

Sharon Poliakine: The Corner of Hanevi'im and Shivtei Israel

The project *The Corner of Hanevi'im and Shivtei Israel* was created over the past three months by the artist Sharon Poliakine, who had been invited by the Jerusalem Print Workshop to work on a new grand artistic undertaking, now exhibited throughout the entire lower gallery of the Workshop. It is a historical, emotional, collective, and personal visual ensemble comprising some one hundred new works that combine etching, screenprinting, digital printing, and drawing. Poliakine brings to life a multi-layered and evolutionary exhibition of floating and sinking, duplicated and interrupted images. These images emerged out of the very edifice of the Workshop, out of its history, architecture, geography, and its function as a place where art comes into being.

The works depict a restless portrait of human layers and actions, based on ancient maps - of Biblical Canaan, of the Crusades and medieval Palestine, and of Jerusalem in various periods - alongside images from the history of art and representations of Israel's social-political present. In the hands of Poliakine, a multifaceted artist and a former master printer, printmaking mediates a triple strategy consisting of mapping, impersonation, and archeological-like exploration; Poliakine employs the medium to submerge and evoke images as she selects historical maps, many of them originally created as etchings circulating individually or in books. She endows them with new life and communicates through them questions of time, representation, and truth.

As we enter the lower gallery from the south, we can choose between several possible paths by which to wander through the enormous body of works created by Poliakine. Two intertwined series of works emerge; the first is a black aquatint series (*Untitled*), which indicates her origins as an etching artist whose images evolve out of the metal plates and back into them. The works resemble photograms, ghosts of objects related to the Workshop, to printmaking, to art, and to music as perpetual yet illusive sources of inspiration. They appear as episodes of unsettling flashes that flicker between exposures of events, as if they were their remnants, their traces: etching chisels, paint brushes, hooks for hanging tools at the Workshop, grates protecting small windows in the building, piano hammers and pedals.

The images in the series, like the rest of the works in the exhibition, are recurring motifs that appear in Poliakine's overall work as an artist; in her paintings as well as in her sculptures. Here they surface not as representations of material objects but as self-referential evocations of their own history of appearances in her oeuvre, thus signifying the source as a locus of constant inspirations and variations. Out of these aquatints emerges yet another series, in red, also exhibited in the entrance hall. The artist used the same aquatint etchings, now printed in red, as a matrix for new artistic quests. She screenprinted opaque newspaper-like surfaces on the etchings,

along with diverse new imagery, especially botanic, with gladioli or cyclamens, bundled or fanned out; remnants of landscapes; and remnants of an abstract line. Hence the prints, the black and the red, all join together to create a lyrical dance, varied and repetitive, evolving and motionless, in which tangible and ghost-like representations complement each other.

In the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican and on route to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, resides a spectacular gallery of frescoes: maps of Italy commissioned by Pope Gregory XIII in 1580. The art of mapping hereby appears as a preliminary image, precursory of the later Renaissance expressions in the Sistine Chapel. At the Workshop gallery, Poliakine embraces the art of mapping and dissects it. Following her work, we head north as indicated (though illegibly) by the Hebrew and Arabic etched in the black oval etchings hanging high over one of the arches in the main hall - one of four etchings scattered among the different rooms, signifying the four cardinal directions, calling attention to the Muslim architecture of the building, to its history from the time of its construction in 1865 by the Turgeman family in Ottoman Jerusalem, and to its location in the vicinity of the Old City but just outside its walls, overlooking its conflicted sanctity. While working on the cardinal direction etchings, Poliakine invited one of the Arab workers currently constructing the Workshop building to inscribe the plates in Arabic, adding her Hebrew handwriting to his. Though legible on the original plate, the inscriptions in both languages appear reversed and illegible in the final prints.

On the floor beneath the hexagonal ceiling - the sky - the artist placed a hexagonal mirror set in a low wooden structure, as a kind of sebil (public Muslim fountain) where the entire space, the viewers, and the artworks are reflected and duplicated. The building itself is hence accentuated as if it were self-referring. The blue series *Addiction to Texture* surrounds the installation. It evolved out of small etchings Poliakine created and then scanned and printed as much larger digital works that reveal each line, each etching, each part of the metal and paper's textures. These are blue fields of sanctity, or perhaps they pretend to be such, just like the medium. They comprise overt signs, such as a waving flag, but mostly demonstrate random signs that emerge from within the plates that daze the spectators, who appear to understand their meaning, even if they are not completely able to. Opposite them hangs a giant site-specific drawing installation entitled *The Sum of All Arches* - the sum of the building's arches, apertures, passageways, potential spaces for wandering; the sum of all lighting, the meeting points of all lines. Nevertheless, as in the 18th century *Prisons of the Imagination* etchings by the Italian artist Giovanni Batista Piranesi, the architectural composition that comes into being is fantastic, deceiving, pointing back to itself over and over again, trapped and eternal inside the space of the wall. Large-scale clocks, unique art tools or perhaps weapons lean against the installation. If we

