

Unicorn, The Death of Doubling

Gil Shachar's work

Nurit David

For we are just the leaf and just the skin.

But that great death which each one has within,

that is the fruit around which all revolves.

(Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of Hours*, [translation: J. B. Leishman])

I have often likened painting to a projection of the world on the back of the forehead. The forehead's square determines its shape and boundaries; it is a creation of our consciousness, mastered by its scope; ultimately, it is the reflection of the world therein. It endeavors to liberate itself from the world, to be free and independent, but finds itself trapped within the square, as within a mirror. That which wishes to break free of existence finds itself trapped in non-existence.

I started with painting because it seems to me that Gil Shachar's sculptures maintain intricate relations with painting, due to different modes of existence. His sculptures look like images that have donned three-dimensionality and walked out of the painting, leaving the background behind. Thus they appear very lonely, withdrawn, delicate and vulnerable, soft-skinned, context-less; they are monolithic units which maintain no interrelations. At times, the memory of the flat square source is still imprinted in their form; their surface is generally painted, too; yet these are images that have detached themselves from the mirror, moving toward (a possibly dangerous) existence in the realm of the real. Absurdly, the reinforcement of existence brings them in contact with death, which is present in various forms in all the works.

In Rilke's poem about the unicorn, in *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, "the animal that never was" is born out of the love showered thereupon. Love for the way it walks and the way it stands, its neck and its soft gaze. The love leaves it enough space for its head to rise up. It is nourished not with grain, but rather with the mere possibility of being. And this

possibility gives the creature so much power, that from its forehead grows a horn. One horn. Gil Shachar's sculptures seem to me like that one single horn growing from the square forehead, and this ability to grow may be perhaps attributed to love.

The striped shirt is one of the sculptures closest to painting. It is hung on a wall, attached to it by the shoulders to render a kind of square, and it is painted in many colors. In the Even Shushan (Hebrew) Dictionary, *ktonet pasim* is defined as: "A shirt or robe made of colorful stripes". Thus we come to Joseph, whose father loved him more than any of his other sons, "and he made him a robe [*ktonet pasim* in the Hebrew original] of many colors" (*Genesis 37, 3*). This love almost cost him his life, and the robe, which is its symbol, reaches his father dipped in blood, after his brothers sold him to the Ishmaelites. The beloved son who is destined to die recurs explicitly in several works.

Turning the back on painting (one of the works is a cast of a screen-covered painting) leads to a denial of seeing - all of Gil Shachar's figures have their eyes closed. This cannot be solely attributed to the process of casting which requires the model to keep his/her eyes closed. In an earlier work, the face of Gil's sister, Yael, appears in a photograph above a container of black pigment, and the eyes there were already closed. The mistrust of the sense of sight is linked to a tendency to avoid illusion, reflection, mirrors. It expresses a desire to escape a Narcissistic doubling; to resist the charm of the mirror image. Looking at the sculpture, the model's gaze is not returned; there is no game of reflections. The sculpture closes its eyes, shuts itself away, as though insisting upon sensing existence from within. Unlike the prevailing tendency of twentieth century art to deconstruct the figure and make it open onto the space - such a figure wishes to contain the universe within itself; it is a mirror of the world; a megalomaniac growth whose origin can only exist in the consciousness - as opposed to this tendency, Gil Shachar's figures or images diminish themselves; they are restricted to the body. In many of the works the body is packed in as tight as possible, reducing its contact points with its surrounding - the rolled up carpet, the rolled sleeping bag, the closed cardboard box, the self-embracing torso, the torso covering its nakedness with its hands. The early image of polyester-covered belts may be related to this need to condense the body.

In some of the works, the face is entirely covered. The face is what's presented to others; it purports to be a window to the soul and body. The double-backed portrait

expresses a rejection of the notion of facade - it is as though inverted, preserved as an inner asset. There is a refusal to show and to be seen; to be robbed of one's face. (This sculpture may be perceived as undermining the most basic concept of painting, but at the same time it brings to mind *Trompe L'oeil* paintings, where the back of the canvas and the frame on which it is stretched are painted, rendering an object with a double back side. In other words, the sculpture is a critique of painting which painting itself often voices).

