



1. Ignace-Henri-Théodore Fantin-Latour,
The Rosy Wealth of June, 1886, oil on canvas

ORI GERSHT: *HISTORY REPEATING*

Al Miner

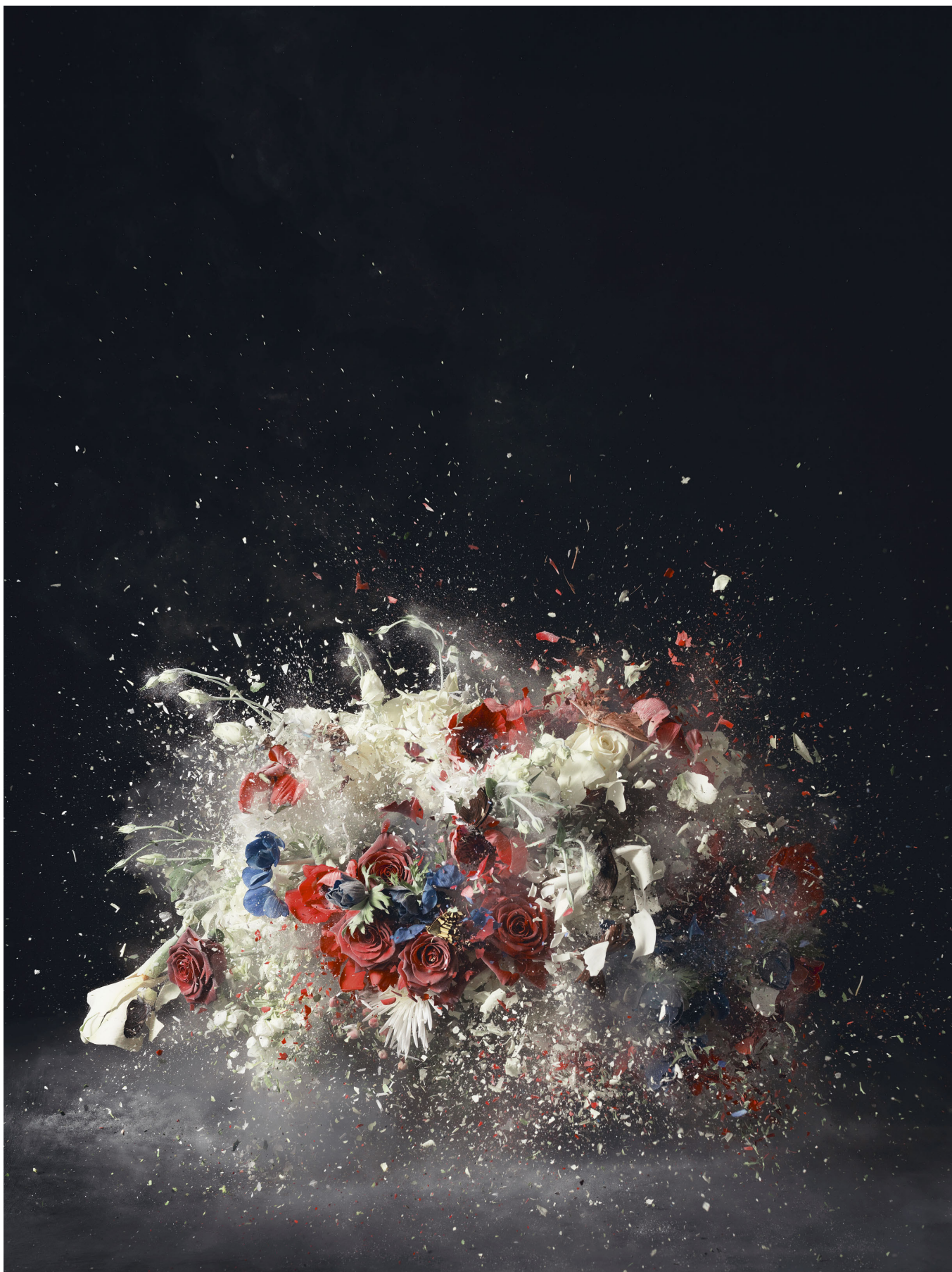
ORI GERSHT CRITIQUES THE PAST through startlingly subversive routes in evocative and innovative photographs and films. Masterfully manipulating the latest digital technology, he takes a deep and discerning look at multiple histories and the way they are communicated. These are histories that have shaped his own identity and helped define the state of contemporary society. Other art of our time has found inspiration in political history and its fallout, from the archive-as-art installations of the 1980s collective Group Material, which commented on the government’s mishandling of the AIDS crisis, to Leon Golub’s rough figurative paintings showing the human rights violations that took place in Vietnam and elsewhere. Gersht, however, is unique in the way he delivers information and sparks critical debate. He uses the discredited quality of beauty and the deeply personal realm of his own emotions to examine the violent past and its connection to the troubled present.

As early as 1963, Andy Warhol’s “disaster paintings” demonstrated the effects of a media-saturated culture on our experience of violence. Borrowing the latest newspaper photographs of aggressive acts and volatile situations — the electric chair at the Sing Sing prison in Ossining, New York, and the suppression of race riots in Birmingham, Alabama — he repeated the images in multiple works or repeatedly in single works, not so much to underline their power to shock as to open viewers’ eyes to the numbness induced by repeated exposure. Yet Gersht’s approach is very different from Warhol’s. Instead of reenacting and filming gory moments of genocide and Holocaust history (a common tactic in television and feature films about these, his central subjects), Gersht creates visually seductive gateways into some of the worst chapters in the history of humankind. Further overturning expectations, he utilizes the same tool as the media, the camera lens, to document these moral assaults. Gersht employs and tests the capabilities of the latest and

most sophisticated lens-based technologies, all the while challenging viewers to question the ability of technology (and collective memory) to deliver the truth: for example, he uses intentionally pixilated images of cherry blossoms growing in irradiated Japanese soil as a metaphor for the breakdown of memory and the media’s filtration of events.

It takes courage for an artist to tackle such monumental issues as the effects of the atomic bomb on Japan and the contestation of the border between Israel and the West Bank, but Gersht takes a further risk by embracing beauty in their description. Beginning with the advent of modernism, beauty has often been used as a derogatory term within art criticism. Gersht unabashedly makes beauty a sweet seductress, luring viewers closer to challenging subject matter while inspiring awe. His visual metaphors for the devastation of World War II take the form of poetic and painterly landscape scenes shot on historically significant sites. Instead of screaming at the demons of our world, he whispers, and in doing so, surprises and disarms them. This methodology averts another potential reaction from viewers: shutting their eyes when the “scary part” comes into view.

The most startling of Gersht’s acts of visual subversion are his animated versions of art-historical paintings, films whose extremely sharp resolution is alarming in and of itself. The recreation of Ignace-Henri-Théodore Fantin-Latour’s *The Rosy Wealth of June*, 1886 (fig. 1), a lovely still life of a vase of flowers, seems completely at odds with Gersht’s commentary on the violence of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, particularly in his native Israel. However, when Gersht explodes the motif and documents the act and its consequences, including the rain of shrapnel it creates, he takes the picture to a different time and place (fig. 2). It is time itself that Gersht and Fantin-Latour have in common. As Emile Zola observed, “The canvases of M. Fantin-Latour do not assault



2. *Blow Up: Untitled 05*, 2007, Lightjet print

your eyes, do not leap at you from the walls. They must be looked at for a length of time in order to penetrate them, and their conscientiousness, their simple truth—you take these in entirely, and then you return.”¹ Gersht uses the moving image, the medium of duration, to take this principle further than any painter could. Instead of giving viewers the whole story in a single shot, one that holds their attention in one place, his videos physically move toward surprising and violent climaxes, an especially effective strategy for the younger generations who are so well trained in screen-watching endurance.

The history in Gersht’s work is palpable, if not expressly stated, as is the depth of his engagement with it. While Gersht’s favorite authors (including Theodor Adorno, Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, and William Faulkner) used words to express their worldview, Gersht’s images are investigative but do not spell out historical events or betray his views on them. Gersht articulates his examination of the past, simultaneously scholarly and intuitively driven, in a poetic visual language. Perhaps because he is so intimately connected to the events and places his work revisits—the forest where his relatives hid during World War II, for instance—he conveys a sense of history powerfully, however indirectly. There is a quiet passion behind Gersht’s alluring and gutsy aesthetics. Such intimate autobiographical content could be self-indulgent, yet in Gersht’s work it is both purposeful and intellectually considered.

In Gersht’s visual lexicon, symbolism is another key mechanism for leading viewers to the meaning of his work without stating it outright. “The series of pictorial representations of which photography is the last historical stage begins with the *symbol*,” as critic and theorist Siegfried Kracauer wrote in 1927. “In a photograph, a person’s history is buried as if under a layer of snow.”²

Snow, in fact, is one of Gersht’s favorite symbols, a metaphor for the passage of time and the burial of historical fact. In some of Gersht’s films, including *Will You Dance for Me*, 2011 (fig. 4), and in photographs such as *Floating Tree*, 2005 (plate 27), a snowy landscape conveys melancholy, loss, and the muffled suggestion of something hidden below. Additionally, he uses snow to suggest the end of a life, whether premature or occurring during its final season. In *Evaders*, 2009 (plate 39), Walter Benjamin struggles in the distance along a snowy forest ravine.

The film does not include the historical detail of Benjamin’s suicide at the end of his journey, but the engulfing snow anticipates it.

Another pivotal image in Gersht’s symbology is the pomegranate, a motif carrying multiple meanings—often of fecundity and prosperity—in different cultures and faiths throughout time. Significantly, the words for pomegranate and grenade, because of the physical resemblance of the two, are identical in several languages, including Hebrew (*rimon*). In Judaism, the pomegranate carries religious overtones; it is said to have 613 seeds, the number of commandments in the Torah.³ Though the pomegranate undoubtedly resonates for Gersht on account of his native language and beliefs, even without any knowledge of its meanings we are captivated by the simultaneously voluptuous and grotesque beauty of the fruit released by the violence perpetrated on it in *Pomegranate*, 2006 (frontispiece). All of Gersht’s symbols support his strategy of seduction.

Like William Faulkner, who famously wrote “The past is never dead. It’s not even past,” Gersht sees history as an ever-evolving and self-referential story, one dominated by tragedy but also by beauty. He uses beauty, including beautiful symbolic forms, as both a tool of subversion and a celebration of the visual interest that is often overlooked in our volatile world. History may be cyclical, but it seems to advance, more and more quickly, as the generations succeed one another. Gersht, masterfully and with understatement, draws attention to the paradoxical nature of history’s trajectory.

