

## What's Soft, Translucent, Moist and Slimy? On Mediations of Erotic Nature in Hugit Rubinstein's Work

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A first studio visit: Hugit and I intensely leaf through catalogs, books and magazines; we're especially interested in the anthropology of porno images, in the ways in which copulations and penetrations are represented in various cultures. It isn't often that a studio visit allows you to ponder the practical likelihood of the Kamasutra positions, or to ask questions about the way the Japanese do it as opposed to the way the Indians do it. It's not often that you are called (in a professional framework) to carefully and meticulously decipher the anatomical structure of sexual organs, or to decode complex sexual positions: when is the woman on top, is there penetration involved, is he white and is she brown or vice versa, is this a representation of a relationship based on ownership and subservience, or a glimpse of enlightened, egalitarian relations, and so on and so forth.

And all this takes place because Hugit Rubinstein's *Jigsaw Puzzles* series – on which she has been working for the past three years – calls for such a discourse, and makes you seek out references and influences in other books. At first glance, the series seems innocent and formalistic, almost abstract (from graphic contours and a monochromatic color scheme it reaches multi-level twists, that bring Jackson Pollock to mind). However, the series actually makes use of patterned, repetitive sexual imagery, consisting of penetrations, male and female organs, bumps and holes, knobs and cracks, which sometimes appear explicitly, and sometimes serve as a backdrop for other images.

Later on I will discover that almost all of Rubinstein's works are steeped in sexual imagery. Even when she painted puddles and frogs, there was something erotic

and sensual about it. Moreover, the erotic, as I will attempt to suggest, serves as the glue that engages the polar opposites of her oeuvre, which at first seem to be completely detached from one another. Rubinstein's generous holistic approach allows trees, sexual organs, fucks, flowers (pansies), snails, portraits, breasts, eggs, Kamasutra images and octopuses to come under the broad heading of 'nature' or 'sex', two sides of the same coin, as far as she is concerned.

It is not easy to categorize Rubinstein's works, or to extract a certain story or meaning from them. Rubinstein employs a wide thematic and formalistic range, and makes use of various painting techniques. Her 'style' seems to be in constant flux, and at first it appears easy to lose oneself within her works. On one hand, in the *Puddles* series (1998), she uses a lyrical, fleshy, almost 'expressive' style to paint groves and swamps. On the other hand, she is able to employ clean, stylized, nearly abstract forms in the flowers she draws in the *Pansies* series (1997-2000). Another type of extremity is represented in multi-layered, color-laden portraits, such as in her *Girlfriends* series (2001-2002), as opposed to the contoured, clean, flat imagery, which is employed by the artist in her *Kamasutra* paintings (2000). Rubinstein's paintings do not give themselves over easily, and are cautious of being read or interpreted in one single way. Their power lies in their multi-faceted, multi-voiced quality. In that sense, Rubinstein's works are Richter-esque. Her paintings do not yield one single 'stance', 'idea' or 'style'. That is also the reason why Rubinstein is hard to place within the context of contemporary Israeli painting.

However, although it is certainly difficult to elucidate a linear course of development in Rubinstein's works, I would like to point out an elliptical reading-path that might allow more clarity. This path begins with the *Puddles* series from 1998, which consists of landscape paintings in oil and tempera on canvas. The works

display a bright central image – a ‘hole/light’ that seemingly tears them apart – which is surrounded by a tangle of browns and greens. The series also reveals a process of abstraction and patterning parallel to methods that are prevalent in some of Rubinstein’s other series: the first works are tactile and detailed (**painting 1**); the brushstrokes are laden with ample, fleshy color, and the image appears real (the first painting was actually based on a photograph of a puddle, and one can even recognize the frogs in it). In some of the later works from the series, the image of the puddle has spread over the entire painting, and has been flattened completely (**painting 2**). The puddle seems to have doubled in size, and has turned into a light that twinkles among the branches. In the final phase of the series (**painting 3**), only the duplicated image of the puddle has remained, splattered on the canvas like a paint drip, reminiscent of the stylized brushstrokes of Roy Liechtenstein.

