



Pumpkin Fields, Rafts, and Books: On Sharon Poliakine's New Works

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"However much my soul may be descended from the Romantics, I can find no peace of mind except in reading classical authors," Fernando Pessoa writes in **The Book of Disquiet**. "The very sparseness by which their clarity is expressed comforts me in some strange way. From them I get a joyful sense of expansive life that contemplates large open spaces without actually travelling through them. Even the pagan gods take a rest from the unknown."¹

Sharon Poliakine – a romantic portrayer of cyclamens, a painter of uncultivated

fields and large open spaces, a printmaker specializing in the traditional techniques of etching and aquatint – is repeatedly drawn to classical painters. Like Pessoa, she is attracted to their clarity of expression, and finds solace in their total control of line, rhythm and form. Raphael's early-16th-century painting **The School of Athens** – which depicts the great Greek philosophers, mathematicians and astronomers gathered around Plato and Aristotle in the Athenian agora, immersed in conversation and study – is central to her most recent group of works. In Poliakine's hands, Raphael's lucid, linear painting is transformed into a tangle of gestural, tension-filled lines, which are thrust down at the heart of an uncultivated field overlooking a forest of pumpkins: a sculptural installation composed of 15 pumpkins cast in metallic aluminum, and elevated about one meter above ground on a series of wooden columns.



Raphael, **The School of Athens**, 1510-11, fresco, Stanze di Raffaello, Vatican Palace, Rome
רפאל, **אסכולת אתונה**, 1510-11, ציור-קיר באולמות רפאל, ארמון הוותיקן, רומא

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Untitled, 2008, ink on paper, 37.5x56.5, private collection (detail)

ללא כותרת, 2008, דיו על נייר, 37.5x56.5, אוסף פרטי (פרט)

What connects the cyclamens that have appeared in many of Poliakine's paintings and drawings since 1997, and whose pale pink flowers and delicate leaves thrive in rocky crevices, to the heavy, clumsy pumpkins basking in the sun? And how does the poetics of the cyclamen, which functions in Poliakine's works as an emblem of drawing, relate to the heavy, formless mass of the pumpkin, which is far removed from any gestural drama?

The tension between line and patches of color, between the cyclamen and the pumpkin, runs through Poliakine's works – traversing a rustic terrain characterized by a rich, muddy materiality as dense as an uncultivated field, and intersecting with a sphere of cultivated knowledge and sophistication, culture and history. Sharon Poliakine fuses together these different substances, weaving them into a single continuum. Her pumpkins, whose clown-like orange color has been transformed into metallic silver, attract additional objects, most of which are related to the physical act of painting: brushes, empty paint tubes, bowls filled with leftover paint, pencils, books, twigs and string – remains of the painting process that have been transformed into vestiges; balanced on flat wooden constructions atop the uneven surface of the pumpkins, these odds and ends suddenly come to resemble a series of rafts topped by fluttering sails. Another art historical specter slowly emerges into memory: Théodore Gericault's **Raft of the Medusa** (1819).

The uncultivated appearance of Poliakine's field is thus somewhat deceptive, for it gives rise to a crop of pumpkins that sprout knowledge, capsules containing fragments of the history of painting, tiny rafts that carry not only the memory of art, but also emblems of artmaking. The wooden columns on which these pumpkins rest are similarly marked by the painting process, covered with stains of paint like an artist's work smock. They too sprout various extensions that branch out sideways, supporting an additional vestige of the painting process: a bowl containing coagulated paint and a brush whose hairs have long dried out. Once again, Poliakine has created a labyrinth of lines that grow increasingly tangled, yet whose progression is punctured by a series of pauses created by the self-contained mass of each pumpkin. Like an awkward reincarnation of Brancusi's sleeping muse, whose dreams are similarly withheld from us, each pumpkin rests on its pedestal, with a book lying below it like a pillow for the sleeper. The personification of Liberty from Delacroix's painting is emblazoned on the cover of one of these books, while the cover of another is stamped with the word LIBRI, which alludes both to books and to liberty and freedom. Brancusi thus joins the ghosts of the old masters wandering among Poliakine's works: set atop a column, the sculptural image of a pumpkin resting on a book subtly alludes to Brancusi's horizontal accumulation of elements.