In an essay about the 16th century painter Arcimboldo, Massimo Cacciari referring to the former's portraits which are made up of fruit, flowers, various objects, and animals, maintains that this is a statement asserting that the face is a "myriad of others". It is impossible to know it through itself, but only, always, in relation to something else, by naming. Only Divinity is capable of knowing a thing through itself. "Man," he says, "is the creature who turns all to metaphor. "The name is always given through something other than the thing itself; no face can ever have a proper name; the discourse of naming is always performed by means of differences and relationships. (Massimo Cacciari, *Animarum Venator, The Arcimboldo Effect*, Thames & Hudson, 1987). Gil Shachar's work refuses to exchange the face for a name; it abhors any and all substitutes. The desire is to keep the organs within the body, to press them close together, so as to avoid any gap or distance, so that no metaphor can sneak in, thus the body's unity, its oneness with itself, will remain intact. It is an attempt to stay out of culture's substitution game; to maintain an unmediated relationship with the body. (In Andre de Toth's film, *House of Wax* from 1953, the body and the external appearance are unified in a macabre literal extremism when underneath the wax figures there are real corpses).

In a fruit-encircled portrait reminiscent of Arcimboldo, Gil Shachar preserves the integrity of the face, his own face; with the carrot stuck in its mouth, the context here is erotic (auto-erotic) rather than linguistic. The words of Joseph's brothers upon identifying his striped shirt (*ktonet pasim*) from a distance may be applied to this self-portrait, which is close-eyed like all the rest: "Behold this dreamer cometh" (*Genesis* 37, 19).

The significance of the body's boundaries leads to a recurring preoccupation with skin, with membranes, with covers, as in the cast balloons, the leaves, the shirts, the jackets, the quilt, and the carpets. At the same time, these flat objects take us back to painting.

The works keep returning to the link with painting as a home port, in order to leave it again. They say something about the fact that painting is unsatisfactory, that it is a substitute of sorts. Perhaps painting is a place of unsatisfactory, insufficient love, and the artist, by embracing, caressing and creating a skin prepares, for his images, a sufficient space in which to rise up, raise their heads, grow a single horn.

Rilke's poem ends with the one-horned creature drawing near to a virgin holding a mirror in her hand, thus reflected in both. The poem ends with reflection, with a return to non-existence, just as it started. Likewise, Gil Shachar constantly wavers back and forth, to and fro painting, fluctuating between the flat and the three-dimensional, the frontal and the physical, between existence and non-existence, between the one and the doubled; yet his sculptures have taken a crucial step away from painting, away from the reflection, and they now exist as single horns, unified with their inner being, as in another poem by Rilke (*The Book of Hours*): "and one rejecting all relation / is now unspeakably alone. / He'll have to learn from things more clearly, / [...] / He must re-learn, through constant trying, / to fall and rest in heaviness."

Life devoid of doubling, life of heaviness and silence, such a simple physicality - brings us closer to death. Painting does not exist, nor is it dead. Gil Shachar's sculptures taste existence, thus they are always on the brink of death. He who has experienced love and thus raised his head up high - his head is threatened??. Perhaps only on the verge of death can one attain an unmediated existence; it is a moment where one forgets the name or merges therewith. Death appears in the sculptures like an inevitable fate, and at the same time, as a long awaited wholeness.

Since throughout the work the relation with painting, with that flat crust which is a mere reflection, is maintained - the body oscillates between a desire for an exclusive self-possession and its awareness of its existence for others through its surface. This awareness shows itself explicitly in the female torso which hides its nudity, or in the torso turning its back, embracing itself. Both sculptures deal with nudity, shame and modesty. The cast fig leaf can also be comprehended in this context. In Freud's essay "The Theme of the Three Caskets" which deals with an issue related to ours, namely choosing the beloved daughter, one out of three, Freud notes that the choice always falls on the quiet, withdrawn, modest daughter. He maintains that when appearing in dreams, these qualities (to which he adds paleness) are common images of death. Thus,

the beloved is identified with death. In 2 *Samuel*, in the story of Tamar's rape, a striped robe (*ktonet pasim*) is mentioned in the context of virginity: "And she had a garment of diverse colors (*ktonet pasim*) upon her; for with such robes were the king's daughters that were virgins apparelled"(2 *Samuel* 13, 18) . Freud associates the beloved daughter with the goddess of death, who is also the goddess of destiny, a Fate who was characterized by weaving and spinning; perhaps the stripes, which are the simplest and most immediate expression of weaving, both in the shirts and in the cast and colored carpets, can be attributed to a sealed destiny, a predetermined fate. At the end of his essay, Freud maintains that Old King Lear's choice of Cordelia, who is death, is a willing acceptance of a necessity. By accepting the decree of fate, Gil Shachar's figures seem to bring death closer, to contain it.

