

FROM IMAGES TO PICTURES

OPEN THE VOID

Zohar Fraiman interviewed
by Esther Niebel

Women can be seen in almost all of your paintings. Those men who appear do so in the role of an opponent or adversary. Do your paintings address your own experiences or rather the role of women in general?

It is true that more women appear in my paintings than men. Nevertheless, my work is less concerned with the role of (Jewish) women in society than with separation, enfolding and with the resulting distinctions within and between groups. My narrative perspective is of course female and my world experience that of a woman.

Coming from a Jewish Orthodox background and being raised in a society which separated men and woman in many areas of life has however also had an immense influence on my work. Being a woman myself, certain memories trigger questions about the place that I grew up in and the expected roles of woman in that society. Within many of my paintings there is a strong connection to my own upbringing, even if it isn't directly autobiographical: I don't walk around at home with a cloak pulled over me, nor have I ever had a conversation with the devil.



What role do your background and Jewish tradition play in your work?

Although I have not lived in a settlement for many years and no longer hold Jewish Orthodox beliefs, my background will always be part of my identity. I grew up absorbed in observant Judaism. Many of the motifs which I use in my work originally come from Jewish rituals, even if these motifs might remain hidden if one is not familiar with Judaism. I enjoy creating images that are inspired by the great Renaissance painters, so there is a Catholic influence on my work; photographs and films from artists such as Shirin Neshat, so she is a Muslim influence; and also moments from my childhood memories, so from Judaism. One could say that my Jewish background has created much inspiration for me to look at religions and rituals from other cultures.

Your paintings are laced with themes which are open to interpretation: non-conformity, loneliness and sexuality are juxtaposed with religious symbols and scenes from Jewish ceremonies. You have even dedicated an entire series to the Dybbuk, a Jewish folklore story. Embedded in a traditional tale, this series is also concerned with sexuality, the social pres-



Scene from the film *Dybbuk*, 1937

point of the story. My fascination with a dark, horror-like side to the tale and the idea that the bride was possessed took over. I saw a possessed woman attempting to elude her destiny, who had chosen possession as her way out. Whether this figure is a man or a woman doesn't make a difference, what I find significant is her need to flee. The woman in the *Dybbuk* "submits" to possession in order to escape.

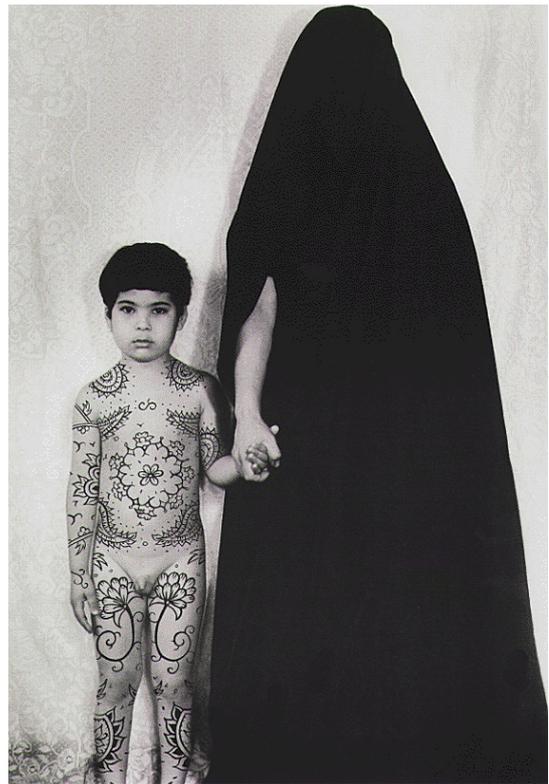
Ever since, I have been researching and interested in many other possession stories. There are quite a few parallels between different stories that have the element of possession in them. Take Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, for example. Of course it is a story about a man afraid of heights, but I actually see it as a narrative on possession. All of the main characters in the film are possessed by something. One can ask oneself why they are possessed: perhaps their realities lack what they really desire and they can only attain their desires through madness. Submitting themselves to their own fantasies gets them further than the monotony of daily life can.

