Fireflies

Inside and outside, secular and sacred, blindness and sight; ideas which emerge from analytical, non-seductive painting. Danny Yahav Brown writes about windows and stained-glass in Maya Gold's show.

Critique / Danny Yahav Brown December 8, 2015

I love painting. I undoubtedly share this love with many. Painting, with its inherent rigidity, seems to be stuck in a rut, which is why many people tend to mourn its demise. From time to time, in an antidotal reaction, some wise men and women gather to figure out what it is we want from painting. Why is it refusing to perish? How is it still pertinent to the practice of art today? The answer usually comes in the form of a circular argument – painting is pertinent because good painting exists and thus it is pertinent. I concur.

מאיה גולד, גחליליות. מראה הצבה. 2015. באדיבות גלריה אלון שגב והאמנית, מאיה גולד. צילום: מידד זוחובלסקי



[1]Maya Gold, Fireflies, Installation view
2015. photo: Meidad Suchowolski. Courtesy of Alon Segev Gallery and the artist

As it happens, I am renovating my house these days. Beyond the enormous hassle of the renovation, other things emerge. I find myself reflecting on architecture, on physical living spaces and on their more abstract values. In the dusty plains of the quotidian I see the lines between tiles meeting and separating. I'm aware of plumbing, of the gradients of the floor. I get windows and the light pouring through them. On other, more abstract levels, I think of language. I think of architectural fragments as syllables, words, sentences, which make up a language and stir up thought. I think about interior and exterior, about the illusion of depth, about encryption, about the stability of the body versus the mobility of sight. Right there, at that precise moment between the physical zone of the curtain covering the window and the ethos of the window, in my transforming house, I saw Maya Gold's show.

מאיה גולד, זיכרון, 59*65 ס״מ, שמן על MDF **[2]**



[3]Maya Gold, Memory, 2015, 59*65 cm, oil on MDF

2015. photo: Meidad Suchowolski. Courtesy of Alon Segev Gallery and the artist

I’m intrigued by the rich history of windows in paintings. The painting on the wall as a window to the world is a kind of meta-painting, in which the window in the painting allows the spectators’ gaze to go through it to the painter, or to themselves (Friedrich, Magritte, Velasquez, and others come to mind). This practice and these artists have one banal but glowing common trait: an architectural

opening, necessary for living. Maya Gold’s show deals with this architectural opening and the syllables derived from it. It provokes thinking by way of restrained, excellent painting. Therefore, paraphrasing circular arguments, Maya Gold’s painting is a good enough explanation why painting is necessary, at least to me.

מאיה גולד, לולו, 105*93, שמן על קנבס **[4]**



[5]Maya Gold, Loulou, 2015, 105*93 cm, oil on canvas

2015. photo: Meidad Suchowolski. Courtesy of Alon Segev Gallery and the artist

All the paintings in the show are similar in size, executed in oil on MDF or canvas. All except two are paintings of stained-glass windows. Stained glass is a painting technique that uses tinted glass and some material, either metal or wood, which separates it into meaningful shapes. Throughout history this technique has been described as stained glass and also as a lighted wall. The practice is ancient – a thousand years old – and most of its applications occurred in holy places (churches and mosques) and in the palaces of the extremely wealthy. The role of stained glass as an intensifier of light or as a prism, which turns ordinary light into something holy, or pious, is obvious. Thus, even before anything is said about the images in Gold's painting, it has already accumulated historical and political weight. A painting of a highly colorful skull, surrounded by flowers, with candles stuck in its eyes, presents an excellent example (*Memory*, 2015). The stained-glass window is part light and part shadow. The shadow, a silhouette of a structure outside the frame of the window, becomes a blind spot that impedes recognition of the skull in the image. From a certain angle, or due to lack of attention, the skull might completely escape the viewer's eye. Is the memento mori in The Ambassadors, by Holbein (1533), a reference point? Is it the routine of prosaic architecture, perhaps a metaphor for that memento mori? Is it the demise of painting or its revival?

Maya Gold at Alon Segev gallery, FIREFLIES, November - December 2015 b.jpg **[6]**



[7]Maya Gold, Fireflies, Installation view
2015. photo: Meidad Suchowolski. Courtesy of Alon Segev Gallery and the artist

Inside and outside, secular and sacred, blindness and sight, all within analytical and non-seductive painting. *Memory* is a small-scale painting of a stained-glass window, a total reversal of its grandiose original purpose. It is plain, almost like an architectural model. Or perhaps the small scale is a reflection of the small gallery space? One way or the other, these precise choices ask poignant questions while insisting on providing answers.