In two of the sculptures, death is explicitly present (the same applies to the gun cast from 1993). In one, a soldier stabbed in the back; in the other, a person sentenced to death, his face is covered with a sack. In the first, the beloved son substitutes the striped shirt for army uniform. In the Brothers Grimm tale, "Death Shirt", God takes the beautiful amiable son of a mother who loved him more than anything else in the world. The mother cries day and night, and the dead son starts appearing at night in places where he previously used to play. When the mother keeps crying, the child appears wearing the white death shirt and a garland on his head, telling her that her crying wets his shirt, and therefore he cannot fall asleep in his coffin. When the mother finally stops crying, the child reappears with a candle in his hand, telling her that now that his shirt is drying, he will soon be able to rest in peace in his grave. The bond with the mother is embodied in the shirt. When the mother cries, the shirt gets wet and sticks to the son's body, thus he cannot rest in peace. She refuses to let go of him, flooding him with her tears. The emergence from (the womb's) water is birth; the fact that it is linked here with death indicates the extent to which these two are interwoven.

I would like to juxtapose this story with the myth of Narcissus, as it appears in Greek mythology. The beautiful Narcissus, who was the son of a river (Cephisus), coldly avoids his many suitors, among them the nymph Echo. He prefers solitude. While wandering one day, he stops to rest by a fountain pool; he leans toward the water and falls in love with his reflected image. Stretching his hands toward the water, he realizes it is himself looking back at him. Unable to part with the face's charm, unable to stop looking at it, he

eventually dies of longing and weakness, becoming the flower which was named after him. Echo's fate was not much better. She pined away until only her echoing voice remained.

These two stories refer to two different, and perhaps dangerous, aspects of water. One, related to the mother, concerns contact with water and the inherent danger of flooding; the other, related to the father (the river), concerns seeing and the inherent danger of falling in love with your own reflection. In both cases, the development of a separate personality is threatened. It seems to me that the central issue in Gil Shachar's work is the awareness of these traps.

During the work process, a wet shapeless material is attached to the surface of the object, or to the skin of the human model. This moisture allows the material to take on a form; but in order to separate itself from the model and become a body in and of itself, the material must dry and harden. The choice of casting as an almost exclusive work process allows a repeated separation or detachment precisely in view of the clinging.

The striped shirt is an identification mark signifying singularity, therefore it is also a target for fate's arrows. Putting on the uniform is an attempt to mislead it; a diversion tactic. Only that it is a tragic mistake: In the Israeli political reality, it is precisely the wearing of an army uniform that attracts fire; at the same time, the substitution of the striped shirt for an army uniform links to the image of the other, separate man. Separation embeds death, as in the Brothers Grimm tale. Two additional images drawn from military life are the army jacket which seems to have lost the body to which it belonged, and it is now hung orphaned, and the sleeping bag, which marks the death of every waking day.

The sculpture of the jacket hung with the lining facing the viewer relates the secret of the intricate relations between the uniform and the striped shirt. The unique thing possessed by the soldier, which has to be concealed within, is revealed here. It is wealth which is reserved to its owner only, and thus must be protected. Painting, with its ostentatious frontality, is keen to exhibit and expose this inner grandeur, thus leaving itself open to suspicion.

The internalization of the other man, the stranger wearing a uniform, perhaps allows consent to Echo's courting, through the sense of hearing (In one of the sculptures, a woman's hands are covering the man's eyes). In all the cast figures, the ears are always uncovered; against the background of the closed eyes they seem pricked up. This is the only channel of communication of these self-absorbed figures. It does not seem as though they listen in order to have a dialogue, they have no intention of responding, and this may support the hypothesis that they are listening to music. In the cut portrait, where some kind of one-eared animal is created from a cast of the face of Gil's sister, there is a dark stain on the neck, typical of violinists. Another single ear appears in the place of the naval in one of the sculptures, as if it were a new kind of a ventriloquist, who listens from the belly, endeavoring to receive a music transfusion straight into his body.

In Rilke's *The Sonnets to Orpheus* which are dedicated to the mythological musician who nearly managed to save his wife Eurydice from Hades with his music, the ear is like a sacred space where a tall tree springs up and where a girl makes herself a bed. I am reminded of Gil Shachar's exhibit at the Israel Museum, where the corpse of a dried tree was situated, and beneath it, next to it, the cast rolled sleeping bag. The tree and the three striped carpets are the only sculptures that relate to space, emanating an aura like a sacred place. Orpheus is depicted by Rilke as one who erects temples in the inner ear.