



29. Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn,
Portrait of a Woman Wearing a Gold
Chain, 1634, oil on wood panel

A CONVERSATION WITH ORI GERSHT

Ronni Baer

The following text represents a conversation between Ori Gersht and Ronni Baer, William and Ann Elfers Senior Curator of Paintings, Art of Europe, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The exchanges, based on a wide-ranging discussion on November 18, 2011, have been edited and grouped by topic.

ON OTHER ART

RB When did you meet old master paintings for the first time?

OG It is a difficult question, because I can't remember. I was exposed to reproductions from a very young age, but didn't pay that much attention.

RB So it wasn't a "eureka" experience?

OG No, it wasn't like that. It was a kind of evolutionary process that led to my becoming more interested in old master paintings than anything else. I used to draw and paint when I was young and when I was a teenager, and I took drawing and painting classes, but at university I wasn't trained as a painter. Initially, my fascination was with photography, but I began to find it limited and separatist, ignorant somehow of its own art-historical heritage. With this realization, I opened up more and more to painting, particularly to old master painting.

RB During your childhood in Israel in the late '60s and early '70s, there weren't a lot of old master paintings around, were there?

OG No, not a lot, but, you know, you just can't avoid it in the world we live in. In Tel Aviv, you'd see reproductions on book covers, in magazines, or on postcards.

RB I wasn't so much aware of that imagery myself. For me, the "eureka" came with my confrontation with the original work of art, which I couldn't imagine before I experienced it.

OG That happened for me years later. It took me a certain level of maturity — from looking at images and developing my photographic work — to become fascinated by old master paintings.

RB For me, it was the stories. It was phenomenal to me that one story could be interpreted in any number of ways, depending on the genius of the artist, that the same story could look so very different and you could be either drawn in or repelled. Beauty in narrative is exactly what the old masters are about, and I like it that your work, too, has an element of narrative. If you had to choose one old master painting that moves you the most, which would it be?

OG I immediately think of Goya. His black paintings, particularly, which I love.

RB Was this in your consciousness when you were making Will You Dance for Me?

OG Yes, it was. All my films are conceived as a single image, hence their close relationship to painting — a moment of singularity. For *Will You Dance for Me*, I was thinking a lot about Yehudit Arnon, the dancer, and the idea that she would rock from dark to light, and I was also thinking of Goya and Rembrandt [fig. 29]. I focused on the contrast between the black background and the luminosity of the figure as she emerges into the light. Paintings will often resonate for me. For example, I saw a major Rembrandt self-portrait exhibition at the National Gallery a few years ago. At the time, I didn't think, Oh, now I want to make a related film; but the seed was planted and while working on *Will You Dance for Me*, the connection emerged in my consciousness [plates 41–44].

RB Rembrandt will leave the ground color that's underneath the entire painting visible in little interstices between the layers of paint. And that color creates the illusion of reflected light under the sitter's chin.

OG I saw this effect just a few days ago, when Nogah, my wife, took me to see a Rembrandt painting that is amber, monochromatic, and quite



30. Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani (The Lady with an Ermine)*, about 1489–90, oil on walnut

gestural. I was mesmerized by the painting, which gave that impression that the base colors were coming to the foreground. There were no contours at all. All the tones seemed to be constantly moving or vibrating, giving a sense of depth and lifelikeness that I cannot achieve in photography, much to my frustration. After looking at something like that, I wonder what the point is of doing anything at all. But at the same time, it's also stimulating and makes me think about the present and about contemporary means of artistic production. . . . You used to work with contemporary art?

RB *I worked at the Museum of Modern Art for three years and I followed contemporary art in the late '70s in New York pretty avidly, but it wasn't nearly as interesting as what you're doing. I found conceptual art sterile, because I'm a sensualist. I love looking at paintings and drawings, and that's why your work is so compelling to me — not just for its pictorial quality, but also because of your unabashed interest in beauty.*

OG It's an interesting time now, because a lot of what was going on in modernism and conceptual art opened doors for my generation, who are now not afraid to return to the figure and to beauty.

