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HOVERING AT A LOW ALTITUDE

BY

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Hagit Cohen.
In the spring quarter of 1988 I became acquainted with computer graphics which opened up great visual possibilities for me. The computer enabled me to layer and integrate various photographic fragments of reality, and enhanced my ability to reveal aspects of my personality--my fears, my desires, and my feeling of confusion between contrasting values within my life. I could now communicate on a more general level, dealing with not just personal but cultural issues such as the role of mythology in our everyday life and how we deal with all the information that we absorb in modern life.

I am attracted to nineteenth-century Symbolist art, and especially those artists who emphasized a feeling for the symbol as a catalyst which, while itself remaining unchanged, generates a reaction in the psyche, and a preference for synthesis (a combination of elements) as opposed to analysis. Synthesis was particularly important for the Symbolists because it involved an effort to combine elements found in the real world or borrowed from other works of art, and to produce a separate, self-sufficient reality. Edward Lucie-Smith wrote about this in his book *Symbolist Art*: "The spectator completes the work for himself. This suggestiveness and ambiguity were the very essence of Symbolist art".

Until about a decade ago most photography concentrated on dealing with what was there in the physical world. Mystical and intellectual
aspects of reality were considered inappropriate by a modernist society that cultivated the minimal and the essential. Searching for other means of expression in my photography, I looked at Symbolist art and its use of ambiguity and suggestiveness as a way of creating a dialogue with the viewer. At the same time, I was also influenced by contemporary artists who used this same method in addressing contemporary issues, allowing the viewer to bring his or her own interpretation to their work. In the introduction to her book *Weighing the Planets*, Olivia Parker acknowledges this when she writes: "Where there are gaps with insufficient information, we tend to fill them with handy thoughts of our own". Later she adds: "I am interested in the way people think about the unknown. For most people have looked to the spirit world to explain what was going on". I find Parker's work a kind of visual poetry. The way she constructs her images and her description of a world of interior spaces and inner states is fascinating and influential to me.

In my earlier computer work I was concerned with connecting and incorporating elements from both Jewish and Greek mythology. I recognized the weight that mythology has on our perception, affecting our very way of seeing. Myth is the form for how we see and understand the world. It can be seen as a kind of cultural D.N.A or software that unconsciously determines the way we see reality and therefore how we behave.

After learning a great deal about Greek mythology I realized that the way I was brought up and educated is very much influenced by Israeli
mythology. The sources of this mythology include the Bible, the history of the Jewish people in the Diaspora, the Holocaust, and the Zionist dream. In both my early work on the computer and my thesis work I was trying to display my own interpretation of major mythical elements that influenced me, emphasizing the co-existence of more than one culture and mentality in my life. I tried to show how major values in life that are usually unconnected, were forced to co-exist in my reality. In visual beauty and harmony, I was trying to display the disharmony and confusion in my reality. It was then a natural process to use my personal history and understanding to deal with the current political and social situation in Israel and to confront the conflict I feel about it.

The computer has dramatically changed my way of working. It has enabled me finally to make things that were difficult to accomplish photographically. The immediate results and flexibility available with computer graphics encouraged me to experiment both visually and conceptually. With the computer's capability to layer and collage scanned photographs, I could combine images from magazines, books, and photo-albums with my own photography. I could also very easily manipulate the scale, color, perspective, and design of images. Using these techniques, I could blur the borders of reality and illusion and thus, create a new message. Terry Gips, a computer graphics artist, says about working with computers: "It feels like an extension of the mind but a mind with physical parameters, a space for image making, and remembering".
Computers have become a major element of contemporary media and have an ability to emulate other media. Like television, they have become an integral element of the way we receive information. The pictures in my exhibit are constructed to look like real photographs but also like stills from film or T.V. They have cinematic or narrative quality as well as scan lines and pixels, and could have been shown as a real event on T.V. I feel that the aesthetic appearance of my images compliments the way we use media to communicate. It also seems to me that at present we have become so oblivious to images of atrocities shown in magazines and on television that a surreal picture can attract more attention and responses to these subjects than just "another real image" of horror. In addition, by altering photographs to create a false reality I can state that the camera for me is no longer a reliable objective witness nor just a mechanical recording device.

The title of my show: "Hovering at a low Altitude" comes from a poem by Dahlia Ravikovitch who is a major figure in Israeli poetry. The title refers to a way of seeing -- a kind of detached observation of the terrible events that are happening around us. The act of hovering at a low altitude is similar to flipping through the channels on television: seeing but choosing not to watch, and therefore not to act. I find Ravikovitch's poetry both fascinating and visual and identify with much of what she writes about. Robert Alter wrote about this poem: "What turns this potentially sensationalistic material into a haunting poem is the tense relation of the female narrator watching the action from the
safe distance of a low altitude.... The image of low altitude hovering over atrocity is an obvious but nonetheless effective emblem of the situation of the ordinary Israeli, knowing but choosing not to see certain terrible acts perpetrated by other Israelis, or even in the name of the nation”.

