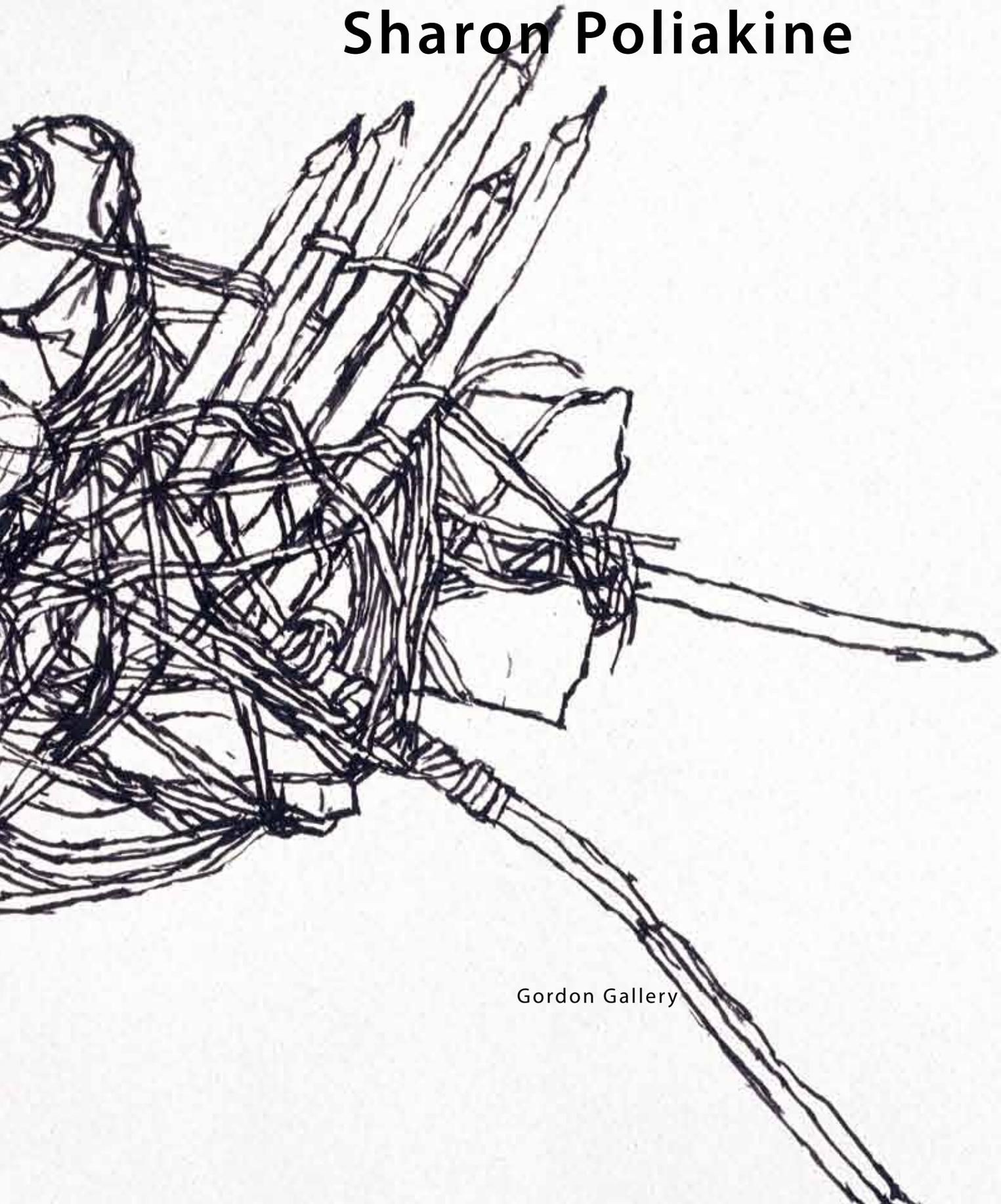
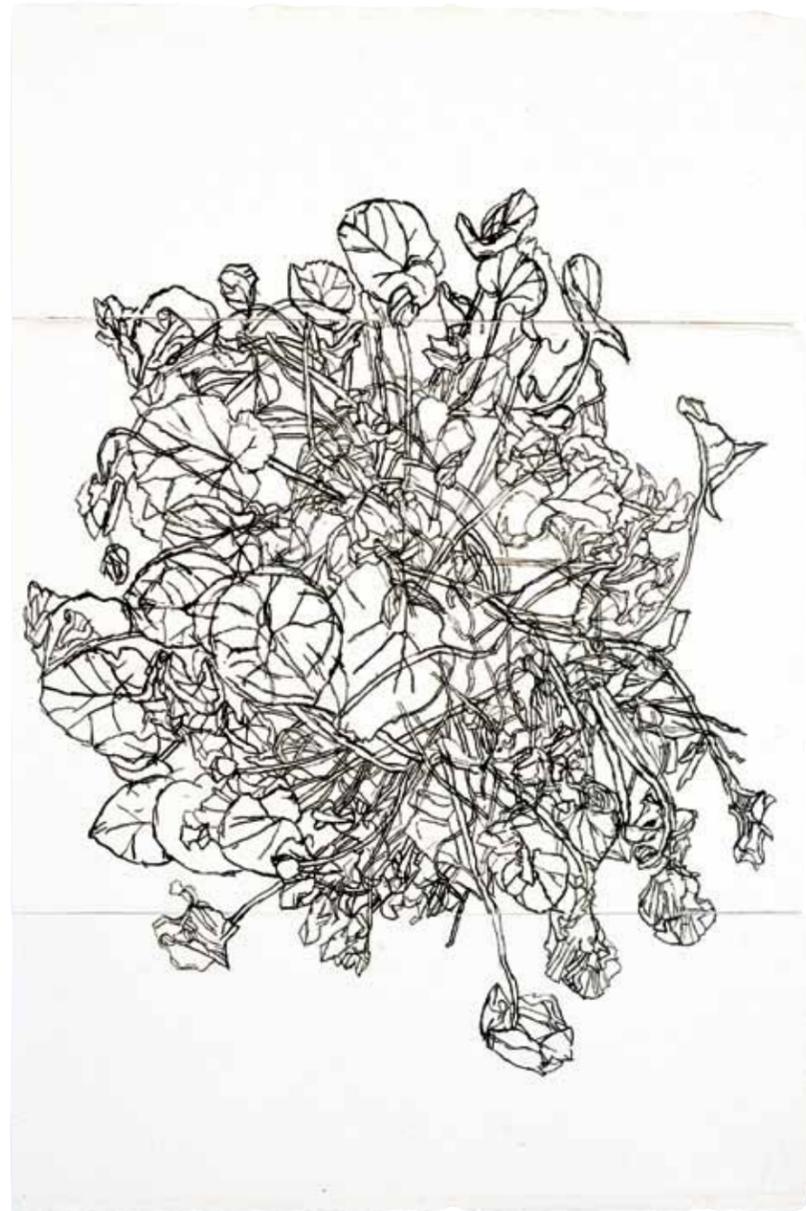


