

## **"Dorrit Yacoby: To Live with Knives in the Gut at the Gates of Mercy"<sup>1</sup>**

A catalogue essay for Dorrit Yacoby's solo show at the Gallery of the Canadian Embassy, Tokyo, and at the Osaka Contemporary Art Center, Osaka, Japan  
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Dorrit Yacoby's works belong to a species of existential painting that has almost vanished from the world – painting that is a metaphor for a frail existence, an externalized and tumultuous expression of the classical existential dialectics: salvation through the gutters. In Jungian terms, we can say that she belongs to an endangered species of artists who are consumed by their vocation. Similar to Van-Gogh, Gauguin, Modigliani, and their like, she, too, is breathlessly swept away and drawn into a powerful and obsessive work of creation. In the private living space she has created for herself in Arad, a remote settlement near the Dead Sea, on the edge of the Judean Desert, she secludes herself in the shell of her art, like a refugee of the center, and devotes herself to a Sisyphean work of creation, that at the same time reflects a personal, metaphysical portrait, in the sense of life as an allegory.

In terms of art history, Dorrit Yacoby follows the tradition of assemblage (layering of materials). Artists such as the Spanish Tapies, the American Rauschenberg and the German Kiefer are certainly among her sources of inspiration. Her works express a strong need to bridge the gap between art and life, a wish already formulated by Rauschenberg early in the fifties and essentially concerning a massive insertion of "low" mundane objects into the artistic space. And indeed, the "life materials" that compose her works are the materials of her immediate, natural environment. In view of the manner in which they are layered, one on top of the other, I was inclined to see in them remains of a ruined universe, objects randomly found in the yard and collected as relics, as sacred memories of a functioning world: "shreds of paper, scraps of cardboard, ropes, bits of broken glass, straw, twigs, strings, stones, weeds, remains of an old cupboard, bottles, articles of clothing, medicines, sand, trash, old belts, parts of children's game, boxes, and other domestic articles. All these have been collected with reverential awe and placed in layers on a cloth base (generally a bed-sheet, an old curtain or a children's pillowcase) attached and pasted to a wooden board, as if in an attempt to perpetuate and bear witness to the life functions they once served. At times it seems that the works themselves are on the verge of disintegration and are liable to collapse and fall apart before the viewer's eyes, as an allegory for

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this essay is taken from one of the poetic sentences the artist scribbled during the correspondence that preceded the writing of this essay. "The ability to live with knives in the gut at the gates of mercy/ while maintaining the memory of pain without drowning in it."

daily human existence in all its fragility."<sup>2</sup> However, the very act of painting – a unification of the top surfaces by applying color, lacquer and tar - allows a patching of the gashes; as though stitching the scabs together again and creating a vital fabric. In the current exhibition, maybe more than ever, this dialectic is particularly prominent. Flashes of hope glimmer from the deep despair, new emphases on reconstruction seem to be born out of the wreck. For the first time, it is possible to notice careful touches that investigate a possibility for cure, a chance for recovery.

In order to examine closely the dialectics underlying Dorrit Yacoby's works, both on the formal and on the iconographic levels, we have to reread her earlier work that was characterized by distinct motifs of death and destruction; motifs that reflected a shattered, demolished and disintegrated world. Her works, from the early eighties on, dealt explicitly with extinction, disintegration, decomposition, decline, the outcry of the margins. The recurring images in her paintings were burial urns, wounded walls, bleeding flowers, falling birds, war targets, and above all – images of long legged, skinny women that held, in one way or another, some deconstructed, fluid entity called "chaos".

The shaky physical condition of the crowded, multi-layered works served as an allegorical reflection of their contents. They mirrored an inner world that is torn, fragile, authentic, unique and extremely human. In this sense, they were distinct emblems of "end"; they embodied remnants of reality that were forsaken on scorched earth in a reality wanting god, themselves laid before the spectator like bodies that conduct meaning. It was possible to extract seeds of meaning concerning mending and reconstruction from the very act of painting, from the archaeologist act of collecting and pasting, stitching together and patching. In other words, despite the physical disintegration of the painting, it seems that the thin external layer of white or black (the image) managed to stitch together and reunite its parts, to subjugate, if only for a moment, death and chaos. In her new works, this dialectics can be detected for the first time on the level of contents too. It seems that the emphasis has changed, making it possible to read the entire story – the story of a woman who gathers the fragments of her life and reconstructs it. Next to the dead body, a living body begins to stabilize, grasping strands of hope and rescuing itself from the inferno. The black, sealed urns are gradually replaced by blue healing vessels of the soul; "chaos" now gives way to the "stream of life". The current exhibition reflects the long road taken by the artist – from chaos to recovery, from despair to belief, from loss to salvation, and yet, her cry does not remain on the personal, biographical level. The age-old cycle of life and death, embodying within

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<sup>2</sup> See my article "Hastily the World Hastens to Pass Away..." in the exhibition catalogue *Postscripts: "End"-Representations in Contemporary Israeli Art*, The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, Tel Aviv University, May 1992, pp. 21-23; English version, by Richard Flantz, pp. 152-153.

it the modern (Freudian) dialectics of Eros and Thanatos, is externalized here on a metaphorical level.