I'm reading a chapter in a book on architecture theory, by Elizabeth Grosz1. One of the issues raised in the book is the significance of Gilles Deleuze's work for architecture. Can we bind Deleuze's text and the physicality of space together? Grosz thinks that this is not inconceivable, that it is possible to tie Deleuze's thinking to space and movement, and that he clearly prefers geography to history. Deleuze is the great nomad of thought, a cartographer of power rather than form. His writing suggests difference, a relentless connection to the outside, an exchange of ideas, the opening of borders (windows?), import and export of events, and so on. Thus, should Deleuze's text be adapted to the terminology of architecture, you might imagine a multi-windowed physical space, light and dark pouring in, voices from the outside disturbing the silence within, and sometimes the outside peeks in. Gold's stained glass paintings are like that too: viewers move through them by gazing, and meanings enter and exit through the cracks in their walls.

Maya Gold, Three Women and Bananas, 59_65 cm.jpeg **[8]**



[9]Maya Gold, Three Women and Bananas, 2015, 59*65 cm, oil on MDF

2015. photo: Meidad Suchowolski. Courtesy of Alon Segev Gallery and the artist

Two_Women_at_a_Window_c1655-1660_Murillo.jpg **[10]**



[11]Bartolome Esteban Murillo, Two Women at a Window, 106*127cm
1670. the National Gallery, London, UK

A certain deception occurs in Gold’s paintings. It hangs on the wall, seemingly innocent, flat and flattening. But in fact, viewers must look deeply into the painting to grasp the process, identify the technique of stained glass as flattening, and only then they really do understand the painting. This is

a very clever illusion, some kind of smart bomb, to be defused patiently. Some paintings define depth through illusion2. Gold's is not among them. It requires a transformation of the dependence on painterly format that creates depth into the realization that depth is achievable even when the painting lacks a vanishing point. This is a delay mechanism, deferred gratification, a mechanism occurring in parallel in the painting and within the viewer. When we let go, when we neutralize the mechanism, the reward is doubly delightful: once in relation to the painting (I got it!) and once in relation to ourselves (I got it). But the ability to develop such a sophisticated mechanism always involves a certain risk; deception is not always well-received. Some will doubt the motivation behind the act, saying this is charlatanism, adept at pushing all the right buttons. However, I believe in the honesty of Maya Gold's painting. I think there is a direct ratio between the time it takes to make the painting (the bomb) and the time the viewer needs to defuse it. And if viewing time (the defusing) varies from quite long to very long, to prolonged, to lengthy – then this must be good stuff.

מאיה גולד, יום אחד אחת בצהריים, 5102, 65X52, שמן על MDF **[12]**



[13]Maya Gold, One day, One PM, 46*53 cm, oil on MDF

2015. photo: Meidad Suchowolski. Courtesy of Alon Segev Gallery and the artist

Paintings like *Three Women and Bananas* (2015) or *One Day* (2015) are schematic and naïve on the one hand, and highly specific on the other (the painted shadow of a structure). They continue to upset me. They continue to take me in and out of the painting; I am looking and being looked at. I am in constant motion, while at the same time I consider what the image in the painting actually is.

Is there a hierarchy of images? Which element is more important, if any? Is a painting of farmers more important than that of hunters? Millet's field workers or Van Gogh's? Cultivation of the land or plantation slavery? Colonialism or robust socialism? Or maybe just an urban scene with stained-glass window? I find no hierarchy in Gold's paintings. The images, some of whom give the pieces their names, are fragments of Gold's unique language, and a large part of the pleasure in her work stems specifically from the ability to borrow letters, words, and sentences and create a private discourse about inside and outside.

Rachel (2015) is a small figurative painting, in the tradition of the Old Masters, very well-made, to my eye. This painting is the origin of the whole show, inspired by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's *Two Women in a Window*, from the 17th century. It is the outlier in the show. Murillo has painted two women: the young one is leaning forward, one arm resting on the window sill while the other tightly-closed palm supports her chin; an older woman stands behind her, hiding her face in a scarf. Both women look down into the street. They are not interested in the painter's gaze or the viewer's. They are immersed in their own affairs. Gold has painted them sans the framing window. She relinquishes the window theme from art history and tosses it out the window. Or does she? What she actually does is discard the physical elements of the window – the frame, the sill, the shutter. Once the physical (painted) window has been eliminated, Gold offers an exchange – window gestures (leaning, holding, peering) made by the two women in the painting. She begins her journey only after she has shaken off the bonds of tradition, a journey pointing to the contemporariness of painting, its necessity to the understanding daily life and the reverse – its understanding through daily life. At the end of this journey painting glows like a firefly – shining gloriously, disappearing, and always coming back.

Maya Gold's show [14] will be at the Alon Segev Gallery through December 18th, 2015.

- 1. Grosz, E. (2001), Architecture from the Outside, Essays on Virtual and Real Space. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology).
- 2. I'm thinking of the Renaissance definition of perspective in its most simple, mathematical form. Or a illusionistic definition, experienced through various well-painted surfaces, such as the paintings of the sublime by Constable, Turner, or Friedrich.

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