Ricardo Reis, one of Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms, likened his poems to columns, and himself to one who "sits with assurance on the steady column." And then:

I do not fear the endless future flow
Of time and of oblivion;
For when the mind is steady, it contemplates within itself
The reflections of the world and is created by them
Each time again, while as for Art,
It's by the world, not by the mind, engendered.
And so the external moment stamps its being
On that slate and lasts forever.²

Sharon Poliakine vacillates between the world and the mind, asking where, in between them, is the locus of artistic creation.

Fields

The painting **Ignorant Field** (2010), for which the current exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art is named, alludes to the Romantic allure of a pristine natural world, a rough and rugged terrain; at the same time, the uncultivated character of this terrain invokes the ethos of work: this is a field that calls for laborers with calloused hands to bend over the earth; a field whose cultivation involves plowing with difficulty through the muddy ground, clearing away rocks, pulling out weeds, working the land and teaching it to yield generous fruits. As the poet Israel Eliraz wrote in a cycle of poems about the paintings of Avigdor Stematsky: "What have I here at hand / a terrain, low-lying land / which I must make into a fertile plot / a territory."³

Like Claude Monet, who identified the surface of the painting with the surface of his lily pond, so Poliakine presents the surface of the painting as an untouched, virginal plot of land, an open field that will succumb to any form of treatment. The painting **Field I** (2000), in which a reddish-brown expanse stretches out across the canvas, contains no agricultural crops; instead, scattered across the surface are a single white work glove, an empty tube of paint, bits of paper, and rags: traces of the act of painting that have been "planted" in the earth. **Ignorant Field**, which was painted a decade later, is far removed from a pantheistic natural expanse that predates the rise of civilization, and is identified instead with the early capitalist era of the industrial revolution. What appear at first glance to be furrows or trees are in fact rows of long-armed looms, which are situated in the vast space of an 18th-century textile factory. This diptych is based on an etching published in a French book about the industrial revolution, in which dozens of workers are seen bent over their looms. Poliakine transformed this early industrial landscape, which is also related to the history of printmaking, into a field that recedes into the perspectival depth of the factory space.

Within the double space of this composition, the artist painted two pumpkins that appear as swollen black silhouettes with a curlicue outline – creating an illusory state in which technology folds in on agriculture, and the space of the factory fuses with that of the field. The only absent element is the figure of the proletarian worker; it is as if he were completely assimilated into the figure of the painter "working" the surface of the painting with great effort, exerting himself like a farmer tending to his pumpkins. In this work, Poliakine fuses the plow, the loom and the printing press into a single image that bespeaks her preference for low-tech processes – a preference that is similarly revealed by the tools she constructs herself in order to "plow" the surface of the painting. On Poliakine's autarkic farm, even the work tools are handmade in accordance with the dictates of painting: using a "harrow" composed of 70 paintbrushes, each dipped into a different color, she paints "striped fields" that could easily be defined as "abstract" were they not shaped by such a specific work tool and concrete form of action.

In August 1888, Vincent Van Gogh painted himself on his way to the fields, with his work tools peering out of his backpack and his head topped by a yellow straw hat; **The Painter on His Way to Work** depicts Van Gogh setting out alone for a day's work, with nothing but his own dark shadow for company. In a letter to his brother Theo, which included a drawing of a farmer pulling a harrow through a large field, Van Gogh wrote of the similarity he saw between agricultural work and painting: "One must undertake it [the work of painting] with confidence, with a certain assurance that one is doing a reasonable thing, like the farmer drives his plough, or like our friend in the scratch below, who is harrowing, and even drags the harrow himself. If one hasn't a horse, one is one's own horse – many people do so here."⁴ Van Gogh, whose art reveals his great sensitivity both towards wide-open fields and towards the working and peasant classes (see his 1884 **Weaver** or his 1888 **Sower**, among other paintings), sought an agricultural metaphor in order to express his peasant-like commitment to the work of painting. The likening of the painting to a field did not appear strange to one who had experienced the act of painting as a continuous struggle, akin to plowing one's way through an uncultivated terrain whose laws and secrets he was constrained to learn on his own. "If you hear a voice within you say 'you cannot paint,' then by all means paint, and that voice will be silenced," Van Gogh added in the same letter to his brother. His self-belittlement is not directed at himself as a person, but rather at "painting" and at himself as a "painter": only the act of painting is capable of cultivating the painter within.