Over recent years, Ori Gersht’s work has steadily grown in scope, scale, and technique. Beginning with his work in Japan, he has been exploring places and histories further and further from his own personal experiences and connections. His film installations have become increasingly ambitious, evolving from single-channel, monitor-based works to complex, multichannel video installations made with a widening circle of creative collaborators, including composers and model makers. He is now embarking on the next stage in his career. His work is already recognized and appreciated by major institutions, and he is ready to contribute to a larger, more global dialogue about art, history, politics, and what lies between. With the recent release of new evidence of Iran’s potential nuclear weapons project, the world is more aware

than ever of history’s potential for repeating itself. We are primed for Ori Gersht and his signature methodology: using beauty as a subversive and revelatory means of reexamining brutalities of the past while contemplating their implications for the present. Such a reexamination is now more important than ever.

WHERE PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE
MEMORIES MEET

In 1941, Gersht’s father-in-law, Gideon Engler, was a boy living with his family in Kosów (the present-day Kosiv, in Ukraine, at that time part of Poland). From Gideon’s firsthand account and the journal of Gideon’s father, Baruch Engler, Gersht learned of the horrors that took place in Kosiv that year. On top of the mountain depicted in the photograph *The Mountain*, 2005 (plate 33), on October 16 and 17, German soldiers, assisted by Ukrainians, murdered almost 2,200 Jews and dumped their bodies into two mass graves. As Baruch Engler wrote: “Next to the jail there were trucks, which the Jews boarded — thinking they were going to work, but [they] quickly found out they had been tricked. After a few minutes ride they reached their destination. They were let out next to the open pits which had been prepared ahead of time on top of the mountain overlooking the town, were ordered to take off their clothes and at the point of a whip were forced to jump into the pit, being fired on one by one while jumping. Many were killed and there were also those who were not hurt by the bullet, but were buried alive under the bodies of those who followed. . . . The terrible screams of those who did not die could be heard throughout the forest of Moskalovska.”⁴

Subsequent attacks, or *Aktions*, left the village *Judenrein* (clean of Jews). The few who survived, including Gideon, his father, and his older brother (his mother did not), went into hiding. From the fall of 1942 to the spring of 1944, the remaining Engler family members waited and prayed for deliverance. At first, they hid in a small space measuring approximately 32 by 71 by 39 inches, located under two floorboards in the bedroom of a sympathetic Ukrainian. They later took refuge in an attic, a series of bunkers, and the woods. Throughout this period, they

suffered from horrendous conditions, the continuous threat to their lives, and the physical and psychological stress of fear.⁵

Today, barely a hint of the village’s tragic history is visible. New homes stand next to the site of the mass graves, and tourists come to relax and enjoy the river and waterfalls. In 2005, Gersht, moved by a sense of responsibility to his family and historical memory, came to this place to record it. Given his purposes, we might wonder why he manipulated the image to enshroud the landscape in a fog that impairs our ability to discern its details. It may be that the washed-out image is intended to suggest the nature of memory; those who lost their lives in this landscape could disappear forever if not preserved and honored. As Gersht has commented, “One of my concerns in these photographs was how to capture in the present the horrors of the past. The camera can only depict the here and now, in this instance a pastoral Brueghelesque landscape, but my experience of these places was conditioned by what I knew, and this therefore loaded these places with subjective meaning. My intention was to create images that would fuse the objective [reality] with my psychological state, images that simultaneously absorb the landscape and project upon it.”⁶

Although Gersht admires Francisco Goya’s series *The Disasters of War* (1810–20) (fig. 3), he himself does not attempt to depict history’s most horrific moments or their immediate aftermath. It is with gentleness and sensitivity that he conveys tragedy; Gersht’s relationship with the past is a waltz, not a march. His aesthetic decisions, such as the long camera exposure that whitewashed *The Mountain*, gain force through their subtlety, inspiring the sense that this place and this picture are not all they seem at first glance.

Gersht’s first projected film, *The Forest*, 2005 (plates 48 and 62), documents the Ukrainian woods near Kosiv where Jews hid and died. A sea of leaves camouflages the atrocities that once took place beneath them. The camera pans across a dense wooded area, contrasting soft, occasionally rustling green leaves with the immobile and rough bark of sturdy tree trunks. This lush vegetation at first conjures the Enlightenment’s idealized vision of forests as the antidote to industrialization, or the forest paintings of romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich (see fig. 18, p. 214). But soon the silence is interrupted by a rumble, and,



3. Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, *Bury them and keep quiet*, about 1810–14, from the series *The Disasters of War*, etching, drypoint, burin, lavis, and burnishing

one at a time, the trunks begin to fall, each followed by a rush of leaves and branches and an increasingly thunderous roar. Paralleling the course of history, there is just enough time between each crescendo and crash that we drift back to tranquility, only to be wrenched out of it, again and again. Throughout the film, the camera pauses dramatically before continuing its journey, much the way our consciousness halts at individual memories before streaming on.

In *The Forest*, we do not see the trees’ breaking point, nor who is felling them. All Gersht shows us are intact columns of wood that stand from one edge of the projection to the other, until one falls. These strong but doomed trees may allude to the artist’s family and their neighbors, many of whom were loggers, as well as to the inevitable passage of time. Supplying the timber that supported the village economy in peacetime, the trees also provided protective cover during the war. They could not, however, save the villagers from genocide. The film reminds us that the trees are mortal and vulnerable themselves, and that as they die, they take with them all that they have mutely observed. Like their human counterparts, the trees represent the dwindling community of Holocaust witnesses that Gersht records.

The forest as historical refuge also informs Gersht’s photograph *Drape 03*, 2008 (plate 11), taken inside a home in Sobibor, Poland, on the site of the former Sobibor death camp. The Sobibor camp was one of two in which Jewish prisoners successfully staged an uprising against the German SS. After killing several guards, the prisoners scattered and about half escaped into the surrounding forest. One survivor wrote: “We ran through the exploded mine field holes, jumped over a single wire marking the end of the mine fields and we were outside the camp. Now to make it to the woods ahead of us. It was so close. I fell several times, each time thinking I was hit. And each time I got up and ran further . . . 100 yards . . . 50 yards . . . 20 more yards . . . and the forest at last. Behind us, blood and ashes.”⁷ Gersht shows us that same forest through a lace curtain — the veil of history.

Much of Gersht’s powerful work with imagery and sound has origins in his childhood memories in Israel. The soundtrack of his film *Big Bang*, 2006, for example, includes the wailing sirens he would have heard while growing up in Tel Aviv. A more recent project, the dual-channel projection *Will You Dance for Me*, 2011 (fig. 4, plates 41–44), was inspired by his recollection of riding city buses during his childhood and seeing numbers tattooed on the forearms of some of the older passengers. Given only to those slated for work at Auschwitz, these serial-number tattoos marked people for life.⁸ Noticing that in recent years he had begun to see the tattoos less and less frequently, Gersht began to engage with survivors, who, in his words, would “soon pass from the world.”

The search led him to Yehudit Arnon, the Czech-born former director of one of the most celebrated modern dance companies in Israel — the Kibbutzim Dance Company. In 1944, SS guards had discovered the nineteen-year-old Arnon doing acrobatics for other prisoners at Auschwitz. When the guards demanded that she perform a dance at their Christmas party, she refused. Left to stand barefoot in the snow as punishment for her defiance, the young Arnon promised herself that if she survived, she would dedicate her life to dance.⁹ Following an illustrious career, she is now in her mid-eighties and suffers from osteoporosis: a body that was once at the pinnacle of fitness is now as diminished as it was long ago in the camp.

With a fifteen-person crew, Gersht traveled to Israel to “interview” Arnon. While Gersht’s other films depict real places and reenact real stories, *Will You Dance for Me* is the closest he has come to documentary, a filmed encounter with living history. He and his crew spent three days preparing to film Arnon, whose advanced age and physical frailty prevented them from working with her longer than two hours. As the shoot went on, Arnon became visibly frustrated. She wanted her voice in the film; she considered herself Gersht’s collaborator. He gave her one more take, this time without direction. It was then that she came to life for the camera. She gave Gersht, the lens, and, in turn, us, one last commanding performance. As Gersht described it, this dance was “so delicate and special, you [could] never plan it. She really put herself in a vulnerable position. She gave a lot to me and I had a responsibility.”¹⁰ After the filming, he spent eighteen months working with three composers on the score. The resulting film, filled with Gersht’s signature visual poetry and conceptual abstraction, transcends documentary.

The film begins with subtitles on a black screen and a voice-over in which Arnon speaks clearly and strongly in Hebrew of that pivotal moment when “for the first time in my life, I was able to say no.” The left side of the split screen comes to life with the image of her face, its topography of wrinkles resembling channels cut through a desert. Without uttering another word, she fully conveys her story. As the camera slowly pulls away to reveal more of her form, we see that she is seated in a rocking chair, which will serve as what Gersht calls a “platform for dance.”¹¹ Arnon rocks in and out of the light, receding as if eclipsed and then reasserting herself. When she falls into the velvety black void, we mourn the dancer she can no longer be, but when she emerges into the light we see that she has retained command of her body’s expressive powers. With eyes closed, she begins to move, slowly and deliberately — bringing her hand to her forehead, lifting one shoulder and pressing it down, moving her head from side to side, raising her face, and opening her eyes. The simple, quiet gestures are more dramatic than a leap and louder than a scream.

Then the right side of the screen awakens with the light-filled image of snow falling at an angle — rapidly and hypnotically — on an austere field of sunflower stalks at the edge of a forest near Kiev.



4. Still from *Will You Dance for Me*,
2011, HD film for dual-channel projection

5. *Road to Jerusalem*, 1998–2000,
chromogenic print

Reminding Gersht of the battle of Stalingrad as well as that day long ago when Arnon was forced to stand out in the cold, the snowy scene intimates that she is now in the last season of her life.¹² In the final sequence, Arnon, on the left screen, shrinks farther and farther back in space until she is only a flicker in the darkness. She emerges in close-up once more, large and prominent, rocking in and out from light into darkness to the sound of whispering voices.

True to the nature of memories and dreams, Gersht bases his narrative structure not on a linear progression but on the weighting, mirroring, and recurrence of elements. The alternation of light and dark on the screens contributes to the visual rhythm of the film and the drama of its narrative, and fleeting continuity is established when the landscape is unified across the screens. In other sequences, the portrait and landscape elements offer balance and counterpoint, just as in the soundtrack the sharpness of a piano meets the mournfulness of a cello to create an almost imperceptible tension that contrasts with the natural, unitary sound of the wind.

