I felt like it was the right moment to encounter Bracha's work in the flesh. It centers on the particular amortization rate of a woman's bodily life stretched between birth, menstruation, pregnancy, and motherhood, and the losses that these continually entail in a patriarchal world. She calls this "the matrixial," a concept that she has been

working on since the '80s. Women, she says, are the carriers of the “wound-spaces” of human life. How to listen to this is the difficult task of the analyst, not because one doesn't want to hear about it (perhaps one doesn't), but because it is effectively buried by civilization, discourse, cognition. Traum, or dream in German, resonates strongly with trauma, or wound, and space in Hebrew, חלל (halal) can also be translated as wound. The link between what opens, or what is open, to what is wounding, unconscious, part of the network that is dream life, is perhaps one of the most basic psychoanalytic problems—the difficulty of going there. This is where Bracha's paintings take shape.



Bracha L. Ettinger, *Annunciation - Birthing; Pieta*, n.3, 2017–21, oil on canvas, 11 3/4 x 9 7/8".

About a month ago, I had a first dream about my daughter, Alma, which was somehow also about psychoanalysis. I was with another teacher of mine, a child psychoanalyst, and we were singing karaoke. Older now, in the dream he was in full glory. I do miss singing and dancing most in these pandemic times. The scene then switched and I had fallen asleep and Alma had gotten ahold of something in bed. I rushed to her and she had eaten a bunch of fishing line. I pulled it out of her mouth, a process which felt endless; the line was practically infinite, and along the way there was the occasional hook, which frightened me, though she seemed to be ok. Pulling out these threads—which felt as if they came from the deepest part of her, as if they transcended the small confines of her body—I wondered if she was damaged by all this. And then I woke up.

After Alma emerged from the newborn phase, she emerged as a voice—loud, powerful, almost a song. Where did this come from? Where had she been those first three months, lost to the trauma of birth? And where is this joy in sound on the edge of language in the rest of us? Her precocious

voice left me with these questions. Bracha quotes Paul Celan in her paper on the concept of “carriance”: “THREAD SUNS / above the grey-black wilderness [–]/ there are / still songs to be sung on the other side / of mankind.” Carrying, she says, is its own kind of knowledge, a learning that is mostly unconscious, and emerges in what she calls threads, string-working; for even if we are in withdrawal from others and the world, “webbing continues. Nets are knotted.” “At what depth?” she asks. Answering: the depth where having hurt the other, it hurts in us, reverberating across these living strings. Alma means soul, learned, world. Alma Mater.



Bracha L. Ettinger, *Pieta n. 3*, 2015, oil on canvas, 7 7/8 x 7 7/8".

Matrixial sublimation happens at the periphery of language and image, not entirely separate from them, requiring what Bracha might call experimental links at the border. Like Ariadne, the psychoanalyst follows these strings in the form of listening that we practice, and we have to experiment with speaking to what we hear. We reach past individuals to something transindividual; we reach past reality, to something she calls the subreal. We might name this the intergenerational transmission of trauma which cuts across the pathos of our individually experienced pain. We might also call this creativity—what we know beyond the conscious constraints of what we are allowed to know. This is, in my field, blithely called “interpretation,” which hardly captures the act. One wonders if we might need an artist to render the art! Many have also called this kind of work with the unconscious “mystical,” meaning it reaches toward something ancient or ancestral in us, tapping into certain kinds of intuition beyond the senses. If

this feels too grand or obscure to you, think of the pleasure in speaking without paying too much heed to sense, where the words and affects seem to rush out from under you, pushing the intensity of one's wit. I love when patients get closer to this. Freud, with his method of free association, wanted us to relax the watchman at the gates who wants to dictate what passes in accordance with the laws of reason and fact. It's a way of trying to remain separate, to not allow what is Other in us to come forth. To refuse to be carried away.



Bracha L. Ettinger, *Kaddish n.6*, 2015–20, oil on canvas, 15 3/4 x 11 3/4".

