

ORIT HOFSHI

Resilience

List Gallery

Swarthmore College

Realism and Resilience in the Art of Orit Hofshi

By Andrea Packard, List Gallery director

The List Gallery is pleased to present *Resilience*, an exhibition of key mature works by Orit Hofshi that have not yet been shown in the United States. Although Hofshi has been internationally recognized as a printmaker, this exhibition highlights the elastic nature of her creative practice, which includes paintings, inked and carved woodblocks, Tusche crayon rubbings, and *Convergence*, an installation she designed for the List Gallery's inner room.¹ Her haunting vistas of ruins and rugged landscapes respond to both the sublime forces of nature and the consequences of war. The daughter of Holocaust survivors who helped found Matzuva, one of Israel's first kibbutzim, she grew up witnessing conflicts over land and ideology written in the changing boundaries and ecology of the country. Through her art, she seeks commonalities of experience that transcend nationalism and sectarianism. In works such as *Uprise* (2010), ruined walls and foundations stand as universal symbols of loss, absence, and the uphill struggle to find one's place in a fractured world. Other titles such as *Steadfastness*, *Remnant*, and *Resilience* emphasize archetypal aspects of the human condition. Addressing the prevalence of violence and dislocation, she asserts the need for reflection, persistence, and understanding.

¹ The artist also has notable bodies of work in pastel and monoprint not represented in *Resilience*.

I first met Hofshi in 1986, when she began studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Even then, she was well on her way toward developing her signature imagery and processes. Already a graduate of the Neri Bloomfield Academy of Design, in Haifa, Israel, she came to the United States seeking a broader vision of both art history and contemporary practices. She was especially drawn to European masters such as Albrecht Dürer and Titian, the expressive language of Käthe Kollwitz, members of the Die Brücke group, and contemporary artists such as Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945), whose solo exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1988 made a lasting impression.

Like Kiefer, Hofshi creates large-scale mixed-media landscapes that examine the dark side of history and suggest parallels between natural and social upheaval. Kiefer's 1988 exhibit featured vast and apocalyptic mixed-media works that critiqued cultural amnesia about Nazi atrocities. However, raised in a society actively bearing witness to the trauma of the Holocaust, Hofshi tempers her imagery with the patience and openness embodied in her devotion to craft. She explores the fragility of social and natural orders in a way that suggests greater space for empathy.

Hofshi takes inspiration not only from direct observation, photography, and memory, but also from the materials and processes of printmaking. Even during her student days at the Pennsylvania Academy, as she worked on large woodblocks formed of pine boards glued edge to edge, fellow students could see how the dark knots, varied grain, and imperfections in the wood gave rise to her richly textured imagery of rocks, rivers, and clouds. Already, a kind of alchemy was at work in which elements could transform: the streaky wood grain evoked water currents, watery brush strokes suggested hard and angular branches or striated rock, broader swirls of wood grain conjured clouds, and gouged patterns in the wood grain became watery whitecaps. More recent works such as *Protuberance* (2002) and *Riparian*, (2003) continue to portray a world that is animated with both geological change and the artist's creative response.

Declining to use a mechanical press, which would exert even pressure throughout, Hofshi prints all of her woodcuts by hand, rubbing the back of huge sheets of Japanese paper with a wooden spoon. As she does so, she responds to the image as it evolves, embracing or enhancing any unexpected textures or effects that she finds evocative and re-inking the board or increasing her pressure as needed. Despite the increasing scale and complexity of her art, Hofshi continues to work without assistants, often working for an entire day to create a single print. Her unmistakable patience and range of expression convey an attentiveness, tenderness, and humility that contrasts with the heroic scale of her largest works. Whereas many contemporary works rely primarily upon scale for impact, with bombastic or superficial results, Hofshi's scenes command our attention in part because the artist herself is so convincingly engaged on a physical and emotional level.

