



SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM

Julie Joyce

We know that under the image revealed there is another which is truer to reality and under this image still another and yet again still another under this last one, right down to the true image of that reality, absolute, mysterious, which no one will ever see or perhaps right down to the decomposition of any image, of any reality.

— Michelangelo Antonioni ¹

Ori Gersht engages the grand themes of life, death, violence, and beauty in works that are as personal as they are universal. His photographs and films of the past two decades transcribe images of historically significant sites—the Judean Desert, Sarajevo, Auschwitz, the Galicia region of Ukraine, the Lister Route in the Pyrenees (on which Walter Benjamin made his ill-fated exodus from Nazi-occupied France)—into ciphers of psychological disruption. Such scenes may not seem out of the ordinary unto themselves, but, through the artist’s focused attention and treatment they evoke the emotional resonance of what has transpired—most often, violence, and, more significantly, the ghosts of war’s most egregious detritus, its refugees.

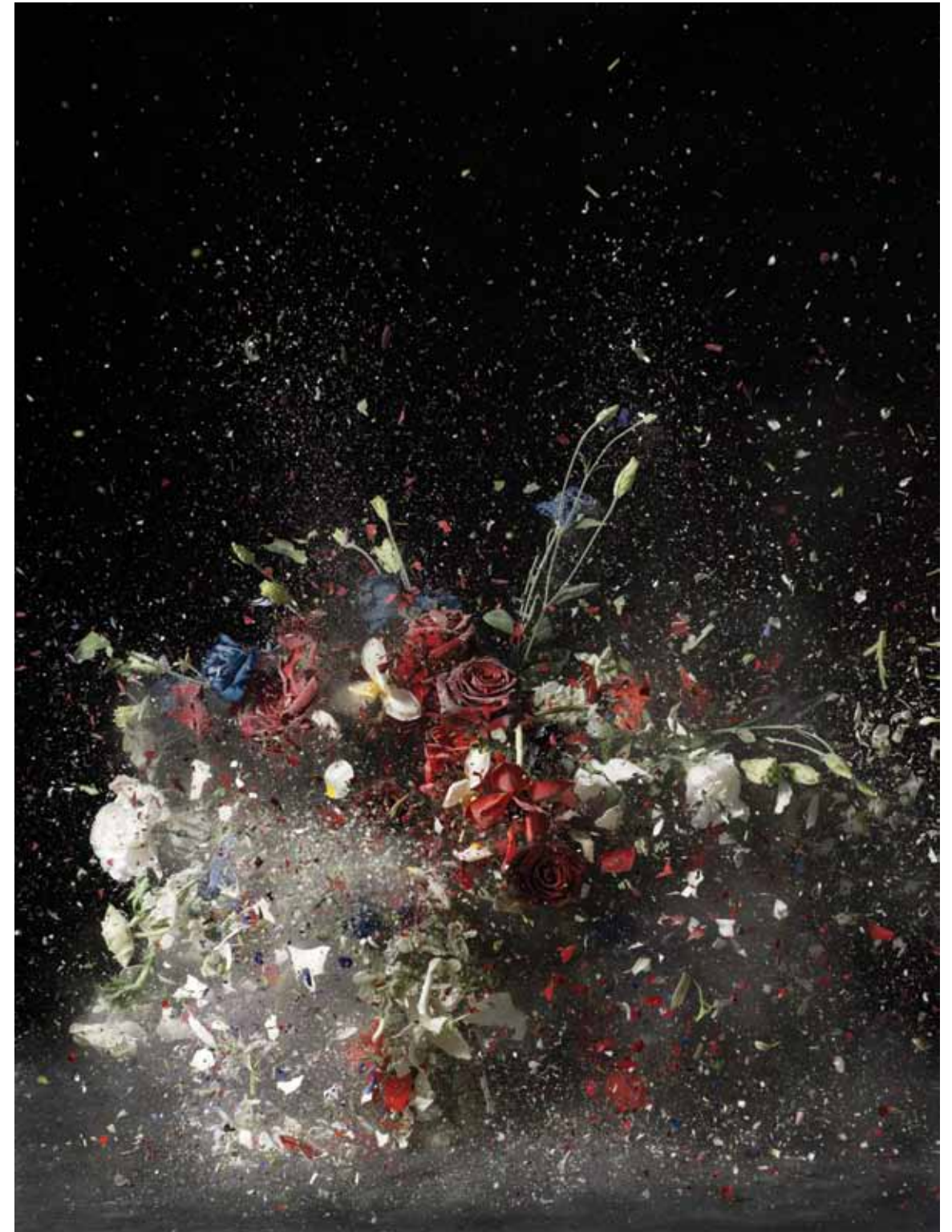
Pervasive in Gersht’s work is the landscape—as a place, an idea, and an art historical trope. His films and photographs may be compared to paintings in their display—from their unhindered access (no Plexiglas separates their surfaces from the viewer) to the frames surrounding the monitors on which the films often play. Moreover, the views and horizons of, for instance, *Between Places* (1998-2000), *White Noise* (1999-2000), *The Clearing/Liquidation* (2005), and *Evaders* (2009), recall Romantic depictions of the sublime. They conjure precedents in both photography, such as the breathtaking vistas of Andreas Gursky and the landscapes of the American south by Sally Mann, and painting, by J.M.W. Turner, Caspar David Friedrich, and even Mark Rothko.