One may well liken Sharon Poliakine, dragging the "harrow" she built out of paintbrushes, to the farmer in Van Gogh's drawing. Like him, she chooses to be "her own horse," learning the tricks of the trade by engaging in a grueling work process. And her models are none other than the great masters of Western art – Uccello, Raphael, Rembrandt, Velázquez, Goya, Géricault, Delacroix: "What distinguishes these artists is that the questions they confront are still so relevant today: how to lay the image on the canvas, how to organize the

compositional space. I am interested in how a personal statement can appear unexpectedly within a work created by a painter in the service of the king. This is how I studied painting. These are my teachers."⁵

In the context of her own personal dialogue with these masters, Poliakine studies Raphael's **School of Athens**, for instance, through countless small-scale reproductions of this fresco, which enters her repository of images as an archeological artifact excavated from the history of painting. Raphael's challenging composition, in which more than 50 figures are situated beneath a majestic arch within an architectural structure, is bisected in Poliakine's image: one part of the image quotes the base of the arch and the left supporting column, and includes a drawing of cyclamens; the outline of the entire arch is only alluded to by a series of red marks that dot the drawing. The second part of the image brings together the group of philosophers from Raphael's painting, whose black outlines stand out against a pink ground. Above them extends one of Poliakine's garlands: a drawing of an object composed of tubes tied to a fig branch. Below the group of philosophers is a detail of the ornamental floor pattern from the Renaissance painting. One may describe this as an instance in which different fragments of Raphael's composition meet in Poliakine's field of painting, with which they share nothing but an obsession with line. The linear drawing of the group of philosophers and the drawing of the cyclamens are placed one alongside another, as two instances of a record-breaking ability to combine thousands of lines and hatching marks into a living membrane, a virtuoso feat of drawing that requires the kind of control and precision demanded of a tightrope walker. The allure of the cyclamens, which make a rare appearance here in full bloom, echoes the majesty of the philosophers: beauty coexists with knowledge, art with nature, sophistication with simplicity.

Poliakine's "quotations" thus do not involve copying existing images and planting them into her work in the spirit of 1980s postmodernism; rather, they constitute acts of homage and experiments performed through the use of her primary research tools: line and drawing. The line traced by Poliakine follows the gaze in real time. Rather than creating a dynamic choreography of rich brushstrokes, she chooses to adhere to this line as it makes its way both across the paper and through the history of painting; this is a line that circumscribes areas of light and shade, breaking up into countless hatching marks and necessitating a great degree of concentration and capacity for observation. "Drawing is a means of solving problems," she explains in reference to the instances of imprecision, the areas in which gaps or mistakes are resolved. Her line strives to trace the contours of the image, insistently maintaining the connection between eye and hand, adhering to the paper as it etches various paths and itineraries across it, occasionally circling back to a missed intersection and then moving forward again; this is a line that attempts to reach every corner, to perform every subtle twist and turn, operating like a precise and demanding mechanism. At a certain point, in order to enhance its physical presence, Poliakine developed a special technique:

she squeezes the paint out of a small hole in the corner of a plastic sandwich bag to create three-dimensional, serpentine forms. This technique, which she calls "Nicole" (after the company that manufactures the bags), produces an organic-looking line, which resembles an undulating secretion left behind on the ground by a passing insect. The process of squeezing out the oil paint is much slower than the drawing process; and the resulting lines bespeak the kind of effort Poliakine is interested in – an effort similar to the one exerted while blazing a new trail. At the same time, this process also alludes to the existence of another world, one shaped by the kind of daily tasks that face a mother and housewife. Once again, she draws a connection between a reality centered on manual labor (the work of the printmaker, the mother preparing sandwiches) and the elevated realm of artmaking.

Poliakine operates at a removal from the Israeli tradition of abstraction, which is based on the creation of transparent layers of color that are superimposed one upon another; instead, her large-scale paintings constitute layered fields of images, which may be likened to an accumulation of distinct geological strata. Many of her paintings include diagonal lines of "rain" that fall on the image and blur it, while contributing to the agricultural conceptualization of a saturated "field of painting." Drawing maintains its autonomy against this ground, appearing as a network of clear traces – an additional image that adheres to the surface and maintains its distinct appearance within the growing mound of vestiges.

Autarky

One possible way of approaching Sharon Poliakine's rich and complex oeuvre, before actually turning to decode her images and themes, is to study the internal logic that shapes her work process. In this context, one central principle becomes clear: Poliakine moves along a circular, self-enclosed course, so that the objects that serve as models for her paintings are not borrowed from the outside world: rather, they are eclectic, artificial, three-dimensional "creatures" constructed by the artist herself, and born within the space of the studio.