The exhibition consists of three groups of works – three allegories for mental states (almost in the Renaissance spirit of Durer) – which together designate processes of rehabilitation and recovery on the existential metaphorical level, like archaeology of the soul. The basic existential duality is found in them all, only the emphases change; a matter of dosage, a question of climate. The first group celebrates death. Images of end are repeated obsessively, distress rules. And the titles, too, seem to mumble in prayer: "Divided Woman", "Woman Holding Chaos", "Bleeding Vessel", "Nest of Pain", "Woman on Illuminated Table", "Nocturnal Bleeding", "Mutilating Organs", "Woman Holding Her Dead Body". The emphasis is on the wound, on the body that is exposed to a prolonged internal bleeding. The woman is perceived as a victim of herself, lacking control, totally helpless. The body is a grave and she stands on the threshold, "carried into those chaotic transition states of death, illness, desert, chaos, blood, drowning, disappearance and endless pain."<sup>3</sup> And yet, in almost all these works, as though despite the harsh images, the act of mending after gathering the fragments is prominent, the materiality of the painting act as a monument for pain. Worlds that had collapsed seem to have been lifted off the ground, classified according to a vague principle and glued together again as souvenirs of a lost human activity. The Jungian conceptual system, based upon the idea of dialectic union that is found in almost all ancient religions and myths, is already evident here. The awareness of death in these paintings is that of a spiritual person; death in life, death that makes life possible.

The second, later group represents the stage of recovery; seeds of hope are beginning to sprout. Life-drive is stronger than death-drive, the music changes, as if a new thing to hold on to had come into being. The titles of the works, too, indicate the change; something lighter is felt in the air: "Woman Holding the Current of Life", "Blue Woman", "Woman Holding the Stream of Her Life", "Woman Holding Plenty", "Woman Holding Sun", "Woman in the Sea of Hearts", "Woman with Four Souls". The schematic image of the woman appears in all the works. At times she bends down in a desperate attempt to collect the wrecks of her life, her crutch-like hands seem to grasp at fragments, at times she raises her hands up in a gesture of prayer, as if holding the sun, and at other times she sinks under the burden of the four souls, hanging like sacks on her bent back. In any case, she is no longer passive, no longer carried away. "The Stream of Life", like the image of chaos in the earlier works, is indeed a clear image of disorder. It is presented here as part of the woman's body, possibly swept along or breaking inside her, possibly bursting forth out of the wrecks, like a horizontal thread stretching from her onwards. However, unlike the paintings

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from scribbling and thoughts written by the artist during a trans-Atlantic dialogue that preceded the writing of this essay.

of "Woman Holding Chaos", here it seems that despite the transience and fragility expressed in this very condition of standing on the edge of the abyss, there is an evident stubborn struggle to hold on to the edge, to seize control, to cling to life. Whereas in the beginning of the series the "stream of life" is presented as a narrow and very thin trickle, in the later paintings it develops into a wide and flowing river, and towards the end of the series its waters seem to flood the painting entirely, the blue fills the heart, drains into the vessel.<sup>4</sup>

This duality is reinforced due to the Midrashic meaning the artist sees in the water motif, perceived on the one hand as a fertilizing and purifying force, but at the same time embodies ancient, chaotic, threatening powers too. The Midrash distinguishes between "upper water", or the "waters above", which are oozing waters (male) and "lower water", or "the waters below", which are enveloping waters (female). On the one hand, bountiful rains, dew, divine abundance flowing from wells, springs, streams, rivers, lakes and seas, with all the mystic meanings attached to immersion in water, saturation and purification, and on the other hand, black subterranean water – depth symbolizing the evil side, the uncontrolled sexual desires (Freud) – "a destructive force striving to burst forth and obliterate all boundaries and restraints."<sup>5</sup> Jewish mysticism is full of rituals of immersion and purification. It seems that the bond with the purifying water attempts to dam up the ancient "lower" water.<sup>6</sup> The remedial mystic experience speaks of a purified state of rebirth, achieved by descending into the water, as a path to salvation. The art of Dorrit Yacoby is anchored in the depths of the mystic experience – for her, too, the road to heaven goes through hell.

The third body of works indeed paves the way to heaven. Here the blue "vessels of the soul" begin to appear, next to "Blue Star", "Blue Woman", "Flying Bride", "Golden Heart Flower (The Ability to Love)", "Woman Holding Four Souls" and "Woman Holding Light". The blue vessel is a

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of duality underlies the perception of the victim – he who imbibes death gains forgiveness for the sins of others and in his death makes redemption possible. Almost all religions and all folk myths deal with a cycle of reform, transfigurations of life and death, re-absorbence of life out of extinction. Thus, for example, in the Assyrian culture, the deity Tammuz is described as descending every summer into the underworld and rising again in the spring. The artist brought to my attention the story of the leper sacrifice; according to this story, it was customary to sacrifice two birds: one was killed and its blood dripped into a vessel of water, whereas the other flew up after it was immersed in the blood and set free.