Sharon Poliakine



Gordon Gallery



Untitled, 2008, ink on paper, 58.5x39.5

ללא כותרות, 2008, דיו על נייר, 58.5x39.5

Osnat Zukerman Rechter

Why Sharon Poliakine is Not a Print Artist

Part I – Transformation

Chapter 1

Sharon Poliakine and I first met four years ago. I met her with an eternally black contour around her nails, leftover traces of her work as a printmaker at the Jerusalem Print Workshop. She had worked there for fifteen years, day after day. In the last period of her work there, after moving from Jerusalem to central Israel, she only "traveled up" to Jerusalem, as she says, two or three times a week. In the Print Workshop she worked as a printmaker: etching, spreading, wiping plates, wetting papers, printing, raising, turning the aquatint-box handle, rolling the press, etc. Unvarying acts turned second nature, creating a precise, controlled body language. In the Workshop she instructed dozens of artists, stretching printmaking methods to fit their needs. In the meantime, she also created her own art. She sharpened the edges of her thought against the lines etched on plates – in black and white, engraved or embossed. She created prints.

And so, although I first saw her large oil paintings, Sharon represented herself in the world as a printmaker and print artist. That is why in the first text I wrote about her paintings I took the printer's point of view,¹ despite the significant presence of fabric, oil and colors in her painterly work: reminders of previous layers, traces of etching and embossing, painting as an extension of the relationship between plate and paper.

Chapter 2

For her final project at the Bezalel School of Art and Design (1989, p. 143), Sharon created large objects made of metal and wood, inspired by poems by Yona Wallach. Each object was accompanied by a print; six poems, six objects, six prints.² The works, highly praised, were thrown away at the end of the show.