Every single thing that crosses the threshold separating her studio from the outside (from the "world") undergoes a formal and structural transformation that prepares it for entering the transparent container of the artwork; from this point onwards, it moves in a cyclical manner from sculpture to drawing to painting and back again to sculpture, and then once more from sculpture to print... and yet her paintings, like all of those things that adhere to them, address the world and human reality. At the same time, they also speak of the power of art to instigate change, while relating the physical and material dimension of artmaking to its theoretical underpinnings.

It is difficult to determine where this cycle begins. Let us imagine that it is possible to define the end point of the painting process, whose vestiges include used objects and

various traces: emptied tubes of paint, dry paintbrushes, pencils, bowls for mixing paint, rags, trowels, lids, and so forth. Poliakine does not view these things as unnecessary debris; she simply moves them aside, returning to them at a later stage in order to bind them together and create tangled masses with multiple protrusions, which are not quite sculptures nor really objects: one may think of them as memorials of sorts to the painting process that has just been completed. These things, which are bound together with tightly wound white string, form a knotted mesh of lines and knots, which are later reincarnated in her tangled black ink drawings. They subsequently reappear in her large oil paintings, where their status is revised once again as they join Poliakine's "mounds of images" – layered archeological formations that participate in the production of a private mythology. The monumental oil paintings, in turn, similarly leave behind different traces, which are scattered throughout the studio like the flotsam and jetsam of a sunken ship washed onto the shore; and once again, Poliakine gathers up these bits and pieces, coiling and "knitting" them into bundles.⁶

Her interest in landscapes and vegetation is similarly pursued without venturing outdoors. Instead, she produces the "landscape" herself, in her studio: several heads of broccoli or cauliflower placed on the table, alongside a series of matches arranged at set intervals and held together with string. This is not a simple "still life" designed to support a demonstration of virtuosity while offering a meditative reflection on the world of things; rather, it serves as a model for tangled drawings on paper or on canvas – where it appears as a thick "forest" with a fence running through it, if not as a metaphor for an increasingly convoluted labyrinth... The three-dimensional object is thus recast in two dimensions, and black ink is later replaced by thick oil paint – a series of reincarnations akin to the gradual transformation of a cocoon into a butterfly. Domestic things borrowed from the space of the kitchen (matches, cauliflower and broccoli) are thus relocated into the theatrical space of the studio, where they are viewed from a new perspective; they now represent something that is greater than themselves, something that "remembers" its humble origins while succumbing to the transformative power of art.

From this point of view, the studio functions as a sort of biological lab, which fosters the growth of various life forms and crops in order to sustain its existence: an autarkic farm or productive microcosm, whose every component is designed to serve its needs. This form of self-sustenance, which may be described as "autarkic feudalism," is not merely a function of a pragmatic work process; it is also a product of a certain state of mind and of an underlying insight concerning the act of painting, which involves a regression to a seemingly archaic, simple and even somewhat "wild" stance. The term "autarkic feudalism," in this context, alludes – in addition to the cyclical structure of Poliakine's work process – to the inferior status of the vassals, the peasants "with mud on their hands" whose daily labor is responsible for the growth of the landowner's crops.

Poliakine spent 18 years working as a senior printmaker at the Jerusalem Print Workshop – where, in the words of Osant Zukerman Rechter, she was constantly busy "[...] etching, spreading, wiping plates, wetting papers, printing, raising, turning the aquatint-box handle, rolling the press, etc."⁷ During this period, she provided important assistance to well-known artists attempting to express their ideas through the medium of printmaking, while strengthening her self-declared affiliation with the class of manual laborers, or craftsmen. The art-historical figure she has chosen as her alter-ego is that of a printmaker, based on an anonymous 16th-century etching.⁸ Four-hundred years ago, this printmaker – like Virginia Wolf's Orlando – was a man... yet even the sexual identity of the male printmaker in the original etching appears rather ambiguous; his head is surrounded by a mane of curls, and he "rides" the printing press as if it were a horse. Poliakine transformed him into a female figure as part of her search for "another kind of female identity, that of a woman who may function naturally as a man," representing a form of self-sustaining "gender autarky." Her transition to the "male" practice of oil painting on canvas – a transition that Zukerman Rechter rightly pays significant attention to, describing it as a process of climbing up the ladder of art⁹ – thus took place without her abandoning the worker's ethos. "I have to get up in the morning and go to work, otherwise I will have nothing," she says by way of explaining the sense of discipline that shapes the relationship between the house and the studio. Today she is indeed a "painter" who creates oil paintings on canvas, yet she still thinks of herself as a "proletarian laborer in the service of painting," as the one charged with using all her force to roll the press over the surface of the paper; accordingly, her paintings are suffused with an underlying sense of tension – the tension between the physical action being performed and the painting's spiritual potential. This is the gap in which Sharon Poliakine's artmaking evolves, brewing and multiplying within its own confines, quoting from the history of art, building models and subjecting them to a sustained process of observation.