<sup>5</sup> The discussion of water is taken from Midrash *BeReshit Raba* (Genesis Raba – the Judaic commentary to the Book of Genesis), Parasha (Chapter) Thirteen.

<sup>6</sup> Taken from an essay by Haviva Pdaya, "Water Was Called Living", *Jewish Thought Studies*, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev; printed in a special newspaper accompanying a play according to Martin Buber's "Gog and Magog" in the Jerusalem Festival, 1994. The title of the essay, "Water was called living", is drawn from *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (Avot De'Rabbi Natan), Chapter 34.

direct sequel of the urn image recurring in her earlier works. However, unlike the black urns, designed "to preserve the fragments gathered from the pits of the abyss", in her own words, the blue vessels hold remedial energies, therapeutic qualities. Here, too, there is a concealed typical dialectics: on the one hand, the full vessel, sealed at its opening, designed to absorb, to store, to accumulate and preserve, and on the other hand, the empty, bottomless vessel – the shell, the empty container – itself an archaeological relic of culture.<sup>7</sup> In this sense we can read the image of the vessel as an image of an imprisoning body, a shell-like vessel enclosing the soul, the "philosopher's stone" of the mystic union. In earlier paintings, the black urns and pots appeared as painted silhouettes, as an element that unifies the fragments of the painting. In the vessels' paintings it is rather the plastic element that is prominent; these vessels have volume, they dispel the hallow of blue around them, glittering with the internal light they disperse. Along with them, it seems that the whole palette has become brighter; this series feels less crowded, redundancy is reduced. Painting the pain in blue – the most spiritual of all colors – seems to enable reform: the disintegrated parts merge and melt into one another, partitions disappear, the broken cosmos becomes whole. Yacoby depicted these vessels as draining containers. She spoke of bandaging the pain, of the blood that was poured and became water, and now it drains into the vessel. The inspirational sources she mentioned are related to folk tales from the 12th century (German), tales of wizardry and twilight-zone stories, black magic, Hassidism, Kabbalism and other occult doctrines. Underlying these sources is the dialectics found in killing the chaotic element and the pleasure of overcoming it. The dripping of blood makes possible the formation of new life, just as the vitality of light can only emerge out of the dark, from the depths of darkness. And indeed, the conspicuous element in these paintings is one that is uniting, consolidating, connecting, pasting body-parts that were torn apart. There, in the depth of the vessel, the reform takes place, self-redemption is made possible, by denouncing the negative, damaged, blemished element and draining it in. There, in the depth of the vessel, the sacrifice is made, sanctity is born. From this point we can interpret the vessels of the soul as an archetype of perfection, as a reorganization of flawed inner connections and relations between inside and outside.

The main character in all three groups of works is the woman: a gray, long legged figure; the center of her body is wide, her thighs are emphasized; a linear, osseous, bodiless woman; like a schematization of the woman, an abstract linear notation of her figure. The common interpretation read her as a mythic figure, something like Mother Nature, a modern version of the goddess of

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<sup>7</sup> The vessel motif is taken directly from an ancient folk tale, which is about the soul of an embryo that was locked in a vessel and only when the cloth-cover was removed from the vessel, the soul was released and delivery made possible. The belief in the ability to store the soul in a vessel, as though the vessel itself has qualities of life, being an energetic source of healing powers, is anchored in the perception of the physical body and the astral body; in the definition of the soul as a living force that may possibly be retained, but never overcome.

fertility. Yet, a closer look at the process described earlier thickens her image, adding to it a feminist flavor, next to the mystical fragrance already embedded in her. From a passive figure depicted in dead-end situations she becomes a hero, a strong woman leading an eternal struggle for her existence. Perhaps the most typical pose of Dorrit Yacoby's new woman is in her dychotomic state - her lower body seems stuck in the ground and a part of her floats to the sky. The true story, therefore, is of a woman who chose life, a strong woman whose "otherness" threatens the existing social order. One of the ancient tales the artist told me while writing this essay is about a woman who swallowed children and was condemned to die. Her stomach was cut open and filled with knives, but she kept on flying. Her mouth was filled with stones, a stake was driven in her cheek and she was forced to the ground, but no one could kill off her soul and she kept on flying. Such myths that are concerned with restraining the divergent woman, the witch or the madwoman, indicate the tremendous fear of feminine powers; "for we both know," Dorrit wrote to me, "that all the restrictions in the world won't stop our spirit from flying and rising, and that a woman with a belly full of knives, a mouth full of stones and a stake in her cheek will recover, heal and fly on."<sup>8</sup> Hence, her works touch upon the ability to live with knives in the gut, the ability to fly when a stake is driven in your cheek, of life in the hopelessness of the present, where hopelessness is the fuel for authenticity; it is the motivating force for creation.

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<sup>8</sup> Taken from the artist's thoughts and scribbling.