RB *Art really did reach a tipping point, or a dead end, or a cliff.*

OG The old masters hold the key to everything; they are the sources of inspiration that really feed me. I don't look much at modernist art. Nogah and I recently visited a Leonardo show at the National Gallery in London and, though I've seen quite a few Leonardos before, looking at that group of nine paintings in the flesh was an elevating experience. I heard Martin Kemp talk about the way Leonardo built his palette to create an internal luminosity, starting with the dominant color and adding lighter tones. As the painting progressed he gradually moved from the lighter to the darker tones, creating the impression that the

lighter ones are not painted on top, but emanate from within [fig. 30]. This technique, which creates a kind of glow, is obviously very, very difficult and painstaking. As I was standing and looking at the paintings, I thought about photography, which is all about reflected light — light that comes from surfaces and not from within the object. But there's a desire with photography, or any visual medium, to have this light be a translucent, penetrating force.

RB *That was the miracle of Jan van Eyck. . . . that he made things reflect light in a way that had never been done before. But each artist finds his own way to do that. One of my favorite things is to see how an individual artist captures reflected light, because there are so many solutions and some of them are just incredible.*

OG I was about to say.

RB *I find the whole thing magical. I think it's alchemical.*

OG It is alchemical. In photography, I am always aware that light can only bounce off surfaces. But my true desire is metaphysical: to capture pure light. I believe this was what Leonardo was attempting to achieve — a kind of metaphysical representation of his sitters. We're made of a body and soul, and we have no tools for understanding where the soul leads, only a sense of it. The idea of a light from within that is not reflected or bounced back is very much about my fascination with the soul.

RB *Is your interest in the soul based in a Jewish upbringing, do you think?*

OG Yes, I believe so.

ON PORTRAITURE AND PERFORMANCE

RB *Evaders is in some ways a portrait of Walter Benjamin, though you use an actor in his stead. Will You Dance for Me features the subject herself. How do you see the role of portraiture in your work?*

OG There are relationships between *Evaders*, *Will You Dance for Me*, and a new film that I'm working on now, *Offering* [fig. 31]. I see each as a portrait and as a performance. In *Evaders* [plates 36–38], the performer is an actor [Clive Russell] who, due to the extreme physical challenges that were imposed on him, was not, in fact, acting. My aim was to strip him of self-consciousness. *Will You Dance For Me*, on the other hand, documents a professional dancer whose performance in the film echoes her present state of being and her reflections on her life story.



31. Still from *Offering*, 2012, HD film

32. Ori Gersht at work, 2007
 33. Sketchbook page showing study for
Falling Bird, 2007, ink and graphite on paper



And, finally, in *Offering*, I have intimately filmed a matador dressing in preparation to face a bull in the ring. This is also a performance but, unlike a theatrical performance, the event is real and the performer's mortality is at stake. In all three films, there is a strong element of existential realism, and all three performances are simultaneously contemplative and intensely physical.

RB How did you prepare the actor in *Evaders for the challenges?*

OG We had a long conversation about what it would be like, that it would be physically difficult and that he would be pushed to the point I was interested in filming — where things start to fall apart. On the first day of filming, I gave him some tips about his character's heart condition, pain, and physical frailty. He tried to walk and act accordingly, and I saw that this was not going to work. It wasn't the point. I wasn't trying to make a sentimental reenactment. What interests me — and this may also be related to the old masters — is making a journey. That is the only connection with the past. We are tracing the route, but we are walking now, in the present. It's a parallel journey. I want it to be an expedition. I don't want to try and imagine what Benjamin was going through, which will emerge from our walking the same route. But there is one fundamental difference: now there is no border, while when Benjamin made the journey there was a border that separated life from death.

O N P R O C E S S

RB Let me ask you now about the historical idea of an artist's studio, where you have a master and pupils who are trying to work as closely as possible to his style. Or the paradigm of a master who has a lace painter and a drapery painter and a landscape painter, and they're collaborating on this great thing in the studio. Your team includes experts in all sorts of fields. What's the process?