One of her largest works to date, *Upon this Bank and Shoal of Time*, is a nearly 35-foot-long grid of 24 panels in varied media—ink drawing, woodcut, and watercolor on carved pine panels and paper. This complex yet coherent landscape suggests distances of time, place, and experience that are so vast they cannot be expressed through a single image or medium. The distant ruins in the upper left panel, the river flowing through the center of the composition, and the extensive labor embodied by her scale and process, evoke distinct ways of conceiving the passage of time. A solitary man in a suit and tie gazes down at the water in an introspective pose. Like the heavysset and lonely figures of William Kentridge, he appears weighed down by middle age, harsh experiences, and cultural disconnection; he seems to reflect upon and represent mortality². Whereas the river of time appears relatively continuous, the human experience, as suggested by her puzzle-like grid, is intermittent and equivocal. The work's enormous scale, divisions between panels, and variety of media constitute an

² Hofshi's inspiration for the figure is a news photo clipped from a newspaper when she was a resident artist at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation, County Mayo, Ireland. The photo shows a man reflecting at a memorial to a victim of sectarian violence. Studio visit and interview with the artist, June 21, 2010.

elastic and recursive visual language that echoes the protagonist's self-questioning pose. Pointing to himself, it is as if he wonders: "Who am I? What is my responsibility?"

If the Tread Is an Echo (2009) elaborates such concerns through an illusionistic panorama that becomes sculptural, inviting greater viewer interaction. This irregular grid of warm wooden matrices and cool white prints builds like a mountain to the gallery ceiling. The panorama incorporates two of Hofshi's earlier woodcuts: *Trail* (2008), which consists of the two printed panels on the lower right, portrays a lone figure precariously wading upstream. *Vestige* (2008), which consists of the two printed panels at the upper left, depicts stark and abandoned ruins. Combining these works with numerous other matrices and prints, she evokes an even more daunting landscape of ruins and summits. She interrupts the illusionistic language of her representation by positioning the 6-by-6-foot-long blackened matrix used to create *Vestige* to the right of the central axis and 3 feet in front of the rest of the work, creating a tiny enclosure. Upon entering, visitors can gaze up at a backlit woodcut print suspended horizontally near the ceiling. Although it recalls a canopy, skylight, or cloud, the illuminated print is also clearly the product of wood, ink, paper, and imagination—another echo of Hofshi's regenerative and self-reflexive process. The enclosure is claustrophobic but offers dramatic shifts in perspective; it encourages us to confront dualities of darkness and light, loss and transcendence. Evoking the mystery, craft, and never-ending potential in art, it offers a kind of tabernacle—space for reflection and potential revelation.

Moreover, although Hofshi obscured the composition on the wooden matrix in the process of printing impressions of it, the panels of *Vestige* remain malleable—ready to generate new prints or interpretations. Emphasizing the dialectic between destruction and creativity, it is as if Hofshi echoes Stephen J. Gould when he states: "I love the wry motto of the Paleontological Society (meant both literally and figuratively, for

hammers are the main tool of our trade): *Frango ut patefaciam*—I break in order to reveal."³

Visitors to Hofshi's current studio at *Mishkan Omanim (The Artist's Studio)* in Herzliya, Israel, are amazed that she creates such large-scale and complex works in a room that is barely larger than her central work table. The limited space requires her to think strategically and in terms of modular relationships. She evaluates her composite works in the public gallery adjacent to her studio. Laying out her compositions on the gallery floor, she can experiment with differences in scale, orientation, and sequence. Always reflecting upon the interrelationships between the varied iterations of her compositions, she seeks new ways to re-contextualize images, lending older works new meanings. She has likened her carved wood matrices to a basic vocabulary that she recombines in varied ways to realize longer sentences in an evolving language⁴.

For example, the grease pencil rubbing *Thicket* (2008) was made from the wood matrix that forms the upper right panel of the much larger work *Remnant* (2008), a nearly 12-foot-wide image of ruined structures in a desolate landscape. We look past a jumble of tangled growth, boulders, and rubble on the left side of the composition toward a central image of ruined foundations. Fragments of vertical beams stand askew, suggesting the scale and shape of past structures. Smaller posts linked by rope appear in the far distance, suggesting a barrier or cordoned off excavation site. The vertical orientation of the wood matrix that produced *Thicket*, contrasts with the horizontal orientation of the central panels of *Remnant*, conveying a vision of the world that has been disrupted and then pieced together. We cannot identify a particular time, place, or cause of the ruin; instead, *Remnant* stands as a symbol of our human penchant for both destruction and reconstruction.