“Puddles are intermediary phenomena”, says Rubinstein, “on the cusp between freshness and decay, a pond of shallow waters.” Puddles also serve as a breeding ground for frogs, which function as an image of innocence, fertility, and unfulfilled potential (the prince). “I wanted to duplicate the randomness, to castrate the primeval quality that appeared in the earlier puddles, while also revealing the pure essence of the image.”<sup>1</sup> In this comment, the artist embodies the paradox that characterizes her work. “I’m interested in conflicts, intermediary situations and twilight zones – sites that carry a potential for transformation.” In a similar fashion, Rubinstein chose to employ a snail – a bisexual creature – as a sort of “alter-ego” in paintings that she created that same year (1998). In greenish, aquarium-like paintings, which she dubbed *Me/A Snail*, she intermixed female body images with the image of a snail.<sup>2</sup>

Transitional situations, elusiveness and ambiguity also exist in Rubinstein's paintings of flowers, which developed naturally from splattering of paint. Rubinstein was preoccupied with the *Pansies* series from 1997 to 2000.<sup>3</sup> The choice to paint pansies – a flower that joins both male and female in one 'body' – also emerges from the duality that is inherent to the story of the brother who is in love with his sister and turns to raping her ("a good thing which has the potential to turn into a bad thing"). At first, she painted single images, such as *Ghost* or *Cowboy* (1997). Gradually, these began to cohere and form close ups of flowers or other images, such as *Present Progressive* (2000) or *Jaffa* (2000).

The flat quality of these paintings is absolute. The flowers, painted in flesh colors or in contrasting hues, have turned into a vivid, wallpaper-like pattern. The use of tempera, acrylic and industrial paint allowed Rubinstein to reach bright, artificial hues, but the flatness of the canvas was still not satisfactory. This is the stage in which the artist began to draw on the flipside of Perspex panels – a choice that allowed her to reflect the surrounding environment in her painting. Two series of paintings by Andy Warhol cannot go unmentioned in this context: the *Flowers* series from 1964 (although Warhol painted hibiscus flowers and not pansies, he still employed similar flat splashes of paint, petal husks denuded of any natural quality), and of course, the *Rorschach* paintings from 1984 (**no. 16 or 18**), wherein Warhol chose to 'design' randomness.

The amorphous forms presented in the *Pansies* series led Hugit Rubinstein to the knobs and bumps of the *Jigsaw Puzzles* series (1999-2001). A small painting of two black puzzle pieces on a green background (*African Lovers*, 1999) marks the shift from one series to the next. On the one hand, one can still recognize the petals, or rather the black that foregrounds the petals – the negatives that have turned into the

leading characters. On the other hand, the male/female forms are much more defined in this painting (“each piece of the puzzle is both male and female”), and thus the erotic implication is revealed. From this point, the movement into explicit images of sexual organs happened almost automatically. The jigsaw puzzle paintings (**for instance, 1-3**) form a choreography of penetrations, an organic grid of invading and containing organs, all immersed in a flowing, harmonious and energetic calligraphy. This dance of masculinity inside femininity seems to act as a movement notation of the essence of life, a holistic circle that celebrates the perfection of opposites, wherein each form is defined by the form that is connected to it.

The endless system of taking apart and putting back together, of flatness and patterned serialization, give the *Jigsaw Puzzles* paintings a hypnotic, meditative depth. This effect leads on the one hand to the depletion of the narrative content of the image, and on the other hand increases the naturalistic foundation of the basic image.

And speaking of naturalism, Rubinstein deliberately uses a palette that implies the skin tone of the participators in the scenes she paints. In one of the more prominent paintings in this series, *Blondes Get It Better* (2000), there is a focus on monochromatic tones of brown, and in the artist’s words, “a jumble of dark skin colors.” This issue is even more apparent in the *Indian Paintings* series (2000), which serves as a sort of footnote to the *Jigsaw Puzzles* paintings. In this series, Rubinstein focuses on sexual positions taken from the Kamasutra, and plays around with the skin tone of the figures. Usually the man is dark skinned and the woman light skinned.