OG Well, first I have to consider the idea. *Pomegranate* [see frontispiece], for example, started with my imagining a bullet going through the fruit and causing it to bleed. My initial associations were with pomegranates in old masters painting and their Judeo-Christian symbolism. A Sanchez Cotán painting and Edgerton photograph [see fig. 17, p. 212, and fig. 11, p. 46] then emerged from my unconscious. The final film is a fusion of these three elements. For the production, I worked with a

film-commissioning group in London called Film and Video Umbrella. With their production team, I constructed a wooden window in the studio and hung the fruit and vegetables from the top frame. When we lit the vegetables, very simply, and looked at them through the camera lens, the transformation was instant: they looked very painterly. For the shooting, we consulted with a special-effects expert, who constructed a special gun and devised a mechanism that allowed us to control the speed of the pellets. After the filming, I realized that the fusion between the Cotán painting and the Edgerton photograph was also a sort of fusion between opposite ends of a spectrum.

RB Opposite ends of a spectrum?

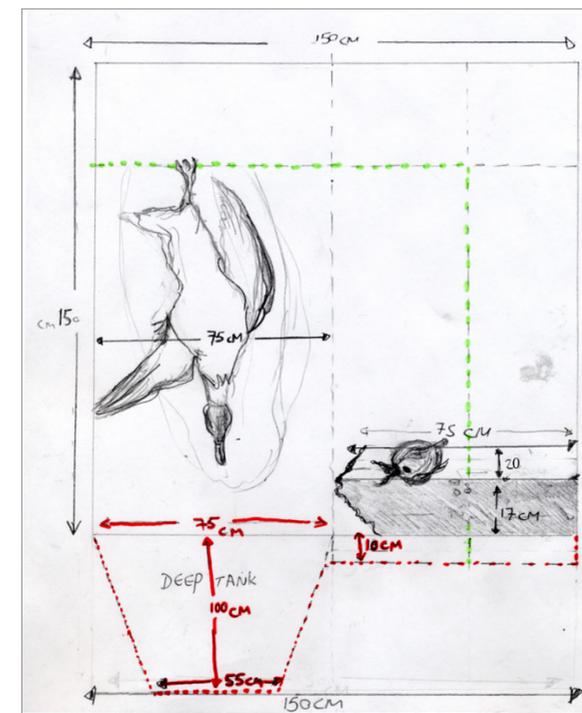
OG Yes. Cotán was attempting to achieve compositional equilibrium through painstaking mathematical calculations, while Edgerton, who was trying to freeze time, captured a perfectly balanced composition from an event that happened in a flash, conceivable only through the mediation of the camera. *Pomegranate* negotiates these two positions. Only after making the piece did I become aware of the relationship my piece had with a parabolic aspect of Cotán's painting that Norman Bryson describes in his book *Looking at the Overlooked* [London: Reaktion Books, 2001]. While arranging the set, I had taken the liberty of moving the pomegranate I had substituted for Cotán's quince, shifting it from its original position at the left of the composition toward the center. This was done for pragmatic reasons, as I wanted to contain the pomegranate inside the window frame after the bullet hit it. On impact, the pomegranate began to swing in a pendulum motion that created an echo of the parabolic curvature of Cotán's composition. It happened by pure chance — a great gift to me and, ultimately, to the piece.

RB It is such a shocking image when you're not prepared, the swinging flesh of that pomegranate.

OG That day, we shot fifteen pomegranates. The filming setup was expensive and we had to maximize the use of time — there are so many variables that we had to keep moving from one take to the next, hoping to get the perfect event.

RB I think this is very important, because it raises the question of why you go to the trouble of setting everything up in reality rather than producing a computer-generated image, where you can control everything.

OG Whenever I produce work, I seek a sort of divine fusion of luck and timing. If I don't give space for accidents to mix with professional intention, I can't make art. And sometimes it won't take, and sometimes it will, but it's crucial that everyone — not just me, because filmmaking involves a whole crew — feels that they are on their tiptoes, nervous and



aware that disaster or failure is looming. And then something will be pulled out. On one level, I have to be very insecure about the whole process, and on the other, remain very open and have faith that at one point it will all come together.