HISTORY DISCOVERED ON THE ROAD TO SOMEWHERE

Referring to his photograph *Road to Jerusalem*, 1998–2000 (fig. 5), Gersht attributes power to the “anonymous location on the way to significant places.”¹³ He travels the world seeking out sites of past trauma, many unmarked, bringing a spirit of exploration to his photographic cartography. The photographs in his *White Noise* series were taken in the winter of 1999 on a train from Krakow to Auschwitz. While watching the landscape fly by, Gersht had an epiphany: more than fifty years earlier, other trains had made this same journey, but many of their passengers did not have a view or a seat. In fact, they did not even know where they were going. The European rail network was complicit in the Nazi’s Final Solution—the deportation of vast numbers of people to Auschwitz and other death camps under the guise of taking them to labor camps. Most were packed into freight cars with no win-

dows or water and little air. Many died before reaching the camps, and none saw the passing countryside.

On the train, Gersht set up a waist-high tripod, pointed his camera at a 90-degree angle toward the window, and took a series of photographs in rapid succession.¹⁴ He could not anticipate what would result. Taken without the controlled use of the viewfinder and at a slow shutter speed, the images “appeared to slip off the film” and formed abstract blurs when printed—some snowy white, others leaf green, and still others black as night.¹⁵ Just as the surroundings were invisible to the people being taken to Auschwitz, so too the imagery is obscured for us. We take the same path, but years have passed and memories, most of them secondhand, have faded. Gersht’s abstract scenes could be almost anywhere, at any time. As one critic pointed out, “The lack of a point of arrival, even any clear sense of departure, would suggest that such a journey is not only ongoing, but that it was always already underway.”¹⁶

Describing one of his earliest photographic journeys—a trip to Sarajevo in 1998 in the immediate aftermath of conflict there—Gersht explains: “The idea of the journey was the romantic notion of facing the unknown.” In his first dual-channel projected film, *Evaders*, 2009 (plates 36–39), and a related series of digital photographs, including the composite *Far Off Mountains and Rivers*, 2009 (plate 35), he addressed the dark as well as the romantic aspects of the unknown. Unlike *White Noise*, which emerged spontaneously on the way to a shooting location, *Evaders* was conceived with the journey-as-destination in mind.

The subject of *Evaders* is one of Gersht’s muses—the famed German-Jewish intellectual Walter Benjamin, whose philosophical writings and art criticism he has closely studied. Gersht’s admiration for and feeling of connection with Benjamin led him to retrace, with cameras in tow, the philosopher’s steps on a fateful and now-legendary day in 1940. The location was the Lister Route, a passage across the Pyrenees (the mountains that separate France and Spain not far from the Mediterranean Sea). Smugglers had long used a trail through the visually striking and extremely rough terrain of the Lister Route. During Benjamin’s time, it was the path of Spaniards escaping Franco’s Fascist dictatorship for Free France. Later, the route was reversed by those who, like Benjamin,



fled Nazi-occupied France into Spain, hoping they might make their way from there to Portugal and, perhaps, the United States. The passage was particularly dangerous because of the *tramontana*, a violently strong, dry wind that can last for days and is, in the cooler months, bitterly cold. The *tramontana* is known for its piercing moan, and locals attribute murders and suicides to long exposure to the sound.¹⁷

One of the unrecognized heroes of the Nazi era was Lisa Fittko, who for seven months led artists, intellectuals, and other Third Reich refugees over the Lister Route.¹⁸ On September 25, 1940, only months after Hitler invaded France on May 12, she set out from Banyuls-sur-Mer in France with a small group that included Benjamin. When they arrived at the Catalan town of Portbou, the border guards detained Benjamin, allowing him to stay one night before he had to return to France. On September 26 he was discovered dead in his second-floor room at the Hotel de Francia. Though the cause of death remains unknown, according to Fittko, “he had enough morphine on him to take his life several times over.”¹⁹

Gersht and his team—an actor and a ten-person crew—undertook Benjamin’s grueling trip without following his path step-by-step.²⁰ We are not shown the point of origin and are not told about details such as the date of the original journey, the fact that the Lister Route is less than four and a half miles long, or who accompanied Benjamin. *Evaders* is not a historical reenactment, it is a fictionalized account, set in nighttime and daytime throughout the seasons, of one man’s struggle against oppression, nature, and his own limitations. Though Benjamin was only forty-eight when he made the journey, Gersht hired a much older actor, emphasizing the toll and risk of the trip for the frail Benjamin.

The right side of the dual projection is activated first. The figure based on Benjamin appears in a hotel room, hunched shirtless at the edge of a bed with his back toward us. Swirling floral wallpaper beside him foreshadows the landscape we will soon see him reckon with. As the camera zooms in and pans the wallpaper, a male voice recites a familiar passage from Benjamin’s last known work, *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), describing a painting he once owned, Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, 1920 (see fig. 28, p. 222), which he referred to as *The Angel of History*.²¹ In the context of Gersht’s video, Benjamin’s words also apply to

the journey he was about to make: “*Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. . . . His mouth is open. . . . This is how one pictures the angel of history.” At the sentence that follows, “His face is turned toward the past,” the left screen comes to life.

Gersht has remarked on “the dialectic of the two screens, the one on the left depicting a frontal close-up of the struggling traveler as he progresses along the route, while the one on the right shows the lone and fading traveler only from the back. The screen on the left may be suggestive of the physical aspect of the journey, while the screen on the right may be suggestive of the metaphysical. The screen on the left depicts a linear journey that was recorded in a single take, while the screen on the right describes a timeless journey that cycles through diverse climatic and geographical changes and recounts a mythical journey that cannot be attributed to a specific time or place.”²²

On the left screen we see the figure, unprepared for the arduous journey, dressed in an inadequate coat. The ice crunches under his feet. He is shown up close, the camera focused on his face and upper torso, as he walks toward us, out of the dark and into a light trained on him. When he gets very near, the intimacy is uncomfortable: we detect psychological pain as well as physical struggle. His mouth open, he gasps for breath, with heavy strands of drool hanging off his chin, as he presses on against a howling wind that occasionally pushes him away from the camera. At times, he clutches his chest and appears to be on the verge of tears. Though we cannot see his destination, we understand that he is driven toward it despite his exhaustion. Simultaneously, on the right screen, the figure appears unmoving on the hotel bed. The voice-over continues: “The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise. . . . The storm irresistibly propels him into the future. . . . This storm is what we call progress.”

In subsequent scenes, we see the figure in the distance, alone. He moves at a steady, labored pace through patches of mist, along a snowy tree-lined path. Often, on the right screen majestic landscapes contrast with the man’s suffering and vulnerability on the left: sweeping mountain vistas grazed by clouds, trees shrouded in fog, craggy boulders, and



6. Caspar David Friedrich, *The Sea of Ice*, 1823–24, oil on canvas

the wind whipping over a riverbed. Violence and the threat of loss are intimated in the image of an avalanche crashing down and the sound of cawing, like that of hovering vultures.

The painterly scenes in the film, along with corresponding photographs, recall paintings of the natural sublime by Friedrich, such as his *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818, in which a lone figure stands before nature’s glory (see fig. 19, p. 214). Gersht’s photograph *Far Off Mountains and Rivers*, 2009 (plate 35)—in which a lavender mist fills a small mountain valley flanked by threatening, blue crags of lichen-covered stone—evokes Friedrich’s *The Sea of Ice*, 1823–24 (fig. 6). Benjamin’s admiration for Friedrich (which Gersht shares) has been linked to the philosopher’s denial of the intentions of the German state, which in turn led him to postpone his escape too long.

As Gersht notes of *Evaders*, “As in many of my works, the dialectics of culture and nature come into play.”²³ In the film, the figure carries a satchel throughout, never letting go of it regardless of the harshness of conditions or his degree of exhaustion. Some sequences show papers blowing in the wind and being scattered on the ground, a symbol perhaps of the burden of history that Benjamin struggled with, and, more specifically, a reference to the heavy suitcase that Fittko claimed Benjamin carried with him that day. She reported that Benjamin told her it contained a completed manuscript whose survival he was more determined to ensure than his own.²⁴ Historians have searched for this manuscript and the suitcase, without success, and the meaning of Gersht’s symbolic recovery of it is ambiguous. One critic described this motif in Gersht’s *Evaders* series as a MacGuffin, an element in a film that catches the viewer’s attention and drives the plot forward, even though it sometimes fails to be explained or examined, or even to survive until the end of the film.²⁵ In the photograph *Far Off Mountains and Rivers*, the atmospheric and painterly qualities are so enchanting that it is easy to initially overlook the black satchel on the ground in the middle of the composition.

In the film, after eleven minutes, the figure appears on the right screen, with his back to us again, now ascending a dark and claustrophobic staircase. To the amplified sound of slow, heavy footsteps on metal stairs, he approaches a rectangle of pure white light—a meta-

7. Stills from *Neither Black nor White*,
2001, video for LCD

phorical doorway—into which he disappears. Both screens go dark and fall silent until, on the right, the town of Banyuls-sur-Mer—its picturesque buildings spread over headlands overlooking a turquoise sea below—suddenly comes into view outside a bank of windows in an uninhabited residence.²⁶ The camera, accompanied by melancholy piano music, slowly glides around an interior wall to pan across the windows. The composition of these sequences makes them seem like paintings or dioramas, but they are so delicate that they might almost be mirages.

In the final scene of *Evaders*, the figure appears on the right screen, again hunched and shirtless at the edge of the hotel bed where we saw him at the beginning of the film, his back toward us. On the Lister Route, Benjamin had traveled forward in space without making any real progress. Gersht is fascinated by the notion that “progress” goes in circles, failing to form a linear narrative or a direct path toward a destination, and returning, inevitably, toward beginnings that are endings.

WALKING THE LINE:
BORDERS BEAUTIFUL AND CONTESTED

Spending the first twenty-two years of his life in Israel had a formative effect on Gersht: “I have lived all my life as part of an ethnic conflict.” By 1989, when he arrived in London, he had witnessed the Yom Kippur War (1973), the first Lebanon War (1982), and the Palestinian uprising against Israel known as the First Intifada (1987). His father was stationed on the Egyptian border as a paratrooper, first during compulsory service and then for many years as part of the reserve forces; after Gersht moved to England, he experienced the anxiety of hearing repeated news of bombings near his parents’ home during the 1991 Gulf War.

With this personal history, it is not surprising that the first film Gersht made addresses a cultural division: *Neither Black nor White*, 2001 (fig. 7), concerns the Arab community of Iksal in Israel. Grainy and silent, the film is more abstract than Gersht’s later moving-image projects. It starts with a hypnotic, cosmic darkness, punctuated by what seem to be stars twinkling and occasionally shooting across the screen.²⁷ Slowly the

“sky” lightens to reveal itself to be a city with its house, street, and car lights gradually turning off.