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/21/us/stephen-jay-gould-60-is-dead-enlivened-evolutionary-theory.html?pagewanted=5>

⁴ Interview with the artist, July 25, 2010

Like its imagery of ruins, *Remnant's* sculptural and tactile variety invites an archeological reading. Hofshi's expressive ink drawing is direct and variable: in some places her draftsmanship is raw and rough; in the center she produces a delicate grey wash, indicating shadows; and in other areas, particularly the top right panel, her lines are delicate and calligraphic. She also scratches into some of the brush strokes, revealing the warm wood underneath to create bright highlights. In other areas, her strokes alternate with deep gouge marks and striations. The scattered knots on the pine boards contribute to the rhythmic animation of the surface, as if revealing realities or forces beyond those we can discern through Western perspective. Similarly, her assemblage of the different matrices, each with their distinct rhythms of articulated wood emphasizes the elasticity of perception and meaning.

The cover of this catalog dramatizes the transformation of another image through the addition of panels: Hofshi's 2008 work *Resilience*, (*Holešov, 1944*). Upon opening the cover, one sees that *Resilience* provides the central panel for her new triptych, *Steadfastness* (2010). *Resilience* was inspired by a 1944 photo of the synagogue in Holešov, Czech Republic, which was burned by the Nazis in 1942. The image has profound meaning for the artist because her mother, Shoshana Kohn (born Ina Weinberger), was the only Jewish child in Holešov to escape the Nazi occupation, deportation, and concentration camps that murdered all but 15 Jewish citizens.⁵ Through enlarging the wall fragment and eliminating the surrounding trees and houses shown in her source photo, Hofshi emphasizes the appearance of utter destruction and haunting absence. The vertical orientation of her spliced pine boards, each with its distinct grain, embed her image with sharp divisions. Whereas these lines produce an atmospheric richness, they also call attention to the artist's construction of history. It is as if we are witnessing a shattered world in which broken shards of reality and perception must be pieced together. However, although the image portrays a lost heritage, Hofshi's monumental imagery, tireless labor, and creative agility demonstrate a commitment to history, family, and future generations—ongoing resilience.

⁵ Czech Republic informational website: http://hol.vytvarno.cz/servis/historie_en.php

To create *Steadfastness* (2010), Hofshi printed two copies of the avalanche of debris and sharply tilting stones that form the right half of *Resilience*. Through placing these identical prints on either side of the central image of the synagogue wall, she repeats the image of debris three times overall, emphasizing the impression of unending desolation. The image cascades forward and repeats laterally, like a recurring nightmare. The assertion of such inescapable sameness on either side of the ruin implies an existential crisis, yet it also calls attention to the deliberative character of the artist's creative response. Bearing witness to history with almost devotional labor and acknowledging the artifice of her interpretation, Hofshi demonstrates the value of steadfastness in a fractured world.

In Hofshi's studio at Artist's House, she is quick to share her image of the Holešov synagogue and other sources of inspiration, which she keeps in a box of photographs, press clippings, and sketches. She finds that collecting and reviewing such artifacts and listening to the radio, particularly news reports and discussions of archeological and political topics, grounds her work her work in the reality of contemporary life.

Visiting Hofshi in Israel in June 2010 allowed me to more fully appreciate the realism of her work—its fidelity not only to historic and current events worldwide but also to her native landscape. Hofshi drove us hundreds of miles through central and Northern Israel to visit and discuss sites that have informed her aesthetic. Like many places in the country, her neighborhood in Herzliya is an area where construction projects exist side by side with crumbling facades and archeological sites. In Jerusalem, she pointed to the cacophony of competing cultures struggling for scarce space—each with its distinct language, shrines, security barriers, and armaments. Gazing at the heavily textured gates to Jerusalem, she declared, only half in jest, “I will print this someday.” The compressed textures of the gate seemed to embody the inscrutable problems of both past and present conflict.

Hofshi was also quick to point out some of the many *tel* we passed: hills built up over centuries by the remains and artifacts of human settlement. Unfazed by the 115 degree heat on the arid plateau of Masada, she marveled at the ruins there: one of Israel's most notable symbols of serial habitation, conquest, defiance, abandonment, and reuse. King Herod built the fortification as a military refuge in approximately 37-31 BCE; in 66 CE, the extremist Sicarri Jews or Zealots overcame the Roman garrison stationed there. Besieged by the Roman Legion in 73 AD, the Sicarri reputedly chose mass suicide over capture. Today, the remains of a Byzantine church from the fifth and sixth centuries mingle with the Jewish and Roman ruins, modern excavation sites, and the constant traffic of school groups and tourists. Scanning the surrounding cliffs and landscape below, Hofshi pointed out the walled remains of Roman siege camps, ribbons of winding road, and the salt residue left by the receding waters of the Dead Sea. Works such as *Remnant*, *Uprise*, and *Reclaim*, respond to the way such imagery embodies millennia of human struggle and ecological change.