Gersht's turn to the subject of historical still life painting in his recent trilogy of films and related photographs may then seem like a logical development, an inevitable expansion of the trace of nostalgia that permeates his landscapes. However, the still lifes operate on a different level than the landscapes, turning the viewer's engagement with what is depicted inside-out. This is particularly relevant when considering the difference between the historic genres of landscape and still-life painting. In his treatise on the latter, Norman Bryson states that still life not only "[opposes] the anthropocentrism of the 'higher' genres," but, moreover, "takes on the exploration of what 'importance' tramples underfoot. It attends to the world ignored by the human impulse to create greatness." Used to emphasize this point are the *bodegones* of Juan Sánchez Cotán, including the painting, *Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber* (ca. 1602) that Gersht recreates in his film, *Pomegranate* (2006).

The still lifes also provide a much different perspective for the viewer. "Instead of the plunging vistas, arcades, horizons and the sovereign prospect of the eye," still-life painting "proposes a much closer space, centred [sic] on the body."² The objects portrayed in these scenes are within arm's reach, a space of "nearness."³ Gersht's still-life films exploit this

effect, drawing us in, through their focus and detail and by virtue of the fact that they actually move in time. Yet any sense of illusion or visceral connection that may be experienced in Gersht's work is virtually obliterated by a disruption that astonishes, arrests, and completely disturbs the viewer's sense of complacency. Indeed, the subtlety that has pervaded his work is annihilated by the explosion in *Big Bang II* (2007), decimated by the bullet shot through a ripe pomegranate in *Pomegranate*, or swiftly displaced by discomfiting anticipation in *Falling Bird* (2008).

In this obliteration, Gersht proposes an uncanny reversal: in effect, what once were still lifes become, through disruption, landscapes. *Big Bang II* and related photographs from the *Blow Up* (2007) and *Time After Time* (2007) series dissipate a floral arrangement into innumerable small particles, spreading open the view and becoming, in a slowed instant, atmosphere. Upon impact, *Pomegranate* turns into a bloody war-scape. And what is understood as a table, windowsill, or hard surface in Jean-Siméon Chardin's *A Mallard Duck Hanging on a Wall with a Seville Orange* (1720-30), metamorphoses, in Gersht's *Falling Bird*, into a treacherous and sinister sea.



Chasing Good Fortune (2010), Gersht's most recent body of photographs, could not be a more poignant sequel to his still-life series. The cherry blossom's resonance for centuries in Japanese culture continues to be, most notably, as a sign of the ephemerality of life, symbolizing both life and death. One of its illustrious manifestations was as propaganda in World War II as a representation of soldiers, who were thought of, in combat, to scatter like cherry blossoms, but also to die an honorable and therefore magnificent death. In response to a question about the relationship between his past work and the *Chasing Good Fortune* series, Gersht states:

I see these works as a natural progression from the still-life works. Both are obviously depicting blooming flowers, both are in a state of transition...the exploding flowers are captured in this amorphous state, simultaneously blooming and decaying. The same is true of the cherry blossom.⁴

Another inspiration for Gersht in creating the still-life series was a famous emblem of the transitory nature of earthly existence, the seventeenth-century Dutch still life painting, or *vanitas*. Wilted flowers and over-ripened fruit specifically emphasized the fleeting transience of life to the viewer. *Blow Up*, in particular, brings with it issues from other sources, ranging from the French Revolution—the *tricolore* embodied in the floral arrangement

that explodes in *Blow Up: Untitled 2, 3, and 4*, for instance—and the film that informed the title of this series, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966). The late director's first and only film set in London, the protagonist is a fashion photographer (inspired by the real-life fashion photographer, David Bailey) who stumbles upon a death by accident, but in so doing becomes embroiled in the mystery and risk of being implicated in the murder that occurred. Gersht, who spent much of his childhood years in the projection booth at a small movie house owned by his parents, was recently asked about the relationship of his photographic series to Antonioni's classic film:

[*Blow-Up*] was and still is very interesting for me, since it explores the relationships between photography and truth, reality and appearances. After the dead body has gone, and after his photographic evidence was stolen, Thomas, the main character of the film, loses his tangible sense of what he believed to be real. The film ends up with Thomas accepting the invitation of a group of mime artists to join in and participate in an imaginary tennis game. His acceptance suggests his affirmation that reality is nothing but appearance.⁵

As Gersht concludes, the film “stretches the medium of photography while establishing a dialectic between the micro- and macrocosmic.”⁶ This is certainly what is occurring in the artist's own work, whether the micro part of the equation is the viewer, or the enchanting and delicate flower petals we see twirling in the air or resting in the moat surrounding the Imperial Palace in Tokyo.

Gersht still manages to elicit that exquisite feeling we have when we experience overwhelming beauty and the sense of loss and mortality, yet in ways that we would not expect—ways that go deeper than just appearance. The multiple layers of his work occur mnemonically, slowly, and also rapidly, but with each comes a sense of changing time. His work reminds us to capture what we can while we can, but also to say or do something about atrocity, whether experienced or perceived. It accelerates the slow decay found in *vanitas* into the amplified, contemporary realm of speed and violence. Gradually *and* abruptly, Gersht's work jars us into altered states of being.

The author would like to thank several colleagues at SBMA who, through conversations about the work and the exhibition, provided ideas and suggestions that proved invaluable in the formation of this essay: Eik Kahng, Chief Curator; Patricia Lee, Curatorial Assistant, Contemporary Art; and Lisa Volpe, Curatorial Assistant, Photography.

¹ Bert Cardullo, ed. *Michelangelo Antonioni: Interviews*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 90.

² Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1990), 60-61.

³ Ibid. 71.

⁴ Ori Gersht in correspondence with the author, April 2011.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