Some ten years later, Sharon invited a number of friends to her Jerusalem home. She was living in a small house with a courtyard at the time, in the Katamonim neighborhood. In the center of the room that served as her studio she built for the occasion three disjointed sculptures: one, a system of raised, rolled-back lead drainpipes, carrying water into a large lead basin; another sculptural element looked like a sort of elaborate cage; and the third looked like a spider made of drop-like wooden beads that she carved herself – attached to each other by metal wire, sharp edge to round one, forming a large necklace that trickled like tears from the eyes of a raw-wood head affixed to the studio ceiling. The objects were dismantled after the event. A huge effort gone into objects that were never, nor were ever meant to be, exhibited in public. In second thought, that is perhaps not unlike preparing refreshments that are meant to be consumed, working on an event whose ending is a given, or an exhibition with a closing date.

The exhibition "Backyard" (2003) at the Bineth Gallery was dedicated entirely to a collection of by-products of her painting: objects,³ prints, and photographs of objects. In Sharon's mind, however, as the title of the exhibition implies, there was a clear-cut hierarchy: above all – painting; all the rest is the "backyard," residues deposited by the body of painting. Empty, crimped paint tubes, marked by pressing fingers, were strung together onto a black plastic line, creating a *Queen's* necklace (p. 105). Squashed cardboard boxes turned into stools. Seventy brushes or forty pencils were joined together and formed new work tools (p. 129). Brown secreted oil paint scraped off the canvas was piled along the edges of old china plates found in the street (pp. 124-125). Remnants of industrial wood varnish, congealing in the bottom of the tin and capturing a paint brush in the process, were removed and positioned as an object in its own right, with the brush standing in its center, disheveled and surprised (p. 108). The Queen of England was painted on a toilet seat, playing football. Dozens of objects, ostensible testimonies to acts of painting, gathered throughout her working years like anecdotes or smirks directed at her serious, important, hard work – painting.

Printing, painting and objects have always been at odds in Sharon's work; her realm of artistic endeavor has always been split between what is actually there, the desirable, and leftovers, respectively.

Chapter 3

One of the first encounters between objects and paintings in Sharon's work took place at the Haifa Museum of Art, in the exhibition "Homage to Hanoach Levin" (2004, curated by Daniella Talmor). She presented a row of large oil paintings along the main exhibition hall on the first floor. On a white pedestal in the center, some distance away from the wall, stood two

grey plastic elephants, male and female, bought at the local "dollar store," defecating brown oil paint all around them. For an "authentic" rendering of the brown paint smearing, Sharon invited her two children to work with her.

Perhaps it was the challenge of Hanoach Levin's biting humorous texts that enabled this encounter between paintings and objects – between creation and secretion. For a moment, a significant one I believe, hybrids were created there, "paintingobjects": a series of flags of different, mainly Third World countries, all very colorful and containing bird icons, were painted on plywood panels and vertically attached to each other. A canvas whose breadth was covered with masking-tape (unlike Michal Na'aman's works, which are covered both vertically and horizontally), on which names of characters from Levin's plays were written in pencil, was named *Leibele* and functioned as a marginal comment on the "serious" oil works.

Titles are always significant in Sharon's works. Often, the seriousness and harshness of the painting are alleviated by the work's title, which generates a humorous pause. A series of disintegrating self-portraits is called *Dwarfs* (pp. 60-63); she watches us from the five canvases as a dwarf, Snow White, and the witch – all at once. A series of paintings depicting flesh, partly torsos and partly torn pieces of meat, is titled *Margins* (pp. 92-93) – drawing our attention to the stripes painted along the canvas margins. A large oil painting of a 16th-century print workshop, at whose center stands a male printmaker, is titled *Rain and Wind*, or affectionately, "female printmaker" (p. 65). The painting is covered with black diagonal rain lines that come to a stop in the halo-like circle surrounding the head of the "female printmaker." Another work, a hectic, busy painting depicting only the lower body of the "female printmaker," is titled *An Image I Have Gained Honestly* (p. 64) – disclosing to the viewers an underground system of gain and loss, both tangible and metaphorical, associated with the printing-painting-femaleness trinity.

Her paintings almost always have titles. Print series only occasionally. Often the name comes to her mind before making the work itself. Her objects, on the other hand, have no titles at all. They just exist, like homeless people, like the leftovers of paintings. To a certain extent, the works' titles have the same function as the objects – unsettling, mixing together things of different orders, pricking the bloated belly of painting.

