

Yair Barak: Hindsight

Curator: Aya Lurie

Post-Mortem

By Hadas Maor

Yair Barak's video project, Hindsight (Horizontal), begins with a horizontal, continuous pan motion. The camera glides on a surface, reaches its end, stops, descends slightly, stops, and continues once again, as though executing a continuous horizontal scan from one end to another, and back again. *Moderato cantabile* – moderately and melodiously. In this manner, line by line, section by section, a large plywood board, made up of several small boards joined together, with innumerable marks on them – splotches of paint and other marks, drawn corners alongside random drips of paint – is revealed to the viewer in one continuous, endless motion. The words "Height: 2.40" appear in cursive handwriting, then the camera changes direction again. Two strips of masking tape indicate location, and opposite direction. Over time, and as the motion evolves, the surface becomes increasingly dense and intensive. Technical comments that are revealed on the board during the filming take on a semantic meaning. The organized and arranged merges with the overflowing, invasive and diminishing. A Kupferman-like quality suddenly emerges from the surface, and suddenly the work seems like a scan of a wonderful work of art.

The wooden boards in question used to cover an entire wall in the studio of Uri Lifschitz, who died in 2011.¹ Yair Barak, who arrived at the studio of the artist, whom he had not known personally, and saw the wall in the aftermath of his death – in hindsight – immediately understood that he had to do something about it. Out of this insight were born the two works on view at

¹ In May 2016, the exhibition "Flesh and Blood" was opened at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, to mark the fifth anniversary of Lifschitz's death (curators: Aya Lurie, Ori Drumer). It featured more than 150 of the artist's works – oil paintings, drawings, etchings, and sculptures – from his early, 1960s works to those that he created in his final days.

the exhibition, each representing different but complementary treatments of the same object: horizontal and vertical; static and dynamic; distant and invasive. The large wall of photographs displayed on the concrete wall at the entrance of the museum – Hindsight (Vertical) – seems to reproduce the wall that Barak discovered at the artist's studio. The photographed frames are not identical to the distribution of the conjoined wooden boards, and a close-look at the photographs reveals the seams between the boards. At first sight, the work seems like a reproduction of an original – except that, from the outset, the original in this case is informed by excess, is something left over, with no independent value, and consequently the act of reproduction is distorted. In the Hindsight (Horizontal) video work, the archeological, medical, and forensic gazes on the same excess appear to blend together. The work is filmed in a single shot – refined, yet also decisive. Line. Stain. Motion. The structuring of the mechanical procedure of the work, the continuous, unbroken movement, and the repeated changes of direction are so precise, that they allow sensuous, emotional, and conceptual aspects to percolate and emerge from the work, and a poetic quality to be revealed.

Barak's work explores the relationships that are drawn between painting, photography, and video; between various aspects of action; between immobility and movement – movement that comes into being through the act of painting or that of photography, when facing a stretched canvas or an inanimate wall. The work of Lifschitz, who was a quintessential postmodernist, was predominantly figurative and narrative, particularly in his later years. The wall that served as an underlying foundation of his work has the appearance of an abstract modernist work. The camera's movement in front of the still wall in Barak's work is meticulously calculated. The body's movement in the space is replaced by the horizontal or vertical orientation of the camera's movement; choreography is replaced by cinematography.

Beyond that, Barak's work also suggests the notion of post-mortem. The term originated in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the attitude toward the dead and dead bodies was fundamentally different from today, and photographing individuals after death was very common. However, this is neither a post-mortem of Uri Lifschitz, nor of his paintings. Barak's work is not about Lifschitz the person, or about his artistic legacy. Rather, it dwells

on the traces that the artistic process leaves behind; on vitality versus mortality; on hope versus insight. It is a post-mortem of the action itself. The work's gaze is not a romantic one in pursuit of the sublime, but a melancholic gaze that observes emptiness and absence with pain and sobriety. In this regard, the work continues Barak's longstanding preoccupation with the notion of death.

A few years ago, Barak's work began to feature book covers. In some instances, only the flyleaf was visible, as in the 2014 work with the cryptic inscription "To the boys who will never come back", rendered by its display as a kind of tombstone. On other occasions, the entire cover of the book was visible – as in Thomas Mann's three book covers, or in the stone work *I'd Rather Not* (all 2014), that likens itself to a book cover and/or a tombstone. At the same time, Barak's work also began to feature various historical monuments that had lost their significance, and iconic architectural buildings that stand in silent testament of past iniquities. These works and others deal with the passage of time, with the relics of history, with questions of memory, oblivion and commemoration, and with the ways by which culture obliterates itself. However, irrespective of Barak's focus – be it books, graves, pieces of land, or various historical monuments – he ultimately reaches the objects and treats them in the aftermath – as a post-mortem, if you will. Not when the objects are at their prime, but after they have declined and become inconsequential. In this respect, Barak's work deals not only with the process of depletion, with cultural eradication and rapid obsolescence, but also with the deceptive nature of the photographic medium itself. Photography – which has altered the face of culture and various modes of thinking but has also, much like the historical monuments, lost its validity – has been voided of content, dying while at its peak, to be left today as an empty digital shell. In effect, Barak's work presents the act of photography as a silent testament, one that ultimately is precluded from recounting anything.