RB Do you have scientists helping you figure out what needs to change to get the image you're looking for?

OG There is often a special-effects team. The approach on the set is empirical — you do something and draw conclusions. For the *Big Bang* film, I had a pyrotechnics expert on the set because the flowers were wired with explosives.

RB At the end of that film, there's a close-up of one flower that is still standing [fig. 34]. How did you know that would happen? Was it prearranged?

OG It happened by chance. That particular take was the only incidence of a flower surviving. It is a very charged moment, and I felt, naturally, this should be the one.

RB That's incredible. So you did take close-ups of a lot of other explosions.

OG Yes. Actually, I did two versions. The explosion in the second film is more spectacular, but no flower survives. Prior to the explosion we had frozen all the flowers with liquid nitrogen, so when they exploded, they were very brittle and shattered like glass.

RB So this particular flower was frozen, but not wired for explosion?

OG Right. We don't put explosive devices on every flower, and this one was fairly small.

O N S O U N D

RB When you were filming *Big Bang*, what was your idea with adding music or sound?

OG At first, I hoped to destroy the composition with high-pitched sound. But I soon realized that there were technical complications, since the shattering points of the frozen flowers and glass vase would be very different. To preserve the spirit of the idea, I brought in the sounds of war sirens I sourced from an archive in Israel and combined them with the voice of an opera singer played in reverse.

RB Did you work with a composer or mixer?

OG No, with a sound designer.

RB Do you use your studio as a kind of stage?



34. *Untitled 10*, 2007, LVT print

35. Robert Capa, *Death of a Loyalist Militiaman*, Córdoba Front, Spain, 1936, gelatin silver print

OG No. Since you need high ceilings and large doors to get in big equipment for filming, I often rent a professional film studio. For *Falling Bird* [see fig. 33], we had to build a large steel tank for the bird to fall into.

RB *I was going to ask you about that. Is it regular water in a regular tank?*

OG No. At first, the liquid was oil, due to its connotations and qualities, but the viscosity prevented the bird from going through it. Then we tried a sort of black glue used in filmmaking to replicate oil. We ended up with water dyed black. We painted the tank black on the inside to make the surface of the water appear impenetrable.

RB *The sound is also quite astounding in that piece. It seems to vacillate between sonar depths and crashing surf. How did you do that?*

OG I was working with Ross Adams, the same sound designer I had worked with on *Pomegranate*. I wanted the sounds to move the film from the micro to the macro, so viewers would feel that at first they were standing in front of a painting in the gallery, and then, when I cut to the close-up, they would have the sensation of being in a place where they lose their sense of perspective and proportion. I imagined an ocean with big tsunami waves, but I also wanted to follow minute details within the vast sound, so, for example, the sound designer highlighted the sound of small drops with the hiss of flame touching water. I wanted to create a transition for viewers from one space to another, with a return at the end of the film to the static setup. For me, the film stretches between two still moments — the beginning and the end — with something occurring in between that is almost like the blink of an eye.

ON PHOTOGRAPHY AND PAINTING

RB *Did you conceive of the idea of exploding flowers — and capturing things that the eye can't really see — first in film and then in photography?*

OG The film came first. I started to realize what a photographic opportunity it offered. The moments are dynamic but also frozen. Some of the stills capture fragments of time when the energy of the explosive has passed through the flowers and you see cracks in the vase, but everything is still held together. Capturing these moments is very photographic, because photography is so much about the here and now and not about the before and after. There is a famous photograph by Robert Capa of



a Spanish Civil War soldier hit by the bullet [fig. 35] — we see that he's already dead but still alive, which reminded me of Goya's *The Third of May* and Manet's *Execution of Maximilian*.

RB *How so?*

OG The two paintings closely resemble each other. However, there are fundamental differences that I believe relate to the time they were made. Goya and Manet created their paintings on either side of the invention of photography. Goya's painting is very much in the tradition of historical painting — his narrative is dramatic and unfolds fully on the canvas — whereas Manet concentrated on something very different. He depicted the smoking barrels, the flash, the millisecond when the bullet has left the barrel and hit Maximilian, who is still alive and already dead. I believe that Manet was able to conceive of this moment only because of the invention of photography, though at the time photography could not yet deliver on its promise that an image could be made at such a high speed that it could present these two moments at once.