Despite the figurative nature of your painting, the depiction often remains vague: hard outlines and rendered details are seldom to be found in your work. Your paintings are airy with a fresco touch and the colours you use are chalky and muted. People and shapes tend to dissolve into space, at the intersection between existence and non-existence. Is there a formal analogy for this substantial and thematic approach?

The description that the figures and shapes in my work are at the intersection between existence and non-existence is quite accurate. It encapsulates that which fascinates me in painting and that which is also echoed in reality. What is really there, and what am I imagining? What is reality versus fantasy? Without fantasy, there is no painting. Visual ideas develop from inspiration and imagination and out of necessity to create something which has not yet attained a reality. Fantasies therefore become reality through creating a painting. In this sense, I intentionally leave room for

sure to live a conformist life and ultimately with breaking away from this pressure to conform. In the story of the *Dybbuk*, the protagonist escapes her wedding through becoming possessed by a spirit, whom she had fallen in love with. The protagonist flees into another reality and, from a non-spiritual point of view, into insanity. **Why do you use this narrative background for your paintings?**

Some years ago I re-encountered the Jewish folklore tale of the *Dybbuk*. In the story, a young woman is possessed by a spirit on her wedding day. There are certain morals and ideals that the original story tries to impart, but after having considered the tale again for myself, I came up with my own insight into the



Shirin Neshat, from the series *Women of Allah*

the eye of the viewer in my painting. Air, atmosphere and powder make room for the observer to fill in the space that he sees. Were I to paint every little detail, I would leave less space for the viewer to imagine and think for himself.

You have been living in Berlin for the last seven years and this year (2016) will be the third time you exhibit in Leipzig, a city with a strong tradition in figurative painting. One refers to the Leipziger School, foremost in terms of formal criteria, though if there is common feature of the Leipziger tradition, it is the explicit non-sociopolitical motifs of its artists. In this aspect your painting is noticeably different to the Leipziger painting style. Formal differences also exist, however, for example in relation to the level of formulation in your paintings. Where are the similarities and where are the differences in your opinion?



Awfully Deep / 100 x 120 cm / oil on canvas / 2015

I believe that intriguing topics enable me to develop within my process. I strive for more in my work than painting for paintings sake, so motifs are very important to me. I want to communicate something with my work. The fact that this is so important to me is definitely linked to my biographic background. All that I can say about my painting style is that I consider myself exclusively to be a painter. I love painting and when I see a good painting exhibition, I am deeply moved. It is evident that my way of painting is different from the Leipzig painting tradition, but I can't exactly say how. There is figurative painting that stems from photography, there is painting that is directly influenced by nature and there is painting which is somewhere between abstraction and figurativeness. I would say that my painting brings a little from each of these styles together. In this context, it is

perhaps important to emphasise that I start from something internal to which I then give form and not the other way round. It can therefore be no surprise that the early Renaissance painters which have had a strong formal influence on my work, such as Giotto, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca and Fra Angelico have almost exclusively worked with religious themes.

In the exhibition ENTER THE VOID with Elena Kozlova, you show work from the series In-fold-Enfold. The cloaked appearance of the figures endows them with a silhouette-like nature. One thinks that they are woman, but the figures are in fact men who carry a Talit to prayers. Does it make a difference for you who is under the prayer shawl?



Yield / 60 x 50 cm / oil on canvas / 2015



Photo by Zohar Fraiman for Talit series

It is not important to me whether or not the observer knows where the series In-fold-Enfold originates from or who is underneath the cloak; the visual impact of the paintings should be the most important aspect of this work. When one seeks more answers as to what the paintings might reveal, these can easily be discovered and uncovered. The motifs for the series are taken from the Jewish prayer shawl, the Talit, as well as from rituals which are performed with a prayer shawl. All the same, it is a conscious decision of mine that these cloaked figures have other visual associations, such as ghosts, brides, covered women and men from other religious rituals such as the Chador and the Burka in Islam or the cloaked people in the Semana Santa procession. All of these associations are often mentioned when observing my paintings and have also been visual material for the making of these series. The cloaked figure is not a new image and the question of what is concealed beneath the cloak remains fascinating, especially since we are eternally unable to reveal what is really hidden underneath.