Still Life

Poliakine's fields tell of a boundless sphere, a vast exterior space; nevertheless, I would like to argue that the genre of still-life painting, which is related to closed internal spaces, occupies a central place in her work, and exceeds her interest in direct observation. Still-life painting is not a goal in itself in Poliakine's oeuvre, where the cultural icon known as "still life" is replaced with a discourse on still life, on objects transformed into vestiges and on painting as a monumental memorial to this very process. The structure of the archeological mound, which constitutes an organizing principle in many of her paintings, and which is even referred to by some of their titles (**Mound of Cyclamens**, 2010), alludes to an archeology of objects and to the

necrophilic sense of suffocation produced by holy relics. Death lies somewhere at the bottom of these mounds, and has its say.

The vestiges of the painting process – and especially the empty tubes of paint and paintbrushes – are transformed into independent entities in Poliakine's paintings. What preoccupies her is not the iconic status of painting itself, but rather the iconic status of its means of production. She points to this status in a simple and direct manner: a hand – her hand – enters the compositional "frame" and touches a pile of tubes and paintbrushes on a table. Every so often, a page from a book of reproductions peers out from under a pile to reveal a fragment of a classical drawing, a winged angel. "The hand returns in these paintings like a surplus element, an addition, perhaps like a seal," Yaara Shechori wrote; "it bursts into

the frame as if to destroy what lies beneath it, yet an additional gaze reveals it to be one of the painting's own bones."¹⁰ The tubes of paint do indeed resemble a pile of bones; or else the matter of painting is likened to an extension of the hand, a continuation of the body. By means of the tautology "here is paint, here is a hand," Poliakine attempts to coax out – out of the hand and out of the pile – the mystery embedded within the artistic statement.



Rain VII, 2010, etching, aquatint and silkscreen, 27.5x20
גשם VII, 2010, תצריב, אקוויטיטה ודהפס משי, 27.5x20

Poliakine dedicated an entire series to the motif of garlands, which may be read as a homage to Moshe Gerhsuni and to his paintings of garlands; her own garlands, however, refuse to conform to the most basic characteristic of such arrangements – that is, their circular form. Instead, she attaches her bundles of objects to a fig branch or asparagus stalk, creating a "circle" that is not round, but rather composed of a number of different and unrelated elements. Poliakine's garlands are full of angular extrusions, as if she had attempted to make the

circle into a square; they are reminiscent in spirit of those created by the photographer Shosh Kormush, who liked combining blooming and withered flowers in a circle of life and death. Yet while Kormush embalmed the plants she photographed, and thus froze them for all of eternity, Poliakine chooses to paint her cyclamens at an intermediate stage – no longer in full bloom, yet not yet desiccated and frozen. Her flowers wither and droop in their domestic pots, forming an avalanche of limp forms that are pulled downwards, while the tense line, which seems to be constantly searching for something, miraculously charges their withered bodies with vitality. As she herself puts it, "There is something powerful about

the way cyclamens bow their heads." Similarly, the "garlands," which combine vegetal and mineral elements, constitute still lifes that have been bundled up, shrouded even, yet which unexpectedly sprout a living branch – a strange growth that is not synchronized with the earth, and which does not seem to offer a real prospect of life.

The violence to which Poliakine subjects the empty, crushed tubes of paint – tying them, handcuffing them, overturning them so that their heads hang down and their legs stick up – renders them palpably human, for this type of cruelty is reserved for human beings. From a compositional point of view, these bundles are reminiscent of the forms and scattered piles of bodies in Goya's **The Disasters of War**. At the same time, they create a dialectic between the idea of painting and the physical act of painting; held together with string, they are attached to the paintings like prosthetic limbs, like a step child or a note affixed to the surface.