RB *So you have painstakingly recreated different still lifes and blown them up to capture, in as clear a way as possible, that split second that the eye can't see.*

OG Yes. When you're standing in front a flower and it explodes, it's "poof," and then nothing.

RB *And for *Falling Bird*, when you cut the string the bird must have dropped down, but in the film it descends slowly.*

OG It's filmed at a very high speed. While normally a camera films at 25 frames per second, ours filmed at 1,600 frames per second. So when you play the film at 25, it becomes very slow.

RB *Oh, I see—you're not doing it in slow-mo.*

OG Well, this is the principle of slow-motion filming. That's where the experience of reality in relation to old master paintings shifts, because technology all of a sudden can radically stretch a moment. Benjamin defined this idea as optical unconsciousness. Things that evade your perception are, all of a sudden, opened up by technological devices. Some of the first photographs that Daguerre made, in 1838, show the street through his studio window at various times of day. You have to remember that this was before photography was officially invented. He was fascinated by the fact that, with the aid of photography, one can simultaneously view multiple images of the same place at different moments, as if the camera allowed us to leap through time. He recognized that photographs are capable of folding time upon itself. This kind of thinking allowed Monet and the impressionists to divert the course of painting away from realistic representation of the world. In my photographic work, I constantly try to resist the violation of the passage of time, and this is in part why I expose my film for such a long periods time. Photography is always very specific to a time and place. I'm trying to make photographs that will free themselves of this specificity.

RB *Is that the point of the pixilation in Chasing Good Fortune? A work from that series, Speck 01 [plate 16], interested me because of Seurat. The relation between pixilation and photography and pointillism and painting is fascinating, something I had never thought about before.*

OG Yes, and beyond the relationship with pointillism, the *Speck* photographs are also reminiscent of the first color process in photography, the autochrome. Invented by the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière at the beginning of the twentieth century, autochromes were created by dyeing potato starch grains red, green, and blue, and mixing and distributing the colors in equal proportions on a light-sensitive varnished glass plate. Due to the size of the potato starch grains, the resulting prints were always grainy and painterly. When I saw how the images I was working on turned out, I was surprised at the resemblance.

The Lumière brothers weren't trying to mimic the impressionist or postimpressionist painters—their process just led them to a similar aesthetic, as it did for me. For the trip to Japan, I took a newly developed digital camera that can photograph under very low light conditions. Because I wanted to push this sensitive camera beyond its threshold, to work at the limits of its abilities to record, I went out to photograph late at night. The effect that you refer to is actually the result of a technological failure. Despite the darkness, light bounced off the subject and traveled through the open aperture of the lens. But when it hit the digital sensor, the sensor struggled to interpret it, producing the color aberrations apparent in the final print. I am interested in the gaps between subjective interpretations of the human eye and the mechanical recordings of the camera. Although the camera is supposed to be an objective tool, when pushed out of its comfort zone, it begins to warp reality and present alternative ways of seeing.

RB *So, you've gone full circle to the Lumière brothers.*

OG Yes, and to Seurat as well. It's about a failure of communication between the optical—the light traveling through the lens—and the mathematical interpretation of the photoelectric information received by the camera's sensor.

RB *Images like Boatman and Floating Tree [plates 26 and 27], on the other hand, resemble Monets. Does that comparison do anything for you?*

OG Yes, it does.

RB *He was capturing visual sensation, right?*

OG Yes. What gives the pieces in the *Hide and Seek* series an impressionistic quality has to do with the dissolving of the horizon line, which allowed me to create the impression of a unified space that lacks a vanishing point. Without any distinction between upper and lower ground, the real and the reflected can be substituted for each other, making the viewer's visual orientation very complicated.