The matrixial thus speaks to a different kind of being with others. Bracha models this on the image of the infant in utero and the mother carrying the fetus to term, but also on much of what psychoanalysis has understood regarding childhood, the prolonged helplessness of human infants and the way they must be continually carried. Importantly, this is not symbiosis, fusion, or enmeshment, which in any case is the problem of the neurotically individuated subject who has difficulty with leaving their boundaries behind and can only do so wholesale, in a kind of fantastical take-over. This is being together with our differences intact. Through strange advances in imaging, I know that my daughter loved sucking on her umbilical cord. It would have had a different pulsating rhythm to that of her own body. She also responded vigorously to the sound of voices, of

which, given my being a psychoanalyst, there were many for her to listen to throughout her days. All the way back, the Other is already there.

In accessing the human beyond individuation, Bracha hopes for a capacity to create new forms of exchange. This is the risk taken between an artist and their audience. She writes:

The pressure I feel to produce significance, not to only paint, is pressure of conscience—my understanding that human beings and mainly the female-mothers collapse under culture's pressure to convert their experiences into that which remains at far too great a symbolic distance from their deep experience of the soul. I named a “women-artist” any artist whose life and work traverse, express and create matrixial spaces.

Her paintings, particularly in this exhibition, are small, creating a space of intimacy. The infinite process of working over fragile traces of light and color feels tender. Emotionally charged, mythical scenes seem to emerge from beneath this abstract screen. Only by seeing these images in person could I sense how they give one the feeling of practicing psychoanalysis, working with another space of possibility beyond what is presented to us by the world, by our families, by the constraints of representation; what we work with only begins to appear through touching this texture or webbing of life at the limit of ourselves.



Bracha L. Ettinger, *Medusa and owl*, 2012, oil on canvas, 7 7/8 x 9 7/8".

I came across a remark in one of Bracha's artist notebooks that often accompany her artwork and are sometimes exhibited: “not only. . . describing subjectivity in terms of split and matricide, but also proscribing it. . . Heroic efforts of both matrixial sublimation and of symbolizing the trap/fish in

the water.” My father is a fisherman. As a young girl I remember watching the process of hooking small fish through their lips, in order to catch larger fish, then digging out the hooks from deep in these bigger fishes’ mouths. I remember the excitement around catching a fish that would fight hard, which often meant they swallowed hard—hook, line, and sinker.

I was ambivalent about learning how to fish, which is certainly a knowledge to be passed on, but one that felt like a knowledge for men. Of course this picture is metaphorically rich—the fragility a young girl feels in her body, questions about sexuality, penetration, male enjoyment, the troubled waters of father-daughter relationships that seem to be encapsulated in the idiom “shooting fish in a barrel.” The sea, the fish, the hook, the catch, runs like a primal scene, replete with impregnation, water-breaking, birth, but also the pain of the bonds of love—to have their hooks in you.

There is also something more specific than this metaphorical scene: My father’s mother’s family were immigrant fisherman from the north of Sweden to the Midwest, where they encountered no end of problems: the Great Depression, loss of their farm, miscarriages, rape, alcoholism, postpartum melancholia, and tragic deaths. An image of life lived well in nature—which was bountiful and giving—was a nostalgic fantasy of my father’s that covered over these traumas; perhaps there was even a fantasy of mother as Mother Earth, differently violent, violent out of sheer necessity.

I wish my daughter didn’t have to swallow all of this. God knows I’ve spent a lifetime talking about it. But my work also wouldn’t be what it is without it, and this is what I have to pass on. On all sides then, Bracha and her painting, me and my psychoanalyzing, my father and his fishing, Alma and her singing: “heroic efforts of both matrixial sublimation and of symbolizing the trap/fish in the water.” I thank Bracha for reminding me of these ethical and aesthetic lessons.

“Bracha L. Ettinger” is on view at Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, through March 19.

“Bracha L. Ettinger. Bracha’s Notebooks” is on view at Castello di Rivoli, Turin, through September 25.

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