A dead bird found at the side of the road has become another recurrent motif in Poliakine's repository of images – appearing repeatedly in her works as a single or double figure, and represented either vertically or horizontally. It has become part of the mound of images, where it appears as a nameless hieroglyph, superimposed on the female printmaker's silhouette, buried under a mound of cyclamens, attached to the tied bundles of objects. A dead bird – its legs gathered under its body, its feathers carefully ordered. Poliakine insisted on drawing it directly from life, competing with the process of rotting and decomposition. Once it was captured on paper, the bird entered the cycle of reincarnation: from drawing to print, from drawing to painting and back again. Poliakine subsequently also painted a lifeless bat, whose death echoes the quiet death of the bird. The artist Tsibi Geva painted birds from the book **Birds of Israel**. Yet Poliakine does not paint local birds, but simply dead birds. The process of drawing them is akin to stroking their feathers, a form of compassion.

Cases and Pianos

Poliakine enhances the perception of her paintings as mounds of vestiges when she transforms them into objects, conflating the surface of the painting with the cover of a case. The title **Empty Case** (2010) plays on the double meaning of the word "case," and suggests that the painting "has no case," no substance underlying the painter's manipulations. The lid of this empty case is painted with a stylized decorative pattern that combines branches, lizards and frogs, and which was borrowed from the cover of an old book about extinct animals. Painted at the center of this painting-cum-case are two golden hinges, which are reminiscent of the metal hinges that held together the books Poliakine created between 1995 and 2000 out of tin sheets. This simple mechanism, which includes no invisible components, may be related to the insistence on ethical transparency that suffuses Poliakine's work, and to the low-tech values she tends to underscore.

Empty Case is an ambiguous painting – both in terms of the contrast between mysterious, dark elegance and a suggestive, animalistic quality, and in terms of the illusion of opening and closing created by the hinge mechanism. Two related paintings are **Industrial Case**, which quotes the image of a 19th century textile factory, and **Piano Case**, which alludes to the world of music and musical education. Taken together, these cases (Pandora's boxes? Sepulchers?) contain various keys for interpreting Poliakine's iconography.

Poliakine grew up in a family of musicians, and played the piano for 11 years. Her paintings of pianos are thus concerned with childhood, and with the experience of "the gap between the perfect place and my place" – a gap that the demanding routine of playing the piano made acutely clear. She paints the piano she played as a child, which appears once in sharp profile and once as an isometric drawing based on a technical drawing made at her request by her father, an architect. In both paintings the piano appears as a black, heavy, opaque mass. Poliakine is fascinated by the invisible connection between this black mass and the intangible music that is supposed to emanate from it – a connection that involves a combination of hard work and a creative spark. The art of piano playing appears, in this context, as a function of exhausting practice; an oppressive regime that involves constant self-discipline, and which may fleetingly give rise to a moment of grace – the grace of music.

The black piano box has been transformed, in Poliakine's painting, into a kind of memorial or rigid, vertical tombstone, which attracts sound just like gesture or action, in Poliakine's experience, organize her intellectual and emotional world: "Black is not just a fact. It is the source of the black mass, which at a certain point rises to the surface." In another painting, the piano's two pedals, which are responsible for amplifying or diminishing the resonance of the sound, float independently in the center of the painting like two tongues reaching out to lick something, or two small hands seeking contact. This scandalous act of freeing the pedals, and enabling them to lead an independent existence, appears as a taunting gesture directed at the black, authoritative, heavy mass.

Poliakine's preoccupation with music is concerned more with the ethics of performance than with the art of music itself. In contrast to the modernist tradition, which underscores the independent values of painting and thus its similarity to music, the most abstract of the arts, Poliakine's art stems from her experience as a piano player, as well as from her parallel experience as a printmaker performing the "scores" of other artists, while continuing to process the complex relationship between execution and idea.

Portrait with a Red Nose

Poliakine's complex body of works includes numerous self-portraits, which feature recurrent attributes: a pointed woolen hat and a red dot placed at the center of the small paintings,

impudently confronting the dead birds, pumpkins and cyclamens. This red dot represents the red nose of a clown – while the pointed hat, which Poliakine wears while working in her studio, adds another clownish element: notwithstanding her concern with weighty issues and the opprobrium of responsibility, self-discipline and grueling practice, Poliakine presents herself as a clown with a bulbous red nose. "Stupidity," Gershuni once remarked, "is a form of existence more justified than wisdom."¹¹ And it seems that Poliakine, who engages with him in a dialogue of cyclamens, agrees with him on this point as well.