RB *You figured out how to do that?*

OG Yes. A few years earlier, I had read Primo Levi's novel *If Not Now, When?* [New York: Summit Books, 1985], in which he described the life of the partisans during World War II, including communities living in and around swamps and marshes at the border of Poland and Belarus. When the opportunity arose for me to seek out these places, I figured



36. Claude Monet, *Waterloo Bridge: the Sun in a Fog*, 1903, oil on canvas



37. Detail of still from *The Forest*, 2005, 16 mm film

out their general location and asked a local forester to help me find them. The question of what to photograph immediately presented a problem: if these places functioned as safe havens during the war, probably not many people knew where they were, and therefore it was possible that they were not marked on maps, and if they were not marked on maps, one could ask if they actually existed. The challenge for me was how to represent places that do not exist.

In this series, I tried to capture a space that is simultaneously physical and metaphysical, which may be related to my preoccupation with the dichotomy between the Jewish Diaspora and the state of Israel, which is also the dichotomy between the utopian idea of a place and the attempt to make it a reality. But these works are also related, as you say, to Monet, not only because they are misty and depict reflections, but also because I am attempting to challenge the technical and conceptual boundaries of photography in something of the way that Monet challenged the tradition of painting (fig. 36).

Photography by default is restricted to a monocular mathematical perspective dictated by the optical design of the lens. In my work, I battle this given restriction in order to depict spaces that are universalizing, that do not have a clear hierarchy. In such photographs, it is crucial to be meticulous about the composition, because if, for example, horizontal symmetry is not maintained, the illusion of spatial compression that I am trying to create will not work.

In relation to Monet, I should mention a photograph I produced in 2004 as part of the series *Blaze*. I pointed the camera for a long time

directly at the blazing sun, hoping to burn the lens and destroy the picture with light. To my surprise, when I developed the film, I saw that the sun had branded itself as a perfectly circular, bright orange disk. Later, it occurred to me that the image closely resembled an early Monet painting.

ON MEMORY AND LANDSCAPE

RB *I think my favorite work of all is The Forest [fig. 37]. You feel like you're there. When one tree falls, you think of it as a natural process, but then others begin to fall. The trees just keep on falling.*

OG Again, you could ask yourself, Did it really happen? Nogah and I visited this forest located at the outskirts of Kosiv, a village where her father survived the Holocaust as a little boy. I began to think of the forest as a stage where a lot of things took place that no one knew about, since it's so dense and concealed. My initial idea was to go to the forest and cut down a tree—I had an urge to scar the landscape. I then decided instead to create a visual journey through the forest, to get lost in this enchanted space. I also wanted to create the impression that the trees fall of their own accord, for no apparent reason. I imagined it as a sort of paranormal disaster. I was after an emotional journey where tranquil arcadian experiences were interrupted by monumental crashes.

The camera action is very monotonous throughout the film, mechanical and unemotional, since I didn't want the camera to dramatize or add pathos. After each crash of a felled tree, the forest quickly fills in the gap. The tree that just a few minutes earlier was so promi-

nent in the frame has disappeared without a trace. The sound was also crucial. I wanted to establish a dialectical tension between pastoral sounds and dramatic collisions. In order to create depth and give the impression of a vast landscape, Ross Adams, the sound designer, recorded the falling trees from different distances. The resonance of the low-frequency bass was crucial, since it rendered the sound physical. When a tree falls, the bass becomes a force that travels through the bodies of the viewers.

RB *Had you done much work in film prior to this?*

OG I had made *Neither Black nor White* [see fig. 7, p. 35] and *A Breath of Air*. Up to that point, all the films I had made were locked-in shots, like a still photograph that is transformed over time.

RB *The way you filmed The Forest feels so simple and so beautiful.*

OG In a lot of my work there is a tension between moments when you experience aesthetic pleasure and moments when you witness violence, or realize that violence has happened or is about to happen. The forest is obviously a place where a lot of horrific things took place.

RB *Well, not obviously. There's nothing that tells you that.*

OG This forest is related to the primeval European forests and all their history and myth. Of course, I wanted the film to have a historical resonance, and associations with the Holocaust infuse my ideas and motivation, but I also wanted it to touch on the more universal idea of human fragility. I wanted it to relate to German romanticism and at the same time to evoke the most mundane sensations of a walk in the woods.