Soon the sun begins to rise and the darkness gives way to increasingly light shades of periwinkle. As the buildings return to view, we see something we could not make out initially—the leafless branches of a barren bush swaying directly in front of us. We realize that we are watching the scene from behind a barrier. In fact, we are observing Iksal from a corresponding hilltop in the Jewish quarter of Nazareth, on the other side of an ethnic border. Though the vantage point renders Iksal mysterious and exotic, just when we get our bearings the view turns subtly sinister. The sun gets brighter and brighter until the entire scene is swallowed in white light, as if a bomb had just been detonated. The bush, which separates the artist and us from the city, is the last feature to disappear into the ether.

Gersht explores this approach further in photographs taken in the same area in 2002—*White Light Red City 01* and *White Light Red City* (plates 57 and 58)—in which we look down on a city in a valley from the side of a rugged mountain. The scene is veiled in a dramatic, glowing red light, as if viewed through a color filter. Though alluring, the city lights are also alarming, resembling a spreading fire or a series of explosions. In *Neither Black nor White*, after white light consumes the image, the film loops back to the beginning and the cycle resumes. Just as quickly as a border is erased—and strife diffused—a new one emerges. As the film’s title suggests, the causes and morality of territorial wars in and around Israel, as in any conflict, should not be oversimplified.

In 2004–5 Gersht undertook a photographic project in which olive and cypress trees symbolize two opposing forces and cultures, both of which have his sympathy. The olive tree is the symbol of Palestine and represents Palestinians’ ties to the land of their ancestors; it also conjures the destruction of ancient groves during the expansion of Israeli settlement, which began after Israel won the Six-Day War in 1967.²⁸ The olive tree appears in both the Koran and the Old Testament—a dove brings a branch to Noah to signal the end of the flood that annihilated the rest of humankind. Gersht shot the *Ghost* photographs on Arabic plantations in the volatile Galilee region in northern Israel, where some of the trees have survived hundreds of years of war. The “ghost olives”



are always depicted alone, as in *Olive 11*, 2004 (plate 6). Long exposures in the blazing midday sun faded each image into a yellow haze, making the trees seem like ancient apparitions. Though gnarled, they are vulnerable and poetic — Gersht has described their curving forms as feminine.

The olive trees’ counterparts are cypresses that Gersht photographed throughout Israel. In many cultures, cypress trees have funerary significance; they are important symbols at Etruscan graves and in modern cemeteries in both the Middle East and the West. Israelis often plant them to commemorate fallen soldiers, and some ancient texts interpret their evergreen leaves as a sign of life overcoming death.²⁹ In *Mark 01*, 2005 (plate 7), the solidity of the two cypresses depicted emphasizes their endurance in the harsh desert. In counterpoint to Gersht’s ghost olives, his cypresses are intended to appear masculine.

Like much of his work, *Neither Black nor White* and *White Light Red City* reveal beauty in places of violence, creating what Gersht has described as “an open-ended conversation with the absurdities around us. . . . In one place, there is a very bloody war, while in another people are living a comfortable, decadent lifestyle.”³⁰ This dichotomy is central to works such as his film *Big Bang*, 2006 (plate 66). In what appears, at certain moments and at a certain distance, to be a framed painting resembling Jan van Huysum’s *Hollyhocks and Other Flowers in a Vase*, 1702–20 (see fig. 16, p. 210), a vase of flowers is set on a table against a dark background.³¹

After a significant period of darkness, the painting in *Big Bang* emerges and subtly starts to move, revealing itself to be a liquid crystal display (LCD) screen. Mist gently wafts out of the vase and we hear the rising wail of a siren. This soundtrack is a composite of two recordings Gersht sourced from an Israeli archive; while growing up in Israel, he had heard many such sounds: sirens are sounded in remembrance on Holocaust Day and Memorial Day (which commemorates fallen Israeli soldiers), and also to signal attacks against Israel — warning everyone to take shelter immediately. As the siren rises in volume and pitch in the film, more mist or smoke billows from the vase. What was once a wisp trickling onto the table now cascades from the cloudy glass vessel. Then. . . boom. A massive explosion from within the vase silences the siren and propels countless fragments of glass and blood-red, purple,

orange, and ghostly white flowers in all directions. Though extremely violent, the action is beautiful. The sound of glass hitting the table dissipates and the film falls silent again as golden petals slowly hurtle toward the lens and bits of sparkling debris rain down. We catch our breath as the wreckage settles. This cosmic scattering of matter that takes place in slow motion mirrors the way time seems suspended and the sounds of the world seem muted when disaster strikes around us. As the title suggests, creation can be instant and it can arise from destruction in an extraordinary visual spectacle. Beauty, in works such as this, forms a boundary between the actuality of violence and our perception of it — Gersht transmutes explosives and blood into motion and petals. It is relevant to know that to create the effect in this work and related photographs, Gersht had the floral arrangement frozen with liquid nitrogen: as a result, the flowers are hard and brittle and the shards of leaf and bloom that fly around after the explosion are sharp as shrapnel.³²

FRAMING (ART) HISTORY

In addition to reflecting on his personal identity, Ori Gersht is acutely aware of his place in the long lineage of artists who have responded to the world around them. Using the latest technology, Gersht broadens our definition of “painting” with crisp videos and impressionistic photographs that are based on, or take cues from, historical masterpieces, particularly within the genres of landscape and still life. He brings the aesthetic qualities and content of art of the past to his recurrent themes of beauty and violence, representation and reality, and creativity and chaos.

Falling Bird, 2008 (fig. 9), the final chapter of a Gersht video trilogy, is as modestly scaled as the painting by French artist Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin that inspired it. Chardin’s *A Mallard Duck Hanging on a Wall with a Seville Orange*, 1720–30 (fig. 8), shows a dead mallard hung by one foot above a table that supports a single decaying, split orange. Like Gersht’s earlier *Big Bang* (plate 66) and *Pomegranate* (frontispiece), *Falling Bird* is presented on an LCD monitor that is surrounded with a thick, black, painting-style frame hiding the hardware and cables. This

presentation heightens the compelling illusion that, at least during their still moments, Gersht’s videos are actually paintings.

Chardin himself looked back at earlier art when working, and on occasion painted replicas of his own previous canvases. Trained in history painting — the most esteemed genre of the period — he illustrated biblical scenes and depicted battlefields littered with wounded men. Chardin also revived a tradition popularized by Dutch painters in the seventeenth century — “*vanitas*” paintings, still lifes intended to expose the vanity of earthly indulgences in order to remind viewers of their own mortality; *vanitas* paintings often include skulls, rotting fruit and flowers, and dead game animals. Radically expressive for its time, Chardin’s work paved the way for the abstraction of Paul Cézanne and other modern artists, and it demonstrably resonates with Gersht, whose work is pervaded by a profound sense of loss. Unlike Chardin’s tender brush, Gersht’s digital technology brings visual clarity, sumptuous color, and precise detail to his reinterpretation.

As *Falling Bird* begins, we see the body of a large pheasant, its feet bound with rope, suspended upside down above what appears to be a polished onyx surface. To the right, several bunches of plump grapes with spindly vines rest on top of a ledge. Though the grapes are reflected in the mirrored black surface, the bird is not. The handling of the painted background, mottled with rich passages of ochre, umber, and viridian, recalls Chardin’s layering of multiple colors with textural brushwork, as does the presence of a shadow.

Suspense builds as we wait to see what, if anything, will happen. Then, at last, we hear a low mechanical rumble followed by the sound of what could be a launched missile. Hearing an explosive pop, we realize that the rope supporting the pheasant has been severed. In slow motion, the bird falls, remaining as straight and rigid as an Olympic diver; it continues its descent to meet its reflection, which appears on the surface below. The converging beaks approach each other slowly but intently, as if on the verge of a kiss. But they fail to collide, as what appeared to be a solid surface proves to be permeable; the mirroring birds merge as the “real” one penetrates the black water with a splash. The dark water, clear as glass, splashes up and around the bird as it plunges below the surface, sending glistening pearls of water into

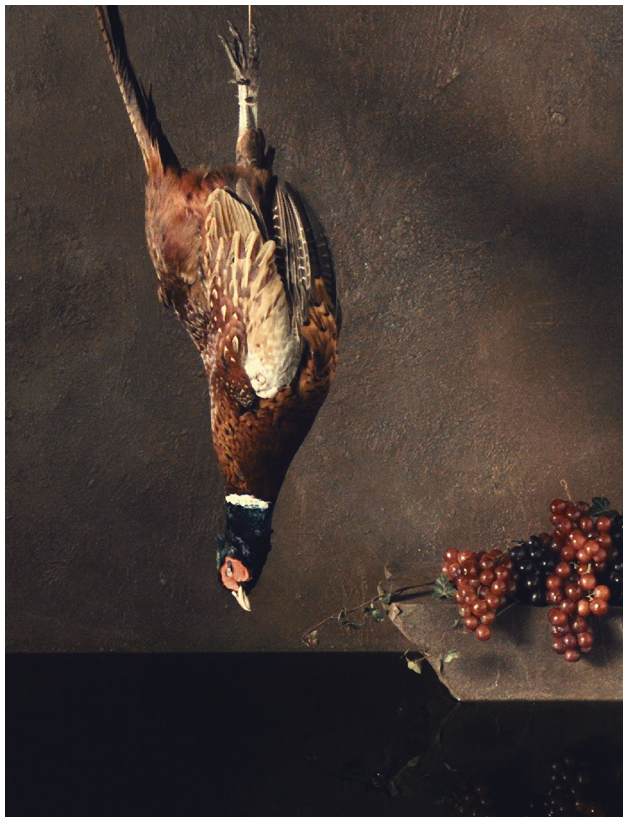
8. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *A Mallard Duck Hanging on a Wall with a Seville Orange*, 1720–30, oil on canvas