Chapter 4

"You surprised me with figurativity," Gideon Ofrat once told her in a chance meeting. Thus, in one short statement, Ofrat – who is well familiar with Sharon's work, both as a print artist and as an abstract painter – pointed out the dramatic transformation that her work has gradually

undergone in the past three years. I believe that the starting point was a work commissioned by the Museum on the Seam, Jerusalem (2005). She painted a series of portraits based on photographs taken of people a few seconds after witnessing a terrorist attack, their faces expressing shock at what they had seen. For this work, Sharon developed a technique that involved a certain degree of printing: the photographs were photocopied and then the facial features were filled in with a graphite pencil. The graphite was then transferred to a wooden plate by placing the paper on it face down, after the plate had been treated with great quantities of mixed oil paint, smeared by hand and lashing in all directions. A terrorist attack site.

Just before the Second Lebanon War broke out, wars started finding their way into Sharon's paintings. Wars and cyclamens. The wars were doubly sublimated: the images were taken from paintings by Old Masters – that is, these images of war were already part of a historical and art-historical context. The reproductions of battle paintings were drawn from those paintings in Sharon's own hand, in ink on paper. Her drawings were then photocopied on transparencies and projected in her studio onto canvases, thus "reinstated" as oils on canvas. The cyclamens went through the same evolutionary cycle, although they were initially drawn from actual pots of withering cyclamens – *nature morte*. Two different practices of drawing – drawing from reproductions and still-life drawing – channeled towards painting, sustaining its fragile figurativity.

Chapter 5

In this chapter, the last for the moment in the evolving connections between paintings, prints and objects in Sharon's work, these two channels of drawing are brought together in her treatment of a single theme: reproduced drawings of vanitas paintings, skulls, books, plants and other objects all directly associated with still-life drawings. These are no longer dying cyclamens, but rather "altered objects" in all their glory. "Assisted readymades," nature+object hybrids: paint brushes and crushed paint tubes + a plant branch, tightly wrapped together in white twine (pp. 132-137), depicted on canvas (pp. 19-21). Something like Duchamp's 1919 *Unhappy Readymade*, which was "returned home" to painting.⁴

The dams have broken. There is now constant leakage between prints and paintings and objects and titles. The heaped objects are now titled – *Nicole* (p. 126), *In the Evening I Knit* (p. 103) – drawn in ink and laid upon the canvas. Vanitas images of skulls are etched in oil on top of books, as if biting into them (p. 34). Then the etched grooves are filled with paint squeezed out of throwaway sandwich plastic bags, which finally accumulate into an independent object. The figurative image is almost detachable (ephemeral), hanging by a thread, on the verge of

becoming an object again. Black-teethed humor trickles from object to print, from print to canvas, from canvas to title, and so on and so forth. An endless whirlwind blending together gravity, levity, and subtle irony. You, me, and the next war.⁵

Part II – The Hubris of Painting

Your edict, King, was strong,
But all your strength is weakness itself against
The immortal unrecorded laws of God.
They are not merely now: they were, and shall be,
Operative for ever, beyond man utterly.
(Sophocles, *Antigone*, 453-457)⁶

A few years ago a meeting took place at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art between young Israeli and German painters⁷. One of the German artists said then that he envied the "light brushstroke" of Israeli painters, since every time he lifted the brush he felt as if the entire weighty, paralyzing history of painting reared its head.

For the past five or six years Sharon's paintings refer to a weighty painting tradition of Old Masters: Velásquez, Rembrandt, Piero della Francesca, Uccello, Delacroix, Van Gogh. She, who had studied in the graphics department of Bezalel rather than the art department, wishes to express herself in their medium. First, it was paintings of *Venus* (pp. 82, 88) or a *Nocturnal Portrait* (p. 83), and then a series of battle scenes.

In her text "These are Sharon Poliakine's Wars," Yaara Shehori wrote:

One may think of Poliakine's action in her disconcerting war paintings as one of double meaning: acting both as a rear-guard and as a gatherer. In the latter capacity, other battles become visible through her painting... That is the first image of the painter: one who gathers into her painting bits of war without discarding anything, acting on behalf of both history and painting. But as mentioned above, she also comes to these battles as a rear-guard, setting herself up as one who steals into a formal scene instituted as a masterpiece.⁸

Sharon seems to be part of a whole local tradition of rear-guard women artists: important, leading artists who work in the medium of painting and yet feel "unworthy" of it; women

artists who seem to fight for their right to be painters – like Nurit David or Michal Na'aman, who have spoken openly of their difficulty in seeing themselves as painters, or other painters in whose works the issue reverberates: How and from whom does one learn how to be a painter? Who is an expert, who is an authority? And why is it always a "he"?