Hofshi also guided us through Northern Israel, where the deep caverns and steep ravines near the border with Lebanon speak of both geological uplift and ongoing border tensions. Knowledge of the terrain here goes hand in hand with knowledge of geopolitical shifts, the dates of attacks and counterattacks, and the names of the dead and missing. This is also true in the Golan Heights, where Hofshi performed part of her mandatory military service. While stationed there, she became fascinated by the topography of this unusual volcanic plateau; its black basalt rocks differ from the limestone and composite rocks seen elsewhere in the country. ⁶ Near the border with Syria, we stopped to look at terrain that looked very much like the rubble and ruins depicted in *Uprise* or the new woodcut panels in *Convergence*. We beheld a sun-

⁶ Hofshi has been delighted to explore other volcanic sites such as the Giant's Causeway, an area of hexagonal basalt columns on the northern coast of Ireland and volcanic landscapes in Iceland. Such sites inspired works such as *Pilasters*, and *Soar*, which emphasize geological and natural forces that dwarf human endeavors.

bleached hillside covered with angular black rocks; large boulders, barbed wire, and ruined houses loomed in the foreground—remnants of 1973 Arab-Israeli War and its aftermath. Signs warn travelers not to walk beyond the road, because of land mines. Inviting hillsides and striking rock formations beckon, but one cannot not enter.

Works such as *Reclaim*, a 9-foot-wide drawing on paper, recapitulate the problematic relationship to the land we faced at the Golan minefield. Hofshi's illusionistic draftsmanship invites us on a visual journey, but her insistent textures and divisions remind us that we are excluded or separated from the worlds she depicts. In *Reclaim*, Hofshi portrays a man striding across the landscape of ruined girders and strewn cinderblocks toward an unknown destination to the right. Like the man, we cannot rest within the picture; instead our gaze must keep moving restlessly across broken habitations and divided terrain. Hofshi does not dramatize what caused this scene to take place; instead, she provides a more universal image of displacement, urgency, and determined reaction.

Hofshi's newest work, *Convergence*, further elaborates such concerns and strategies while placing her artistic vocabulary in a new syntax. Transforming the List Gallery's 20-foot-square inner room into a type of black box or tableaux, she theatrically arranges and lights diverse images and media. Hofshi's installation explores the dynamic relationship between nature, human intervention, and changing perspectives. At the entrance to the room, Hofshi positions a pine observation deck with a wooden railing; the structure allows a limited number of viewers to enter only a foot or two into the darkened space, ensuring a more direct and intimate experience. Whereas works such as *Reclaim* and *Upon this Bank and Shoal of Time* portray figures attempting to navigate a troubled environment, *Convergence* places us directly in the position of the protagonist, who seeks resolution.

In front of the viewing deck, Hofshi suspends four woodcut prints depicting an avalanche of rubble. The two higher panels tilt sharply skyward; the lower ones angle toward the deck, directing the image of cascading rock toward our lookout point and 4

rectangular vessels directly in front of us. These black vessels, which are approximately the size and shape of her wood matrices, are filled with oil that appears as dark and viscous as printer's ink. In one rear corner of the room, she positions vertical poles supporting the panels from which the suspended woodcuts were printed. In the other far corner, such matrices lie horizontally, as if awaiting further interpretation.

Using wood, paper, and ink—the language of solid and liquid, darkness and light—Hofshi evokes essential elements of nature and art. She dramatizes the precarious balance of destructive and creative forces, chaos and order. Her working diagram and rendering of the installation has less to do with representing a particular topography than prompting conversations between materials and their morphology—evidence and imagination. *Convergence* challenges us to reconcile disparate elements and perspectives. Embracing such shifting images, materials, and orientations, viewers may well discover unexpected insights and more expansive viewpoints. Although Hofshi explores the psychological realities of a world in which humanity's survival appears precarious, her ever-changing surfaces, indefatigable creativity, and elastic re-configurations provide a model of openness and resilience.