In 2008, Poliakine painted a series of self-portraits in which she appears wearing her woolen hat and holding a paintbrush, with only her upper body visible. The reduction of her own figure to the wide format of the compositional space enabled her to call the entire series "Dwarfs" – a title that alludes to Velázquez's portraits of dwarfs. The woolen hat is thus transformed into a dwarf's hat, while the painter, whose sexual identity remains ambiguous in these images, appears to identify with these diminutive figures rather than with Snow White. "These are the cluster bombs of Poliakine's painting," Yeara Shechori wrote, foreseeing the deconstructive power of the group of clowns that would make its way through the weighty paintings created by Poliakine in 2010.

Pair of Clowns (2010) and **Group of Clowns** (2010) – two new works that appear as composites of several different paintings – make no distinction between male and female clowns, following upon the intentional confusion concerning the sexual identity of the male and female printmakers. This confusion is further enhanced by the original Hebrew title of the painting **Anonymous Painter** (2010), which combines a masculine noun and a feminine adjective. The blurring of the distinction between male and female forms also impacts the images that Poliakine alludes to in her work: the printmaker, the farmer, the peasant, the carpenter, the tinsmith... The red dot has been detached from the clown's nose, and now floats freely through the space of the painting; it bespeaks a subversive attitude, a search for the *punctum* capable of overturning the established order of things – including the clear-cut distinctions between femininity and masculinity, knowledge and ignorance.

The image of the artist as a clown is a familiar theme explored by numerous artists, ranging from Watteau and Picasso to Cézanne and Rouault. Yet Poliakine's red dot was created more in the spirit of Duchamp, and represents an act of inversion: this is not an attribute of a melancholic Pierrot or witty Harlequin, but rather of the fool wandering across fields and untrodden paths – his clothes soiled, his hat sloping sideways over his head, walking in the company of birds. It is from this space of freedom, on the edge of the uncultivated field, that Sharon Poliakine casts her gaze upon us, offering an ethical, monumental practice of painting that is at once clownish and indisputably serious.

- 1 Fernando Pessoa, **The Book of Disquiet**, edited and translated by Richard Zenith (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 55
- 2 This poem originally appeared in Portuguese in Ricardo Reis, **Poesia** (Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim, 2000). The translator wishes to thank Uri Attar for providing the original poem in Portuguese, and for his helpful comments.
- 3 This cycle of poems was published in Hebrew in the literary review **Hadarim**, vol. 10 (1993), pp. 123–125.
- 4 Letter dated October 28, 1883; see **The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh**, New York: Bullfinch Press, 2000.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 One of the objects created by Poliakine, which is composed of oil-paint tubes, pencils, paintbrushes, pottery shards, wood and string, is titled **In the Evening I Knit** (2008). One cannot ignore the ironic contrast between the female image of a woman knitting at home and between Poliakine's active studio life, which involves various "masculine" and physical skills. Many of these objects were actually created at home in the evenings ("I'm a mother, and so I'm at home"), and their status is comparable to that of traditional female handicrafts.
- 7 Osnat Zukerman Rechter, "Why Sharon Poliakine Is Not a Print Artist," in **Sharon Poliakine, Selected Works, 1994–2008**, (exh. cat., Tel Aviv: Gordon Gallery, 2008), p. 152.
- 8 This image has appeared in a number of paintings by Poliakine that are not included in the current exhibition, such as **An Image I have Gained Honestly** (2008) and **Rain and Wind** (2008); it has also appeared, in part or in full, in additional paintings. In the group of paintings featured in the current exhibition and in this book, the image appears only as a silhouette, and gradually dissolves and disappears.
- 9 See f.n. 7 above, *ibid.*, pp. 12–14.
- 10 Yaara Shechori, **These Are the Wars of Sharon Poliakine**, text written in conjunction with the exhibition "In Person," Bineth Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2007.
- 11 Moshe Gershuni quoted in Sara Breitberg-Semel, **Gershuni*** (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2010), p. 82, in Hebrew.
- 12 Shechori, see f.n. 10 above.