

“ TIME RETURNS TO THE SHELL ”

Nurit David

I see creatures whose life-space is the photograph. They breathe through its pores. These are adult creatures, developed, at the height of their maturity. Here there is no budding or wilting, no past and no future (for this reason there is not an inkling of sentiment in the photographs). The maturity of the images is the maturity of the photograph, they bloom in the underwater world of the photograph, inside its stifling membrane (the ivy in the cabinet).

This is a world where there is constant regeneration, and the reproduction goes on by way of self-duplication (the piles of plates, the towers of chairs), and where one limb is equivalent to an entire body, capable of attaining to fullness and wholeness (the feather, the butterfly's wing). A world where nothing has happened or will happen; the photograph here is neutralized of all actuality and points backward, towards its own inner time.

I see images where the gray is the air they breathe, backgrounds which themselves are an isolating gray felt, blocking noises. In the process of printing, after the projection of the image, the negative is taken out of the enlarger and the photographs receive a portion of gray, like dust that has sunk slowly through long seasons. The photograph of the clouds is a kind of explicit demonstration of the gray, airy, weightless food, the manna the photographs are nourished on, a realization, as it were, of the photographic material. Elongated images - to spread out in space at the expense of time, their body is stretched like a great conch, to contain the time, to hush it.

On the one hand - monastic asceticism: dishes, a feather, a single bed. On the other hand - luxury: an ornamented plate from which a rose grows, chairs embellished with carved birds. The cataloguing of a culture of silence. Images do not touch each other, or the edge of the format, to avoid a knock. Thanks to the ornamentation, the lips of the images are soft, slack, extended, split, convoluted beyond what an image needs to announce its existence. These are lips that are incapable of tightening so as to produce syllables. Slack-muscled lips whose verbal, vocal expression has been eliminated because they pass beyond their banks into the sphere of the sense of touch.

A day in a monastery, with all its infinitude, comes to my mind. A day without purpose, which does not end, which is a variation and return on the day before it. The different works, the ritual, the prayer, actualize the time not in the way of a straight and short line passing between two points (sunrise and sunset), but as an ornamentation that repeats itself in various rhythms, which has no beginning and is not hastening to any end.

It may be that the fact that photography as a separate art was and is, for the most part, blocked to painters, originates in the difficulty it has in being reflective, in thinking itself. This, on the background of the diverse uses that painting has made of the medium as a metaphor for the ways in which consciousness darkens the world.

Photography has an innate problem in the sphere of dealing with itself. One of its essential qualities is an abnegation of self, in order to reflect something outside itself. Photography's various attempts to deal with the medium, under the influence of painting, have ignored its lack of body, and the result has been that instead of reflecting a reality, photography now reflected a painting, and this "translation" of painterly gestures into photography produced a feeling that the material has been missed out on. There remained the difficulty of seeing the photograph. Its existence was expressed in the fine transparent membrane (more two-dimensional than any two-dimensionality painting is capable of) which is prepared to stifle to death whatever is "beneath" it. At this stage one might sum up and say that photography is what brings to our knowledge the perishability of things. This perishing happens in a flash, with the speed of a "click" (on the photographic film what is registered is a negative of the reality). The speed (a flash) and the fine membrane are two sides of the coin of the photograph's non-existence (its negating nature).

If it were possible to open a space in this two-dimensionality, to thicken it, to prolong the duration of its becoming, and then to go on and work inside it, it would be possible to conduct relations with what is not, to open the nothing into a work space. If it were possible to get to know the photograph, it could serve as a perfect metaphor for life from the other side, eternal life.

Shosh Kormosh's photographs appear to me as an exceptional attempt to work with and within the absent essence of the photograph. In the work-process, she photographs images, mostly from magazines or books (a few of them, like the feather or the butterfly wing, directly from life); she prints the image in a small format, on which she works, making slight corrections with acrylic colors and retouching materials. The corrections referred to are in the covering of the background, in the concealing or adding of details, and the painting of shadows. In several cases the image is cut out and doubled. The small photograph is photographed again and printed on the large, final, format.

The result is meant to look, at first sight, like a possible reality, as though one could rely upon it factually, and in this sense the photographs remain connected with photography's documentary function. They bring to mind the work-room of an amateur scientist, a collector of butterflies or ancient items. An important point about Shosh Kormosh's work is her submissiveness to the basic characteristics of photography: there is no attempt to bypass or ignore any one of its qualities, and it is only thanks to this that she remains in constant contact with the photograph as a phenomenon, and does not turn to what is seen through it. Of course it is important not to forget that photographs, by their nature "... are signs which do not *take*, which turn as milk does".¹ Within this paradox, Shosh Kormosh advances with cautious and calculated steps: on the one side is the danger of losing the photograph through absolute adhesion to reality, and on the other side the danger of losing the photograph by distanciation from reality. One could say that the minor corrections she performs give the reality something of a jolt. There are no drastic or anecdotal changes, and they are mostly absorbed back into an almost possible picture of reality. She works on the photograph, accumulates it in time, distances it from the instant flash of its birth, thickens it, but after all this she sends it out to be once more registered in reality, that is, to take its place as a photograph.

What is achieved in this process is the severance of the immediate and direct connection between the photograph and its source in reality, a connection that is responsible for the random quality of photography, which is what makes it difficult for it to produce meaning, to form itself as a sign. The randomness stems from the fact that a photograph is the outcome of a single moment in time. Treatment of the photograph opens it up to a long duration, and since it ostensibly retains its documentary function, its quality of freezing remains, and thus a stopping of time ensues, and we pass to a place that is beyond time (this is something that cannot happen in a painting where as we look, we reconstruct the duration of the artist's work, which is what gives it its vitality). In the traditional photograph, the world passes for a fleeting instant through the "frame". What freezes is that moment torn out of the stream of occurrences which continues its streaming. In Shosh Kormosh's photographs the world seen through the photograph is frozen just like the photograph itself, and they form a compound with each other. The membrane does not come to negate a living reality; it negates what has been negated anyway. From this double negation the photograph wins a spark of self-consciousness.

If a photograph is "the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency..",² then in Shosh Kormosh's works there is an attempt to separate these two characteristics of the photograph, which seem to be bound together - the particularity and the contingency. She makes use of the photograph to arrive at the maximum of detail possible: she chooses this particular object, with all its unique details. The images have no abstract aspect, they are not archetypes. The use of luxury items, of ornament, enhances the status of the images as particulars. The photograph, by its nature, presents things as they are, takes them from reality. Nothing is more natural than to cut out photographed images - something that is difficult to do with a painting, which is a medium of relations, of a co-operative life within a frame. Technically, in no painting will an object have a sharp and clear contour as it can have in a photograph, which allows it to be taken out of its surroundings.

Shosh Kormosh aspires to rescue this distinctive particular from any contingent relations, and to impose the volume of its body onto the entire space (hence the symmetry, the isolated background, the immense enlargement, the atmosphere of asceticism). The shadow of an object is perceived as belonging to it, and not as something dependent on relations with the surroundings. Objects carry their fixed shadows with them like a kind of inner quality of their own.

Shosh Kormosh seeks a status of eternal life not for abstract truths, for creatures of consciousness, but for the broken reed of private existence.

The title is from a poem by Paul Celan, "Corona", in *Poems of Paul Celan*,
tr. Michael Hamburger, Anvil Press, London, 1958.

1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*,
tr. Richard Howard, Hill & Wang, New York, 1981, p. 6.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 4.