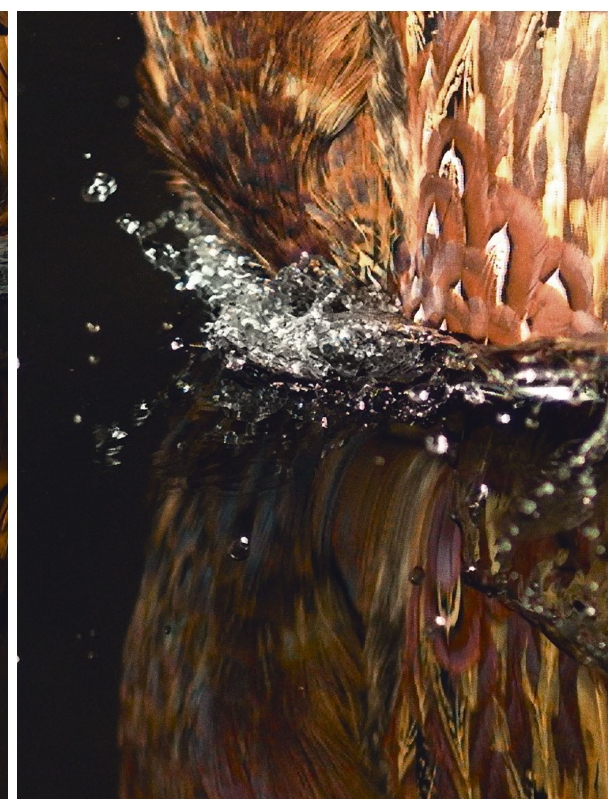
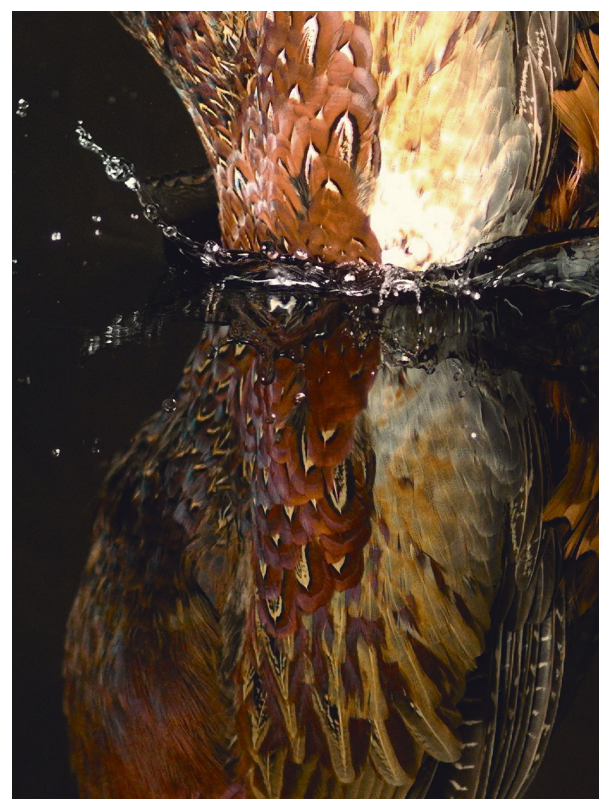
orbit. The displaced water becomes a single, ruffled collar around the neck of the now conjoined creatures. As the falling bird penetrates the water more deeply, two soundtracks become one. Rather than a single splash, we detect what could be the sound of a jet plane taking off, its thrusters in high gear.

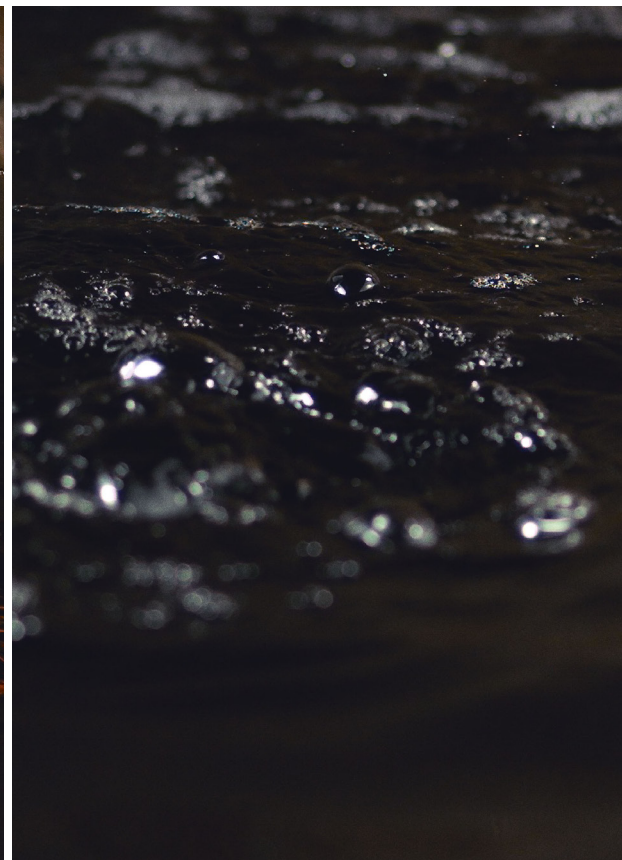
After the last inch of the pheasant’s tail feather sinks below the surface and the crystalline splash has fully risen, having birthed countless droplets of water that twirl through space like aerialists, a close-up replay follows. The two birds again come together, but this time the reflected bird fills more of the screen. The reflection, in fact, no longer reads as such; it is as solid as its twin, and equally formidable. We watch as the two bodies become one.

Early eighteenth-century naturalism has now morphed into abstract expressionism. At the beginning of this sequence, the merging birds’ bodies fill only the center of the screen, resembling Barnett Newman’s zips; as they come closer together, filling more and more of the frame with the colorful feathers of their necks and shoulders, they recall Clyfford Still’s jagged fields of color; and as the real bird is swallowed whole, the water that fills the screen with cresting waves and splashes suggests Jackson Pollock’s energetic drips. What unfolds is like an epic midnight storm at sea. The water’s dark



9. Stills from *Falling Bird*,
2008, HD film for framed LCD





surface, seen up close and for some time, undulates, bubbles, and froths like primordial tar.

This water ballet, its costumes made of jewel-toned feathers, scarlet masks, and sparkling diamonds of water, is undeniably beautiful and intensely hypnotic. But, as with all of Gersht’s work, the troubles of our time lie just below the surface. The soundtrack—the cacophony of jet propulsion—hints at a story other than that portrayed. Is it a fighter plane? Could the bird be a Kamikaze pilot, its last act exquisitely executed and deadly? Is the wave of black water that takes over the screen a tsunami? Are the falling beads of water postnuclear “black rain”? Or could the black water be oil that consumes and suffocates living creatures?³³ Gersht has emulated not only Chardin’s imagery but also his *vanitas* theme: at any moment we could pass into the final unknown. In the last frame of *Falling Bird*, as well as in a related photograph, *Drown Two*, 2008 (plate 77), we are left to assess the damage. Nothing remains of the bird’s passage except for splash marks on the wall that gradually evaporate as the surface of the water again becomes as smooth and shiny as glass. Gersht’s grapes, unlike Chardin’s rotting orange, have remained perfectly fresh throughout.

The photographs in Gersht’s series *Hide and Seek*, shot in 2008–9 in the marshes, swamps, and forests of Poland and Belarus, are so painterly, so still, that it is difficult to decipher their medium, even on close inspection. As with his videos, scale encourages the confusion. The extra-large prints (such as *If Not Now When 01*, 2008 [plate 13], more than 94 inches wide) are more akin in size to the paintings we see in museums than to traditional photographs. Additionally, Gersht provides the “unhindered access” of paintings by exhibiting his photographs without mats or protective glass, drawing the viewer into full and direct visual contact with the work.³⁴

Unlike the videos, which have an exaggerated level of clarity, the *Hide and Seek* photographs are impressionistic. The quiet, remote places they document served as refuges for people during times of political upheaval; their power to hide and obscure is often expressed in the blurring of soft landscape elements with their reflected duplication in water. In these pictures, Gersht uses his camera like a paintbrush or a pastel stick, filtering images through a thick fog, implying that time, too,

has taken refuge in these landscapes. Lacking clear details, but awash in a moody mist of color, works in this series are closely related to the work of impressionist masters (see fig. 37, p. 233). In *Boatman*, 2008 (plate 26), a ghostly boat barely emerges from the haze, like a memory floating into consciousness.

These videos and photographs do more than comment on the historical works they reference; they enhance the way we experience art of the past. As Gersht has said, “With painting there is something about the way the information is revealed that makes it impossible for you to digest it in one look and be fully satisfied. You can stand in front of it for hours every day, and still it will evade you.”³⁵

THE MYSTERIES AND MECHANICS
OF PERCEPTION

For the past half dozen years, Gersht has explored the perception of time and motion, as well as the relationship between painting and photography. In 2006, he produced the small, moody photographs of the series *Time after Time* (plates 67–70) and animated a vase of flowers in *Big Bang* (plate 66). The following year he again used flowers in the series *Blow Up*, which moves far beyond the Henri Fantin-Latour painting (see fig. 1) that served as its inspiration. For *Blow Up*, as for *Big Bang*, Gersht literally froze his subject for a demonstration of the near-magical power of the camera to reveal otherwise unseen moments in time—the extraordinary achievement permitted by the invention of photography. As Gersht remarks, if we were to use the naked eye alone, we would miss the event, as if “it never happened.”³⁶

For photographs such as *Blow Up: Untitled 05* (plate 64) and *Untitled 08* (plate 65), both 2007, with the help of pyrotechnics experts Gersht created an elaborate and volatile mise-en-scène. Floral bouquets were rigged with dynamite and frozen with sprayed-on liquid nitrogen; if the photographs were not taken quickly enough, the flowers would defrost and collapse. It was not safe to stay in the room when the explosive was detonated, so Gersht synchronized ten Hasselblad digital cameras in a semicircle around the vase and set their self-timers. The cameras made

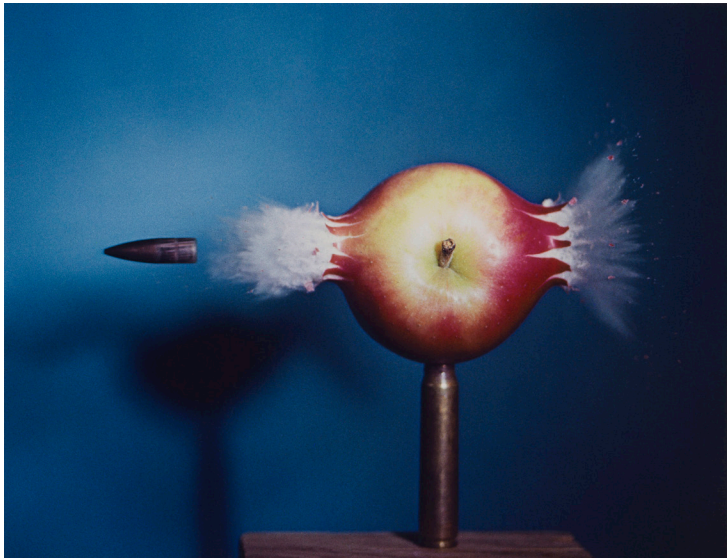
consecutive exposures of the flowers exploding, at the extremely high speed of 1/7500 of a second. The sequencing of the images—each representing the next instant in the life of the explosion—produces a stuttered effect that is different from the continuous motion of video. The images, captured in the instantaneous burst of light from the cameras’ superfast flash, are remarkably crisp, and their colors are intensely saturated—the red roses are dark as blood, the blue is rich as lapis. The cameras, infinitely quicker in gathering information than our eyes, record every particle of exploded detritus.