Rubinstein’s approach to otherness and difference evades the rules of political correctness by employing a holistic, egalitarian perspective, which is devoid of ethnic ascription or national identity: “I’m attracted by variety, and interested in the entire span of human experience.” Indeed, the various positions in the *Indian Paintings*

series create a grid-like interplay of human organs in different colors. In a painting such as *Kamasutra I* the democratic character of these images is clearly apparent: there is no hierarchy, no battle between the sexes, no stronger or weaker side. And in the words of the artist, “even when they’re connected to each other, each one of them retains his or her individuality. They continually engage and disengage from one another like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle.” In addition, it should be mentioned that eastern philosophies (such as Kamasutra), treat sexual intercourse and love relations as means to reach the path to enlightenment. Orgasm signifies ultimate freedom. Physical fulfillment finds its source in the fulfillment of the mind, and the definitive aim is to channel sexual energies into intense spiritual energies.

This moment of orgasm – or in the words of Guy Bar-Amotz, “an all-encompassing state of corporeal enjoyment, without borders or boundaries”,<sup>4</sup> – appears in the painting *The Factory* (2001), one of the climaxes of the *Jigsaw Puzzles* series, painted on the back of a Perspex panel. This time the choreography of penetrations and organs within organs, the swirl of in and out, appears in the background, and paint drips, reminiscent of Jackson Pollock, adorn the upper layer of the painting (“the flowing of boys’ and girls’ juices”). The word “factory” implies “the factory of life” – the mass production of unique images, and the labor of love which it involves – and, of course, also refers to Andy Warhol’s studio, The Factory – a reference that adds an additional facet to the erotic, meticulous act of male painting.

While working on the *Jigsaw Puzzles* paintings, Rubinstein was also preoccupied with the series *Mother* (2000-2002) – paintings of target-like breasts. Rubinstein painted pairs of nearly ‘life sized’ breasts and nipples that cohere into optic circles, using an intense Pop palette. Once again, Rubinstein alludes here to masculine paintings in the tradition of Jasper Johns. Johns’ target paintings, as well as

Duchamp's optic spiral discs, have cross-dressed as females and have finally turned into desirable erotic targets. But surprisingly, not much of the erotic has remained in this series. There is something detached and mute about these paintings of breasts on Perspex. "It's a mother that's unreachable. She's impenetrable, blocked. She's fictive."

For the artist, the very act of painting in acrylic on Perspex is a sort of mummification. The discourse concerning "the death of painting" has led her to choose an opaque surface that does not soak up color, a smooth surface that negates the materiality of paint and leaves only the hue and brilliance of the environment's reflections. "These are 'clean' paintings, without smell, without the traditional signature of the artist. When the spectator comes near them, he sees his reflection revealed in the smooth surface." Because the work is painted in reverse (from the upper to the inner layers), it might be suggested that the painting is buried under the Perspex. The spectator's reflection – and the fact that all the images presented in the painting are spread, decentered, on its surface – is deceiving: it concurrently sucks one in and blocks one out.

The most elaborate and airy phase (the *Octopus* paintings, i.e. the 'Transparent' paintings) of the *Jigsaw Puzzles* series, unites all the components that have appeared in Rubinstein's work thus far. It seems as though these paintings incorporate images from her previous works, by layering them upon each other. Images of penetration, though situated in the background, have grown more detailed, and breasts and reptiles, excesses of the color trickles, have made their way, intermingled, to the foreground of the paintings. In the brown hued painting entitled *Bitch* (2001), one can count six targets/breasts (udders) within a 'wet' tangle of erotic images of spread legs and organs. In *Invasion of Thoughts* (2001-2002) two black,

multi-armed octopuses slink along a transparent surface stained in intense red and flesh colors, as though penetrating or sucking the life out of the erotic images. In the *Red Painting* (2002), the latest Rubinstein has produced, she reaches the height of this type of articulation: here, in the most sparing of means, she is able to describe the penetrations as if from within, a live broadcast from the vagina.