The unwritten law of painting here resembles the law of war; in the here and now of the home field – as opposed to over there and long ago – it is weighty and paralyzing. The attempt to grapple with it obliges one to find a way around it, to generate new laws, to commit the sin of hubris. And perhaps this is the very reason that Old Masters offer solace rather than a threat. At home, in the studio, alone, perseveringly, one may embrace them as teachers and learn from them. They are approachable to all.

Sharon's war paintings allow her to grapple with all that is pre-supposed by the reality of painting here, rules whose origins are unclear and yet clearly prevail. She mixes together images from old paintings, displaces them, subdues them by drawing them in her own hand, uses them to forge her weapons against the spectral rules governing the present. In her war paintings she creates a mythology, or a painterly exegesis: paintings that refer to past paintings, redepicted at a different time with changing details and emphases. Sharon once told me that she could have given up many of her professional activities, but without her studio she would die. In her war paintings she sustains life.

Alongside wars, at the same time, Sharon paints cyclamens. Cyclamens are part of Israeli mythology. Manifestly local, they are associated with artist Moshe Gershuni as well as with printmaking. Sharon has worked with Gershuni over the years in the Jerusalem Print Workshop, and has absorbed both his prints of wreaths and cyclamens and his aptitude for generating prints from paintings and paintings from prints. Adopting the cyclamen and making it her own by making it wither serves the same function as her adoption of past masters' battle images. That is why her cyclamens often look like battles and her wars like cyclamens.

The cyclamen code first manifested itself in her painting without any actual cyclamen, as a faint sphere against a greenish background, sharply restricted by a white line above (p. 37). Actual cyclamen images made their way into her works gradually – dark, withered, and magnificent.

The "war-cyclamen" in its various manifestations is a complex, layered unit of significance in Sharon's work, allowing her to commit the sin of being political without sinning against her painting. It is through the "war-cyclamens" that her works in the past three years also sustain a political space – a space that emerged in her work at the same time as the brightening of her abstractions and the appearance of figurative images.

"Arieh Aroch, Avigdor Stematsky, Moshe Kupferman, and Aviva Uri had indeed found a successor: Sharon Poliakine," claimed Gideon Ofrat in 2002, describing Sharon as a link

in a distinguished local lineage of painters, adding: "The torch of Israeli abstract had been passed on to a new generation of post-lyricism and post-action."⁹ In the past few years, however, the figurative has reemerged from deep within the abstract, layered backgrounds of her works. Moreover, figurative image and abstract background struggle against each other, confounding background and foreground, seeming to challenge the very distinction between abstract and figurative; sustaining both at the same time. And in the spirit of post-action, action has in fact become more manifest in her work – although not in the sense of action painting, nor in the sense of abolishing the image, but rather in the exegetic sense of producing the new through a return to the old. Something in Sharon's painterly space looks us straight in the eye, shakes off its body, and shows us how we may indulge in the sin of painting.

- ¹ In the catalogue to her exhibition "The Butterfly Effect," Bineth Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2005.
- ² "When you will come and lie with me/ You will wear a black dress/ Adorned with strawberries ..." – a scaffold-like Sisyphean bed adorned with strawberries; "All the trees had ribbons/ Adornments ..." – a wooden post decked with metal plating, from which rose colored ribbons spread out in all directions; a Da Vincisque metal bird on wheels for the poem "Identity Issues"; and two ladder-like wooden towers topped by metal sculptures attached to each other by cable and weights – for the poem "A Good Eye".
- ³ These objects are works of art that are neither paintings, drawings nor prints, mostly consisting of everyday objects from the painter's working environment.
- ⁴ In 1919 Duchamp instructed his sister Suzanne to hang a geometry textbook from the balcony of her Paris apartment so that the problems of geometry could "get the facts of life." Suzanne carried out his instructions – and in 1920 depicted the result in oil on canvas. The discolored, wrinkled, damaged book, object+nature, was destroyed. Suzanne's painting is called *Marcel Duchamp's Unhappy Readymade*.
- ⁵ *You, Me, and the Next War* is the title of a satirical political cabaret by Hanoach Levin, first performed after the 1967 War.
- ⁶ Sophocles, *The Oedipus Cycle*, trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, Harvest Books, New York, 2002.
- ⁷ On the occasion of the exhibition "This Time, Painting!" (2004), curated by Martin Hentschel.
- ⁸ Exhibition leaflet, Bineth Gallery, 2007.
- ⁹ Gideon Ofrat, "Destructive Creation," Cat. *From Dawn to Sunrise*, Jerusalem Print Workshop, 2002, n.p.