One of the earliest art photographers, Henry Peach Robinson, wrote in 1896: “We got tired of the sameness of the exquisiteness of the photograph, and if it had nothing to say, if it was not a view, or a portrait of somebody, we cared less and less for it. Why? Because the photograph told us everything about the facts of nature and left out the mystery. Now . . . it is easy to get a surfeit of realities, and [we want] a little mystification as relief.”³⁷ As immaterial as the subjects in some of Gersht’s *Liquidation* and *Hide and Seek* photographs may be, they convey a sense of longing for the concrete. Images such as *Boatman* are as much portraits of real places as they are metaphysical. The boatman is a ghost; he emerges from the fog just sufficiently to seize our attention and remind us that these places are filled with apparitions like him. No matter how much time passes or how few people know of their existence, they are never going away. As Gersht says of his photography, “It’s very much a process of recalling and erasing or remembering and forgetting.”³⁸ Gersht has set up a game of hide-and-seek in which the camera is his conspirator. It brings us real places that hold real histories, but it filters and distorts those realities as much as memory does.

The deceptions of the camera inform all of Gersht’s work. Though the title *Blow Up* evokes bombings, it also refers to photographic enlargement and deliberately references Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1966 film of the same name (fig. 10).³⁹ Antonioni’s first English-language production and the only one he shot in London—Gersht’s current residence—*Blow-Up* tells the story of a fashion photographer named Thomas who discovers, when he blows up the images on his negatives, that he has accidentally documented a murder. Gersht’s *Blow Up* prints,



10. Still from *Blow-Up*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni (MGM, 1966)



11. Harold Edgerton, *.30 Bullet Piercing Apple*, 1964, dye transfer print

though nearly eight feet tall, preserve every minute detail on account of the capability of the high-resolution, large-format cameras he used.

When Gersht says that his work “is constantly in conversation with all the masters’ work,” he refers to painting, filmmaking, and photography.⁴⁰ These three influences come together in the video *Pomegranate*, 2006 (frontispiece), which owes much to the pioneering photographic work of the late Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Harold “Doc” Edgerton. Edgerton advanced strobe technology, which he initially introduced to cameras to aid in machine repairs. According to biographers J. Kim Vandiver and Pagan Kennedy, by synchronizing a camera with a strobe light, Edgerton “found a way to photograph speed without the blur, allowing technicians to study the behavior of fast-moving objects.”⁴¹ In *Pomegranate*, Gersht quotes one of Edgerton’s best-known images, *.30 Bullet Piercing an Apple*, 1964 (fig. 11).

Pomegranate also quotes *Quince*, *Cabbage*, *Melon*, and *Cucumber*, 1602 (see fig. 17, p. 212), by Spanish still-life master Juan Sánchez Cotán. Gersht varies only slightly Sánchez Cotán’s controlled composition of fruits and vegetables set within an austere window frame. In both, the pitch-black background might extend infinitely, or end abruptly just on the other side of a drab, gray wall. Where Sánchez Cotán positioned a sliced melon cut side up, Gersht has inserted a pumpkin with its sliced side facing us. Gersht has also replaced Sánchez Cotán’s bruised quince, suspended on a string, with a rosy pomegranate, a fruit holding many symbolic meanings, particularly within Jewish iconography. Where the Spanish master sought to achieve stasis through compositional equilibrium, Edgerton created a different kind of stasis by freezing a fast-moving object; in his own film Gersht, in his words, “attempts to negotiate these polarities.”⁴²

The scene begins in silence, at rest within a framed LCD monitor. But then we hear, and feel, a low bass rumble. Suddenly, a golden bullet flies into the scene, as in the Edgerton photograph, traveling in a straight line from right to left like written Hebrew. The pomegranate hangs directly in the path of the bullet, and a whooshing sound is heard an instant before impact.⁴³ The bullet slices straight through the pomegranate without resistance, making a clean, knifelike cut. This is less a collision than an extreme integration of elements: in one captivating

and catastrophic moment, three artists, three eras, three evolutionary stages of the pictorial image — painting, photograph, and digital moving image — and three degrees of reality come together.

The bullet exits the scene quickly and takes the sound with it, but before disappearing, it slows down just enough for us to see its gold surface, much as we are able to linger on its counterpart in Edgerton’s photograph. Edgerton’s apple, attached to the table with a rod, remained still, allowing the bullet to carve a perfect tunnel through it; movement, impact, and aftermath are captured in a single, static image. Unlike Edgerton’s apple, Gersht’s bisected pomegranate is sent on a pendulous journey by the bullet. As the splayed pomegranate swings, its bloody juice sprays in all directions. Its open halves, tenuously connected, reveal its entrails. With each frame advancing more slowly than the one before, we notice every chunk of flesh and drop of crimson juice that is propelled into the atmosphere. The lower half of the fruit becomes a bottom jaw as it rises to meet the upper half, spewing trails of bloody drool.

As it slows, the splatter dissipates, leaving singular rubies of juice — shiny and sensuous — hovering in midair. In the aftermath, we notice two bloody gashes on the left side of the window frame and fallen drops of thin juice on the fruit below. The plump, blushing pomegranate halves look like breasts, the pumpkin’s golden lips beckon us toward its inner mystery, and the cucumber assertively confronts us. The jaw of the pomegranate barely opens and closes as it gasps for breath, and the screen fades to black. We imagine that the pomegranate will continue to swing, that the effects of violence reverberate beyond the act itself.

It is assumed that with each advance in photographic technology — the advent of the digital camera, in particular — we are able to reveal ever-increasing degrees of truth. Walter Benjamin predicted that “the camera will become smaller and smaller, more and more prepared to grasp fleeting, secret images.”⁴⁴ But Gersht does not buy into photographic truth. Neither does Antonioni. At the end of his film, no body has been recovered and the photographic evidence has been stolen. Thomas questions if the murder ever happened at all, or if instead his lens or his mind may have failed him.

Gersht’s photographic series *Chasing Good Fortune*, made in Japan in 2010, leads us to similar doubts. According to Gersht, he embarked on a “journey to keep on chasing the cherry blossom,” which, because of the short duration of the annual bloom, would “always be almost too late.”⁴⁵ Here, he again uses the camera to freeze time without aiming to capture reality. Unlike his *Blow Up* photographs, with their almost surreal sharpness, the cherry blossom images are highly pixilated. Digital imaging replaces photorealism with pointillism in these grainy depictions of blooming pink trees with delicate branches. The photographs, such as *Isolated*, 2011 (plate 20), were taken at 4 a.m. with a camera designed to work in very low light conditions. There was so little illumination, however, that the camera could barely deliver on its promise; in Gersht’s words, “When I pushed photographic technology beyond its limits, the images started to fall apart.”⁴⁶ The result? Photographs in which every pixel is visible and the component colors — red, green, and blue — have separated.

Gersht does not manipulate these images in postproduction; the camera alone is responsible for the breakdown of visual information. Though a work such as *Speck 02*, 2010 (plate 19), is particularly affected by the limitations of the digital camera, it is more compelling (and certainly more distinctive) than traditional photographs of the subject. Ironically, these images, taken with the latest technology, look old, sharing aesthetic properties with turn-of-the-twentieth-century autochromes made with the earliest photographic color technology.⁴⁷

EXCAVATING THE TRUTH BURIED IN TIME

Gersht’s early photograph *Bookmarks*, 1998 (plate 1), presents a wall of packed bookshelves extending, seemingly forever, in every direction. Here we see more history than our eyes can readily take in. There are books of every size and color, books from many cultures and eras — a world full of histories waiting to be mined, reconfigured, and shared. Gersht shot the image in an apartment in Sarajevo, where he had gone to photograph the aftermath of recent violent conflict. He did not need to venture from his host’s home to find traces of brutality. With signature

12. Roger Fenton, *Valley of the Shadow of Death*, 1855, salted paper print from a wet collodion glass negative



subtlety, he uses the title to draw the viewer’s attention to marks on the spines of two books located on the top shelf, slightly left of center. These are scars from a passing bullet, evidence of violence hiding in plain sight. While we may not notice these marks at first, Gersht is highly sensitive to such clues. Constantly aware of the weight of history, whether it has been written or not, he uses the camera lens to seek out the truth.

In 2003, one of Gersht’s many journeys took him to the edge of the Galicia region on the northeastern coast of Spain, an area locals call the “coast of death.” Its craggy shore and frequent storms have wrecked hundreds of ships, which, legend claims, hold treasure at the bottom of the sea.⁴⁸ The photograph *Dead Dog*, 2003 (plate 52), shows us Galicia’s rolling emerald hills, baby-blue waters, and cerulean-tinted clouds that fade into the sun-soaked distance. This magical landscape beckoned those now-sunken ships, luring them into the dangerous waters at its edge. In the foreground of this scene of nature at its most lush and glorious, on a carpet of kelly-green grass, lies the carcass of a dog. Not long before Gersht arrived, the oil tanker *Prestige* had crashed thirty miles offshore, spilling 4,000 tons of fuel.⁴⁹ Gersht chose not to photograph black waves attacking the shore, or floating patches of suffocating oil, but rather to evoke with the dead dog the damage the disaster left behind.

The search for evidence is a constant preoccupation for Gersht, and he is fascinated by the history of the technology that assists it. When the microscope was new, he notes, “we were able to perceive particles that were so small that, before that moment, we could only imagine what they might be, but were not familiar with them. And all of [a] sudden, through technological devices, we became familiar with them. They entered our consciousness and became part of reality, and in many ways are expanding our sense of reality.”⁵⁰ The technological devices he refers to include the camera, long assumed to be yet another tool for revealing otherwise unperceivable truths.

As photography advanced in the twentieth century, it brought an increased level of documentary detail to viewers and, in turn, a greater ability to astonish and shock them. Well-known examples of horrifying images are Robert Capa’s 1936 photograph of a Spanish Civil War soldier falling backward just after a bullet pierced his chest (see fig. 35, p. 231)

and a 1968 photograph by Eddie Adams taken during the Vietnam War, in which a Vietcong is being shot in the head at close range. The advent of television increased the proliferation of realistic gore.

Gersht understands that to convey history’s violence in a resonant way today, one must look beyond the ubiquitous images in newspapers and on the evening news that, as Susan Sontag noted, “make us less able to feel, to have our conscience pricked.”⁵¹ Gersht stealthily draws us into dialogue with the hard facts of history’s darkest days without even a hint of graphic description. This photographic strategy has a history too. In this context, Sontag drew attention to the photograph *Valley of the Shadow of Death*, 1855, by Roger Fenton, arguably the first war photographer (fig. 12). Assigned by the British government to document the Crimean War, Fenton photographed a dusty, barren road dug into by wheels, curving toward an unseen destination; though no bodies are depicted, the history of human violence is conveyed by strewn cannonballs and rocks, creating, according to Sontag, “a portrait of absence, of death without the dead.”⁵²

Sontag’s popularization of the suspicion that Fenton staged the scene to heighten its drama has given rise to animated debate.⁵³ Regardless of the truthfulness of photographs, they undeniably have the capacity to rewrite history; viewers who know events only through pictures often etch those images into their memory. As Sontag noted, “When it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite.”⁵⁴

Gersht is aware that an event or place can become or be deemed “memorable” simply because it was photographed. With that knowledge in mind, he takes his camera to places where offenses occurred, but which have not been recorded by journalistic photographers and mapmakers. To make *Swamp No. 1*, 2008 (fig. 13), and other works in his *Hide and Seek* series, Gersht traveled to the marshes and forests that served as places of hiding during the Nazi era. While keen to reconstruct historical fact, Gersht is also motivated by his interest in how the past is remembered.⁵⁵ The places in the *Hide and Seek* photographs occupy the “no man’s land” between official histories and the vernacular of collective memory.