When looking at Rubinstein's paintings, Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock are the first names that come to mind. Such a coupling is not self-evident, and certainly not natural, being that each one of these artists represents an opposite extreme of the practice and strategy of painting prevalent in the second half of the twentieth century: Pollock's disclosure of his tormented soul straight on canvas, in contrast to Warhol's sterilized, synthetic and mediated sensibility. Surprisingly, Rubinstein manages to quite naturally conjoin both extremes in her work. The common ground that is shared by almost all her paintings is a uniformity of oppositions: abstract versus figurative, dense, warm materiality compared to stylized, cool lightness, flatness versus depth, linearity compared to smudginess, a fierce, sharp palette versus subtle pastel colors, opacity and stickiness in contrast to transparency and frothiness, order versus chaos; and all of the above are oftentimes able to coexist in a single painting.

Another feature that characterizes many of Rubinstein's works is the choice to employ a superior perspective or a symmetrical scheme that brings together opposing viewpoints. The doubling and flattening of images on Perspex obliges the spectator to view the scene from all angles – from above, from the sides, and now, with the *Red Painting*, from the inside as well. Despite the loss of an illusive sense of depth, the aerial perspective has a mesmerizing force. Rubinstein was inspired to employ this viewpoint (especially in the *Jigsaw Puzzles* paintings and in the *Indian Paintings*

series) by the philosophy of Zen Buddhism. The perception of reality according to the principles of Zen (**Suzuki**) is based upon the desire to dissolve the ego and to identify with the object completely – to the extent of the cancellation of all boundaries – so as to experience it as if from within.

From a formalistic perspective, Rubinstein's paintings recall the aesthetics common to Japanese pornographic imagery. In the **Shonga** prints, for instance (p. 159), the sexual whirl is entangled to such an extent, that it grows difficult to decipher the sexual positions depicted, or to pinpoint the rightful owners of the human organs involved. In **Otamaro's** prints (such as in *The Love Act*, p. 100), the male and female bodies appear as part of calligraphy and patterns of cloths that flow into each other. The sexual act is always part of a larger image that supposedly takes part in the scene; sometimes it is an architectural device; sometimes it is the landscape that takes part in the sensual coupling (like in **Eisen's** painting, *By The River*, p. 106). The compositions are always holistic and echo the act of penetration.

But beyond all the aforementioned influences, there is the feminine context. Rubinstein does not offer a deliberate critique in her works, and the term 'women's art' is alien to her sensibility; notwithstanding, one must place her work in a post-feminist context. In the past several years, two axes have become prominent in the works of women artists: first, the negotiations concerning the stereotypical equation of woman with nature<sup>5</sup>, and the ensuing conclusion – woman/beast; second, the problematics of the representation of femininity in pornography. Hugit Rubinstein has much to say regarding both these matters: "I come from a place where women take responsibility for their actions", she says. "There's no victimization in my paintings. The perspective is feminine, but there's no stronger or weaker side. There's no reflection of violence. The penis doesn't subsume its surroundings. The women is

much larger, her vagina isn't hidden." Despite the graphic form in which she paints the sexual organs, she is interested in the site wherein form ends and out of it "floats a completely different world, a sensual world that's beyond form." She is interested in the gaze which is directed "from the inside looking out", but also in the perspective which allows a gaze "from the outside looking in." Indeed, when looking at Rubinstein's works, one discovers that she paints engulfment rather than penetration.

The artist's discourse with 'nature' is immediately recognizable in almost all the series she's painted, beginning with the *Snails* and *Puddles* paintings, through the *Pansies* series, the *Jigsaw Puzzles* and *Kamasutra* works, and up to the *Octopus* paintings. This is not debased 'nature', and in any case, the aforementioned equation is inherently absurd. Since she is aware of her inability to completely merge with nature, Rubinstein must content herself with mediations and adaptations – in other words, with 'culture'. How to translate the Law of Nature into painting. How to mediate 'nature' from a consciousness-controlled perspective. The paintings of snails, centipedes and octopuses lend a Freudian dimension to the vexed proposal that equates woman with nature. According to the artist, "these are creatures that are usually considered repulsive, and talked about in terms of sensation and surface: wetness, sliminess, glossiness, elusiveness. I don't find them disgusting at all, but sensually intriguing."