turn east, we arrive in a room where the spears\chisels\brushes are swords from the Dutch Fencing School at Leiden University "recorded" in the 17th century etching. The rain lines in the woodcuts by the 19th century Japanese artist Utagawa Hiroshige, the works of Vincent van Gogh that were influenced by Hiroshige, and the famous darts of rain in the film *Macbeth* directed by Akira Kurosawa are all echoed in these tools of war. At the same time, they appear as self-weaving strings on looms, as perspective lines converging towards a vanishing point, as furrows in an open field. In the same fashion, the parallel and intersecting diagonals painted in Chinese ink dominating the series *Souvenirs*, which is exhibited in the same hall, trap images of "sacred" remains from the artist's own history of images: flowers, paint tubes, and a self-portrait as a dwarf.

In early works Poliakine's abstract layered prints influenced her painting. However, now her printmaking is influenced both by the vast fields of colors and layers and by the figurative imagery of her paintings, as in the series of large screenprints exhibited in the north-west wing entitled *Window Facing East*. The series is based on maps of Palestine as they appear in a book by the 17th century churchman and historian Thomas Fuller¹, and on Aharon Ben Yaacov's map of the of the Biblical Tribes of Israel that appears in a 1695 Passover Haggadah. The fragments of the maps are overt and covert, "bandaged" and severed by other layers of images - a bound bird, arches, moons or suns, paint brushes, beehives in the land of milk and honey, duplicated windows that convey those long oriental-romantic, secular-Zionist, religious-messianic quests for the east. These all merge inward instead of outward, echo and reflect one another as in a room of mirrors or a labyrinth with no exit.

Heading back south and east, we perceive *The Painter on Her Way to Work*, where Poliakine's blurry figure appears from in between intensively drawn lines. We seem to follow in her footsteps; but they are deceiving, for in this fabulous work we see only her shadow. Furthermore, it is also a verisimilitude of printmaking as it is a drawing that has been scanned and enlarged. The medium is thus camouflaged and the imagery is only a silhouette, a trace.

The series *Workers* peeps out of a small hermit-like room at the beginning of the corridor; it is a series of grey-brown-pink shades, comprising portraits of Arab construction workers whom Poliakine drew while they were paving a road in HaSharon area. Their faces consist of several coats of drawings screenprinted onto abstract etchings, which had previously been created by the artist through imprinting a nylon bag on soft-ground. On the left-hand side of the entrance to the room, visitors encounter yet another print with the same soft-ground etched background, but in this

¹ Thomas Fuller, 1650, *A Pisgah-Sight of Palestine and the confines thereof; with the history of the Old and New Testaments acted thereon*.

case the inspiration for the screenprinted drawing was an image of a Palestinian woman carrying her child after her home had been destroyed. Both the workers and the woman appear as compositions whose duplication and variety of media prevent them from being deciphered, from being stabilized, from being taken for granted.

At the end of the corridor, looming over the visitors, the etching *East* leans against a window. Just before it, in a room on the right, two series unfold; both entitled *What Happens in the Heart Simply Happens* following a poem by the same name written by the Jerusalem poet Hedva Harechavi. The artworks in the large series were created through an entangled process that combined scanning the etching's brass plates, which produced their golden color, then separately scanning the etched prints, and finally assembling them with digital software and printing them as monumental pieces. The outcome incites a battle between expanding powers of gold and black, metal and paper, etching and scanning, while the poem describes the elements of a bloody battle between love and selfhood, inside and outside, sanity and imagination: "Over. Over. It's over" you said / once, in nature, in a dream - oh how happy it made me in the dream - as if we were meant for it - and we would run towards / "the imagination, with the imagination, alongside the imagination, before the imagination, quicker than the imagination" I said / "someone is going mad" you said / "What happens in the heart, simply happens" I said.

The series of small prints combining etching and screenprinting also entitled *What Happens in the Heart Simply Happens* is exhibited in showcases in the middle of the same room. These works are based on ancient maps depicting the earthly and spiritual Jerusalem, which are part of the National Library of Israel collection. Poliakine also appropriated many other images, such as Michelangelo's painting of Noah and the flood at the Sistine Chapel, a 19th century etching of a cabinet of curiosities, and contemporary imagery. They all become her own, converging into an archive of life, as the black ink spreads over them, staining them, blurring the entities they are supposed to represent.

Throughout the entire exhibition, Poliakine presents a tremendous all-encompassing endeavor that spreads over means of expression, over the past, present and future tenses, over tangible and imaginative spaces. She thus maps the unmappable as she captures the voice of the human heart.