How does Gersht illustrate this borderland and attempt to right the errors of history and collective memory? While he does not describe

these places in detail, or give clues as to their exact geographical location, he communicates that they are the sites of long-hushed secrets. In this respect, he provides a representation of memory, using visual devices that call its reliability and precision into question. In the *Hide and Seek* series, a thick haze obscures the landscape. This is particularly evident in the impressionistic *Boatman*, in which a man in a rowboat barely emerges from a veil of pale blue fog. In Gersht’s world, the haze of time acts as a force field denying access to realities that might otherwise make their way into collective consciousness. Images such as *Boatman* are both portrayals of actual places and metaphysical speculations about the enduring effects of human suffering, the traces of which are impossible to erase.

In the earlier *Liquidation* series, Gersht used a blur instead of a fog; in works such as *Trace 01*, 2005 (plate 29), the effect can be seen again to represent the imprecision of memory or the passage of time. A comparison can be drawn between these photographs and Gerhard Richter’s “photo paintings” of the 1960s and early 1970s that were based on black-and-white photographs. By dragging a soft brush or a squeegee across a painting’s still-wet surface, Richter created enigmatic, blurred images that resemble faded photographs. Gersht intercedes earlier in the photographic process by allowing the camera to blur the original images almost beyond recognition.

FROM THE FALLOUT,
A PHOENIX

Gersht’s fascination with the fine line between destruction and creation led him to the subject of nuclear technology, which informs the series *Chasing Good Fortune*. The preoccupation with nature’s ability to regrow what humankind has destroyed is foreshadowed in his 2007 photograph *Untitled 10* (see fig. 34, p. 231), the last in his *Time after Time* series, in which what we assume to have been a tremendous explosion has decimated a vase of flowers. Remaining are clouds of dust, glass rubble, and fallen flowers that lie to the left, their stalks perfectly straight as if from rigor mortis. By chance, one lone stem has survived upright. Crimped



where it meets a small white bud, the injured stalk nonetheless lifts toward the sky. Signs of renewal peek out from the ash of devastation.

During Gersht's mandatory service in the Israeli army, he functioned as a medic, and as such was trained to treat soldiers for the effects of chemical agents.⁵⁶ More than sixty years after the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan, he looked farther beyond his personal geography than ever before, and traveled to Tokyo and Hiroshima.

Gersht is not the first photographer to tread on this soil or subject; photography played an important part in the creation and understanding of the bomb. Edgerton developed a relationship with the U.S. military when the high-power strobes he had invented were used to take aerial nighttime photographs of enemy territory. The Atomic Energy Commission then called on him and his colleagues at the company Edgerton, Germeshausen, and Grier to assist with development of the atomic bomb. Though not intended for military use, the Tyrister, a device Edgerton patented, became the detonator. The U.S. government then asked him to photograph atomic testing. Edgerton, with assistant Charles Wyckoff, replaced a camera shutter with filters, inventing the "rapatron" camera, which was able to capture the tests at extremely high speeds.⁵⁷

Edgerton did not fully grasp the implications of his involvement before his camera revealed the bomb's unparalleled power, and the photographs of the testing in the desert of the American Southwest could not predict what would happen when the bomb was used against a city full of people. On August 6, 1945, the B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Edgerton did not document the bomb's aftermath, but others contracted by the U.S. government did: President Harry Truman sent a top-secret group of military photographers, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS), to make a visual record of the impact of the bomb on Hiroshima's architecture and infrastructure. The loss of 140,000 people is palpable in these small but haunting black-and-white photographs. Though no bodies are present, what is visible is no less distressing. The photographers captured the crumbled and partly collapsed public buildings, but they also recorded "flash burns" on buildings and streets. When the bomb hit, its blast rendered some surfaces light sensitive. As with photograms, the shad-

ows cast by objects in front of these surfaces were burned into them by the flash. A mark the precise shape, size, and position of a person was created at the moment the victim was vaporized. In the USSBS photograph captioned "Flash-burned asphalt on Bridge 20 over the Motoyasu River, Hiroshima," October 26, 1945 (fig. 14), footprints and a whitish flash burn in the shape of human legs have been outlined in chalk on the dark ground. An arrow has been drawn there, pointing between the leg marks, and over it the words "direction of blast" have been written.⁵⁸

Gersht has said, "I see the dropping of the nuclear bomb as the most important event of our time. It became such a landmark in our engagement with other human beings."⁵⁹ Like the USSBS, Gersht photographed the bomb's aftermath. But instead of flash burns, he sought out cherry blossoms. After the bomb exploded, trees were left standing, but all their branches were burned off. Gersht's cherry blossoms, rich with petals, are portraits of resilience.

Appearing for only two weeks each year, the cherry blossom is a symbol of beauty and ephemerality in Japanese culture. During World War II, Kamikaze pilots of the Japanese military Special Forces Unit, the Tokkotai—arguably the first suicide bombers—were instructed to fly directly into American naval vessels, sacrificing their lives to end those of their enemies. A single cherry blossom was painted on the side of their rocket-powered Ohka planes and cherry blossom patterns were stitched onto their uniforms. Additionally, the Japanese military used the metaphor "falling like a beautiful cherry blossom" to recruit Kamikazes,⁶⁰ and today cherry trees are planted in the Kamikaze memorials that surround the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. These trees, in full bloom, were evocatively photographed by American art photographer Lee Friedlander from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s.

Gersht says of the cherry tree, "As it's blooming and [the petals are] immediately falling, I'm trying to capture something that is already gone."⁶¹ His photograph *Imperial Memories: Floating Petals, Black Water*, 2011 (plate 15), looks, at first glance, like an abstract painting or a photograph of the cosmos. The jet-black background seems to recede infinitely behind innumerable pink particles that swirl and cluster to form an overall composition. Only at an intimate distance does it become apparent that these are cherry blossom petals. Specifi-

14. Unidentified photographer, photograph captioned “Flash-burned asphalt on Bridge 20 over the Motoyasu River, Hiroshima,” October 26, 1945, gelatin silver print



cally, they are petals that have fallen into the reflecting pool of one of the Kamikaze memorials. For Gersht, the petals represent not only the Kamikaze pilots who fell through the atmosphere, but also all the countless other lives that ended instantly during that era.

Hiroshima Sleepless Nights: Never Again 02, 2011 (fig. 15), is a photographic haiku—a vertical diptych showing a single, simple cherry branch against an empty backdrop; the shape recalls painted Japanese scrolls of the same subject. The black branch cuts through the image, like a fissure spreading dangerously down the façade of a marble building. As with much of Gersht’s work, it is at once delicately beautiful and ominous, as emphasized by the break between the two panels of the diptych. The branch that begins in the upper half, sturdy and thick, does not match up with the frail divided branches in the lower panel. In various Kabuki plays, a broken cherry branch with blossoms represents impending death. Gersht’s fracture is a metaphor for the everlasting damage that has split something lovely in half and left it weaker. The color is also sinister. These blossoms are, like Gersht’s snowy landscapes, a pale, anemic white, and the background is whiter still. Most reports of the detonation of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima describe a similar effect, what one witness described as “a tremendous flash of blue-white light.”⁶² Yet in irradiated soil this cherry tree,

an ancient symbol of death and rebirth, blooms. Even if its braches are less hearty than those of its ancestors, Gersht’s cherry is determined to grow, resisting the poison pressuring it to fade out of existence. Gersht is intrigued by this kind of alchemy, by the way violence can radically change its surviving victims, and yet how darkness can become light, fueled by the will of living things to survive even the worst atrocities.



15. *Hiroshima Sleepless Nights: Never Again* 02, 2011, archival inkjet prints





IN MY NEW FILM FOR THE Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, what appears to be an ancient Greek coin from the collection gradually melts, slowly transmuting the portrait of Euthydemus II, king of Bactria. As if aging, he begins to crumble and disappear. This struggle between nature and culture—between the human hand that created the object and the natural mineral of which it is made—is fierce and continuous. Like the image of Christ on the shroud of Turin, the face refuses to fade away. As the metal turns to liquid, ripples and waves form rhythmic patterns. I associate the transition with the medieval effort to alchemically transform base metals into noble

ones such as silver and gold. But since coins have been the most universal embodiment of currency, and have hardly changed for over two and a half thousand years, I also identify this ancient coin with the beginnings of the economic system, when cash was exchanged for commodities. Today we are at the end of this era, as coins become nearly obsolete and transactions almost entirely abstract. —*Ori Gersht*

**ORI GERSHT: HISTORY REPEATING
(PAGES 23–52)**

- 1 Quoted in Edward Lucie-Smith, *Henri Fantin-Latour* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 37.
- 2 Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 433, 426. Emphasis in the original.
- 3 See “What’s the Truth about . . . Pomegranate Seeds?,” *Orthodox Union*, www.ou.org, accessed January 31, 2012.
- 4 Baruch Engler, “Holocaust Days in Kosov, July 1942–November 1942,” typescript of English translation of portions of *The Book of Kosow*, ed. G. Kressel and L. Oleizki (Tel Aviv: Hamenora Publishing House, 1964), 3.
- 5 “I asked Nicolai Horbaczuk for three ropes, so that we could end our lives before falling into the hands of the Germans, in case we were discovered. . . . My younger son [Gideon, Gersht’s father-in-law] worried terribly that he might not reach the rope, and I reassured him, promising to help him when the time comes.” Baruch Engler, *ibid.*, 5, 7. As Engler later wrote: “I have lived more than sixty-five years with the memories of that terrible time and this became part of my being. Such deep feelings cannot simply disappear.” Engler, “Voyage to Kosov, 1–9 April, 2007,” in *ibid.*, 6.
- 6 Ori Gersht, e-mail communication to the author, November 16, 2011.
- 7 Thomas “Toivi” Blatt, Sobibor: The Forgotten Revolt, <http://www.sobibor.info/revolt.html>, accessed January 24, 2012.
- 8 United States Holocaust Museum, “Tattoos and Numbers: The System of Identifying Prisoners at Auschwitz,” online Holocaust Encyclopedia, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007056>, accessed January 24, 2012.