The preoccupation with animals while addressing 'nature' from a feminine perspective characterizes the works of many women artists, such as Annette Massager, Kiki Smith, Janine Antoni and Dorothy Cross, who work in varied contexts. It seems as if Hugi Rubinstein's choice of 'primitive' animals (not cats, cows, or horses, but rather frogs, snails and centipedes), makes one wish to make friends with these creatures, to touch and feel them. Furthermore, the artist is

especially interested in these animals' bisexuality: "A snail is both male and female; a frog is talked about (in Hebrew) in the feminine form, but has the power to turn into a prince." The *Pansies* series can also be interpreted in this light: male and female in one flower, as well as the term "pansies", used as a derogatory tag for homosexuals. The flowers series also brings into play a wider context of women artists, who all dealt in their work with the fruit of the land (flowers, foliage). These artists include Frida Kahlo, Naomi Fisher or **???? Kosama** – an artist whom Rubinstein especially admires.

In the context of the debate concerning pornography, Rubinstein's works do not conform to the acceptable code prevalent in the post-feminist discourse ("Are you pro-porn or anti-porn?").<sup>6</sup> Her work cannot be addressed in terms of extravagance, provocation, kinkiness or teasing, but it also cannot be understood as a radical critique. The sex she depicts is erotic and holistic, and not pornographic and hierarchic. From this perspective, it might be intriguing to inspect the connection and formal resemblance between Rubinstein's *Jigsaw Puzzles* paintings and the works of artists such as Sue Williams and Ghada Amer, who also make use of pornographic imagery.

The formal similarity lies in the spatial ways in which the sexual images unfold: in Williams' case, in the form of spontaneous, pointed drawing, and in Amer's case, in the form of embroidery. These two artists also allude in their works to the tradition of masculine, straight-laced Abstract Expressionism in America, whose forerunners were artists such as Jackson Pollock and de Kooning. But while Sue Williams' works present a radically anti-pornographic stance, which chiefly emphasizes the sense of victimization, and Ghada Amer's works posit a strong critique towards the conservative society in which she grew up, Hugi Rubinstein's

defiance stems from her choice of a masculine medium (painting), and her wish to undermine it as if from within. The obstruction, the erasure of signature and the decision to work in reverse create an illusion of exposure and concealment, removal and seduction.

Although Rubinstein's modes of expression vary, and sometimes even contradict each other, her oeuvre exudes a deep sense of consistency. The quest for the appropriate way to gaze at the world, and the attempts to make sense, to mediate, and to represent 'correctly', reflect the yearning to capture reality in an unmediated fashion (as if to "unlock the genome of creation"), so as to situate the relation between the artist and the world surrounding her. The use of different dialects of expression is reminiscent of a scientific experiment, which aims to extract the right language with which to describe objects in the world.

<sup>1</sup> Quotes from the artist are based on our conversations during the months preceding the show, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> The snails also appear in a video piece by Rubinstein that was exhibited at Tal Esther Gallery in 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Close-ups of pansies also appear in a video piece by Rubinstein, which was exhibited for the first time at Tal Esther Gallery, in 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Guy Bar-Amotz, "Hagit Rubinstein – a Deformalistic Exhibition", *Studio 120*, December-January 2001, p. 71 [in Hebrew].

<sup>5</sup> On the equation Woman = Nature as opposed to Man = Culture, see: Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male like Nature to Culture?", in *Woman, Culture & Society*, Stanford, 1974. As well as: Marilyn Strathern, "No Nature, No Culture: the Hagen Case" (1980), in Carol MacCormack & Marilyn Strathern (eds.), *Nature, Culture and Gender*, Cambridge, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> On the use of pornographic imagery in contemporary art, see my article, "Women Are Allowed, Men Forbidden", *Musa* 6, October 2001, pp. 10-19 [in Hebrew].