In my work I wanted to express a feeling of being caught in a violent situation and a perpetual fear of war, while trying to maintain my own world. I recognize the danger of ignoring the fact that my country is using power to oppress others in the name of defense and protection. Being aware of this, I chose to juxtapose images of my self as a passive observer with images of the violence that is happening around me. I appear passive not only because I did not want to deal with the enormity of the events, but also because it is the role of women in war games. Women have been expected to stay behind, waiting and mourning the loss of their men. By visually emphasising this passivity, my work questions my responsibilities and commitment to myself and society.

In the process of working on my thesis I realized that although I am displaying passive and detached images of myself, the work itself demonstrates a stronger political statement, calling for individual responsibility, political awareness, and a protest against violence and war. David Grossman, in his controversial book Yellow Wind, describes the situation in the West Bank: "We have lived for twenty years in a false and artificial situation, based on illusions, on a teetering center of
gravity between hate and fears, in a desert void of emotion and consciousness... We became artists of suppression, trying to delay any question of morality".

Dealing with so many conflicts and contradictions in my reality, I tried to express my confusion by creating impossible scenarios that touch the surreal. With the computer as a tool, I made a visual unity of elements from different times and places giving my images a new and more effective meaning which approaches the absurd. In an image titled "Ritual", I placed a woman figure peacefully dancing in front of a fire caused by a violent encounter between three Arab men and an Israeli officer. In this image I tried to comment about how photojournalism can document atrocities in a way that glamorizes them and avoids the tragedy of the situation.

In an image titled "Beyond the Normal Range of Experience" I placed a little girl between a group of soldiers pointing their machine guns at a large white dove that holds a soldier silhouetted against the sky. While the soldiers are represented realistically, the dove functions as a symbol and archetype. In this picture I was making a surreal and altered image that could still function on a realistic level and represent a very real problem. In the exhibit as a whole I was trying to point out the contrast between myth and reality and how both can be combined and influence each other.
I chose to use titles in my show to direct the viewer's perception or understanding. The titles suggest only some of the ways that these images could be read. With these titles I am actually trying to emphasize the ambivalence of the issues and let the images operate on additional levels. They become more accessible to a general audience rather than specifically Jewish or Israeli audiences.

The use of art against war has a long history. Artists have always played a major role in criticizing violence and war. Since 1919, when the use of collage was introduced by Dadaist artists, photomontage has been a political weapon. The word "photo-montage", which means photo-construction, was first used by Dadaist artists such as John Heartfield, George Grosz, Raoul Hausman, and Hanna Hoch. Photo-montage was used by Dadaist artists mainly because it was the medium most accessible to a mass audience. The computer is capable of doing such "montages" only faster. If John Heartfield were alive today, he would probably be using the computer as a tool for his assemblages, putting together different photographic fragments, printing, and cutting and pasting together numbers of images. Heartfield was a master of visual metaphor and significant part of his work was dedicated to protest against Hitler and the Nazis.

In contemporary art, one often sees the expression of personal dreams, nightmares, and apocalyptic fears. Valerie Fletcher, the author
of Dreams and Nightmares - Utopian Vision in Modern Art, calls this phenomena "distopian vision". Artists today are more aware of social and political issues and are trying to create a dialogue with their audience hoping to shock people and stimulate them to sensitivity, awareness, and action. Although "distopian" art has usually a hard and negative appearance, it still aspires to a different and better existence on both a personal and general level of expression.

I see my art as "distopian" on one level, but not completely so. Embedded in it is the wish for myself as an artist/person to move out from the stage of "hovering at a low altitude" and to become more engaged in action. At the same time I invite my audience to recognize the fact that by being silent we almost become participant in the violence act. As my friend Ayala Gabriel said to me when looking at my work: "The worst of us are implicated in distopia and the best of us are hovering at a low altitude but that is not good enough to make us human."
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"Ritual" 1990

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"Anne Frank is planting a tree at the Jackan Hillel"

3. Hagit Cohen
"Hovering at a low altitude"

8. Hagit Cohen
"Beyond the normal range of experience"

5. Hagit Cohen
"Swept with confused alarms"

6. Hagit Cohen
"Our land and its wealth"

7. Hagit Cohen
"Mouchel Salahi"

8. Hagit Cohen
"To live with a dream"

7. Hagit Cohen
"Hero of all the wars"

10. Hagit Cohen
"When you hold your way"

11. Hagit Cohen
"Ignorant armies"

The exhibition