- 9 Judith Brin Ingber, “Yehudit Arnon,” Jewish Women’s Archive, in A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/ar-non-yehudit>, accessed January 24, 2012.
- 10 Ori Gersht, gallery talk at CRG Gallery, New York, N.Y., May 7, 2011, author’s notes.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Ori Gersht, conversation with the author, November 17, 2011.
- 13 Ori Gersht, e-mail communication to the author, March 30, 2011.
- 14 Joanna Lowry, “Documents of History, Allegories of Time,” *Afterglow: Ori Gersht*, exh. cat. (London: August Media; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2002), 153.
- 15 Gersht, conversation, November 17, 2011.
- 16 Jeremy Millar, “Speak, You Also,” in Ori Gersht, *The Clearing: Ori Gersht*, ed. Steven Bode and Jeremy Millar (London: Film and Video Umbrella, 2005), 15.
- 17 Francis Barrett, “Geography of the Ampurdan,” *Iberianature*, <http://iberianature.com/spain/culture/catalonia/girona/ampurdan/geography-of-the-ampurdan>.
- 18 Fittko was recruited by Varian Fry, an American journalist who was an early member of the Emergency Rescue Committee, which during the Vichy regime helped thousands of refugees — many of them intellectuals, avant-garde artists, and political dissidents — make their way to safety.
- 19 Quoted in Michael Taussig, *Walter Benjamin’s Grave* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 3.

- 20 “Since the border is now deserted and therefore any attempt to cross it is meaningless, my parallel journey highlighted the absurdity and arbitrariness of borders.” Gersht, e-mail communication to the author, November 16, 2011.
- 21 In the book, Benjamin rails against the definition of history as a fixed chronology of events past, a view he sees as rigid and spiritually empty. See Alfredo Lucero-Montano, “Walter Benjamin’s Concept of History,” *PhiloSophos.com*, http://www.philosophos.com/philosophy_article_69.html, accessed December 1, 2011. Benjamin also stresses that the Torah forbids fortune-telling but emphasizes remembrance, and, aptly in relation to Gersht’s work, observes that “the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.” Walter Benjamin, quoted in Eduardo Cadava, “Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History,” *Diacritics* 22 (Fall–Winter 1992): 85.
- 22 Gersht, e-mail communication, November 16, 2011.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Taussig, *Benjamin’s Grave*, 9: “‘I cannot risk losing it,’ Benjamin had said. ‘It is the manuscript that *must* be saved. It is more important than I am.’” The presence of a suitcase and an itemization of its contents were noted in the legal papers filed at the time of Benjamin’s death, but no manuscript was mentioned.
- 25 Martin Herbert, “Ori Gersht: Places That Were Not,” *ArtReview*, no. 39 (March 2010): 123. The term “MacGuffin” was coined by Alfred Hitchcock.
- 26 For Gersht, the building represents the checkpoint, which was situated only a few

- hundred meters away. The tracking shot recapitulates Benjamin’s journey from the mountains to the sea, and Gersht plays it in reverse to echo the angel’s “being blown backward into the future.” Gersht, conversation, November 17, 2011.
- 27 This allover composition against a dark ground continues to interest Gersht, as evident in the recent photograph *Imperial Memories: Floating Petals, Black Water*, 2011 (plate 15), which depicts cherry blossom petals near Hiroshima, Japan.
- 28 Donald Macintyre, “The Big Question: What Are Israeli Settlements, and Why Are They Coming under Pressure?,” *Independent* (U.K.), May 29, 2009.
- 29 Catherine Connors, “Seeing Cypresses in Virgil,” *Classical Journal* 88, no. 1 (October–November 1992): 1.
- 30 Joseph Caputo, “Q&A: Ori Gersht,” *Smithsonian Magazine* 39, no. 12 (March 2009): 27.
- 31 In the flower arrangement, Van Huysum included an exotic tulip in full bloom, its rich red and purple colors and asymmetrical shape contrasting with the simple white and pink hollyhocks below it. According to historian Mike Dash, the tulip was once an extremely expensive flower; bulbs fetched their highest prices at a 1637 auction, making Dutch flower merchants among the richest of their time. As Dash explains: “Some tulips were so scarce and so greatly coveted that they were worth more than a hundred times their weight in gold, and successful bulb dealers could make huge profits. At this time the richest man in the whole of the United Provinces was worth 400,000 guilders — a sum amassed over several generations. But some tulip traders were buying and selling single flowers for hundreds, even thousands of guilders and building paper fortunes of as much as forty or sixty thousand guilders in a matter of a year or two.” Mike Dash, *Tulipomania: The Story of the World’s Most Coveted Flower and the Extraordinary Passions It Aroused* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 2. Soon thereafter, the tulip market crashed. Scottish journalist Charles Mackay was the first to link the tulip trade’s rise and fall to the phenomenon of the speculative economic bubble, in his book *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions* (London: Richard Bentley, 1841), reprinted as Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (New York: Harmony Books, 1980), and it has become a metaphor that is still used today.
- 32 Carol Armstrong, “Ori Gersht: *Blow Up/Time after Time* — Art and Violence,” *Portfolio Biannual Magazine of Contemporary Photography* 47 (May 2008), reprinted in Julie Joyce, Carol Armstrong, and Michele Robecchi, *Ori Gersht: Lost in Time*, exh. cat. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2011), 24.
- 33 Gersht addresses the deadly effects of oil spills on nature, and on animals in particular, in his photograph *Dead Dog*, 2003 (plate 52), shot in Spain in the aftermath of a spill from the oil tanker *Prestige* in 2002.
- 34 Julie Joyce, “Space-Time Continuum,” in Julie Joyce, Carol Armstrong, and Michele Robecchi, *Ori Gersht: Lost in Time*, exh. cat. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2011), 15.
- 35 Ori Gersht, quoted in Michele Robecchi, “Breaking the Surface,” in Joyce, Armstrong, and Robecchi, *Ori Gersht: Lost in Time*, 32.
- 36 Ori Gersht, in interview for Artis Video Series, May 2011, vimeo.com/26419742, accessed January 24, 2012. Gersht is interested in issues related to notions of the “optical unconscious” that Benjamin introduced in his “Small History of Photography” (1931), where he addressed the capacity of technology to permit examination of visual reality that lies beyond the power of the human eye; he compares this capacity to that of Freudian psychoanalysis to expose the “instinctual unconscious.” Rosalind Krauss critiques the notion in her book *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).
- 37 Henry Peach Robinson, “Idealism, Realism, Expressionism” (1896), reprinted in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven, Conn.: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), 96.
- 38 Ori Gersht, interview by the author, May 23, 2011, transcript, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
- 39 The evocation of bombings and attendant notions of nationalism is fortified by Gersht’s selection of flowers based on the tricolor palette of Fantin-Latour’s source painting as well as the U.S. flag.
- 40 In his youth in Israel, Gersht sought refuge from the climate of violence in the film theater his parents ran, the now-defunct Paris Cinema in Tel Aviv, which showed cult as well as classic films, day and night, and attracted film buffs from all over Israel. Gersht could see as many films as he could stand at a time, and watched many from the projection booth. See Mordechai Omer, “Ori Gersht: The Pursuit of the Concealed, or Photography as Autobiography,” in Ori Gersht and Mordechai Omer, *Afterglow: Ori Gersht*, trans. Daria Kassovsky and Richard Flantz (London: August Media; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2002), 147. Seeing films unfold through the small projection-booth window may have influenced Gersht’s tendency to see the world like a cinematographer, framing and capturing it through glass. This way of seeing recalls Gersht’s *White Noise* photographs, taken through a train window beyond which the landscape passed like a movie, a story evolving rapidly frame by frame (see plate 25).
- 41 J. Kim Vandiver and Pagan Kennedy, “Harold Eugene Edgerton,” *National Academy of Sciences Biographical Memoirs* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2005), 85:4.
- 42 Gersht, conversation, November 17, 2011, in which he cited the essays by Norman Bryson in his seminal book *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).
- 43 Gersht uses sound evocatively: in this case, the sound of breathing played backward. Gersht, conversation, November 17, 2011.
- 44 Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography” (1931), reprinted in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven, Conn.: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), 215.
- 45 Gersht, interview for Artis Video Series, May 2011.
- 46 Gersht, conversation, November 17, 2011.
- 47 In 1904, Louis Lumière — a pioneering inventor who, with his brother, Antoine, invented early photographic and motion-picture technologies — developed the “autochrome.” He covered glass plates with tiny grains of potato starch, which he dyed several colors, and carbon dust. Exposing the plates to light and developing them in a darkroom, he produced some of the earliest color photographs, which were quite grainy and pointillist. Though they took longer to process than black-and-white pictures, for the first time amateurs could easily learn the process, and soon the Lumière factory was mass-producing plates. *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 38, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 10.
- 48 “The Sinking of the ‘Prestige’ Raises, Once Again, the Importance of Communication,” Universia Knowledge@Wharton, March 26, 2003, <http://www.wharton.universia.net/index.cfm?fa=viewArticle&id=548&language=english&specialId=79>, accessed February 2, 2012.
- 49 “The Prestige Oil Tanker Disaster: The Facts,” World Wildlife Federation, assets. wwf.org.uk/downloads/prestige.pdf, accessed February 2, 2012.
- 50 Gersht, interview, May 23, 2011.
- 51 Susan Sontag, “Looking at War: Photography’s View of Devastation and Death,” *New Yorker*, December 9, 2002, 96.
- 52 Ibid., 91.
- 53 See the three-part article by filmmaker Errol Morris (*New York Times*, September 25, October 4, and October 23, 2007) investigating Sontag’s claim, which she based on earlier speculation by Mark Haworth-Booth.
- 54 Sontag, “Looking at War,” 87.
- 55 Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed., ed. William A. Darity, Jr. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008). Olick refers to the past as it has been remembered as “mnemohistory.”
- 56 Ori Gersht, e-mail communication to the author, February 7, 2012.
- 57 Vandiver and Kennedy, “Harold Eugene Edgerton.”
- 58 Brian Sholis, “‘Hiroshima Ground Zero’ at International Center of Photography, New York,” *Art Agenda*, June 3, 2011, <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/hiroshima-ground-zero/>.
- 59 Gersht, talk at CRG Gallery, May 7, 2011.
- 60 Emiko Ohnuki-Tierny, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 38.
- 61 Gersht, talk at CRG Gallery, May 7, 2011.
- 62 “The United States Strategic Bombing Survey: The Destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” Academic American History Web site, updated June 23, 2010, <http://www.academicamerican.com/worldwar2/docs/Hiroshima.htm>, accessed February 2, 2012.