RB *In addition to the major themes that recur in your art, there are also symbolic elements, one of them being the tree. The olive, the cypress, the Japanese cherry, and then the trees in The Forest.*

OG Yes, it keeps coming up. I see a strong affinity between the human being and the tree. Trees are so evocative, and it's interesting to see how much of our nationalistic discourse is invested in them.

RB *The anthropomorphic quality of a tree is traditional, and maybe you're picking up on that subconsciously.*

OG Yes, it's very intuitive. It's not that I'm thinking, Oh, what other trees can I find and what can I do with them. For example, the cherry images emerged from my thinking about the contrast between the soft, pastel palette of their blossoms and the nuclear-contaminated soil that nour-

ishes them. When I looked into it, I learned of the association of the falling petals with the Kamikaze pilot; often the pilot took a branch with him for his final flight. During World War II, Japanese nationalists praised the ephemeral nature of cherry blossoms and compared them with Chinese and Korean flowers that never let go and ultimately rot on the branch.

RB *In the case of the olive trees, when you first look at the photographs they're reminiscent of the Barbizon painters' take on trees, but then you start to wonder what's going on. What's happened to this beautiful, poetic, sensitive depiction of a tree? It seems to be deteriorating in front of your eyes.*

OG I titled this series *Ghost* [plates 2–6]. The olive trees were photographed in Palestinian villages in the Galilee in Israel. The trees I photographed are very old—they have lived through the Ottoman occupation, the British Mandate, and the current conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. I wanted to photograph these silent and beautiful trees, but I wanted the process to relate to the violent environment they grow in. My intention was to destroy the film by flooding it with light, so I overexposed the photographs in the heat of summer days. When I processed the film, I got dense, black negatives. I then took the negatives to my darkroom and attempted to save the traces of information that had registered on the film. The ghostly effect is a result of light bleaching the emulsion. In other words, the same light that originally registered information begins to erase the film, and new information is recorded on top of old information. The film becomes a plane on which simultaneous processes of recalling and erasing are taking place. Metaphorically, this process can be compared with recollecting and forgetting.

Formally, these images challenge traditional conventions of photographic perspective. Photographic focus tends to recede proportionally toward a vanishing point, but in these long exposures, due to movement and the fading from the light, elements drift in and out of focus. As a result, the photographic spaces look more like an abstract painting than a photograph.

RB *There are so many resonances and layered cadences in your work that I wonder how you feel when the audience looks at it on a purely formal basis, missing the multivalent associations.*

OG I totally accept this. When the works enter the public arena, they're not

mine anymore. Hopefully, they're evocative, and in books and catalogues like this there are texts that document and contextualize them. Also, the titles and wall labels provide information that can transform the cognitive experience of viewers. I am interested in the space between the visual and the lingual, between what one sees and what one knows.

O N D I A L E C T I C S

RB *Your work is always talked about in terms of oppositions. Creation and destruction. Violence and poetic calm. These oppositions are crucial. But it's also an intellectual procedure. I don't know how you can achieve such beautiful results from such an intellectual undertaking. That, to me, is the real dichotomy—intellectualism and beauty.*

OG The *Drape* images that at first sight appear beautiful and delicate are a good example of the oppositions you refer to [plates 11 and 12]. Through the lace curtains you see the forest of Sobibor, planted by the Germans at the end of World War II to conceal evidence of the systematic killing that took place there; the trees are, in fact, feeding off the ashes of the 250,000 bodies buried there.

The lace curtains were collected in local villages, and are typical of these rural regions. I was interested in them because they are translucent, and therefore simultaneously reveal and conceal. Placed at the front of the picture as a screen, they optically dissolve, provoking a sort of meltdown of foreground and background.

This device enhances the dialectical tension that exists between surface and hidden meaning, between beauty and horror. The collision of such fundamental oppositions is at the core of my practice. The tension does not have its source in rational analysis, but in an intuitive impulse that haunts and motivates me.

