

Talking to Hilla Ben Ari

Nomi: Even before we began working together I felt that your work was very relevant to the experience I'm looking for concerning the project. And as we progressed, I was amazed to find out how accurately you register the bodily sensations and complexities that I had experienced in this regard right from the outset. How would you define the subject of your works?

Hilla: In these works I am preoccupied with some sort of confrontation of the female body with the elements of order and rule, a somewhat painful relationship. I think that the real impetus for the works is the experience of my body in the world, which gives rise to connecting with issues that are much more far-reaching.

In the works, I ask about the boundaries of the body, about how its territory is blocked, where it disappears to, and how it is defined. I'm preoccupied with situations of the 'edge' of the body that range between pain and torture and overcoming those boundaries. The challenge that preoccupies me again and again in my work is how to create movement inside restriction.

N: At one stage of the process I wanted to suggest making the figure in the works bigger, and you said that you're unable to work on a large image.

H: I have a problem with creating a big, monumental figure. The large figures that I have made are usually made up of small units, as if they were weightless, so that they only become a mass, a body with presence and volume in the space when they are combined. It's a kind of spatial anorexia that I have to cope with all the time.

N: In some of the works there are two identical figures. Are they part of a larger pattern?

H: In my earlier works the figures themselves were, so to speak, bricks that built the big image. In the last two or three years I've been trying to isolate a single image, and that's why the "master image" is only left in the elements that surround it. In fact, I really am not able to create the crowded and repeated images any more. The qualities endemic to that crowd are like a layer of myself that has peeled away to reveal a deeper layer.

N: And where does the cut-out come from? The option to cut?

H: The cut-out is the façade – like a sign of the body that encloses an entity. You can also talk about cutting in connection with torture, as if a body reaches virtuosity through torture.

N: You told me that working in the studio was, for you, a very bodily, very physical process.

H: At first, working in the Printshop gave me a chance to try out techniques, and simply to play around without a goal and without direction. It was a stage of freedom and healing. The ongoing process was very interesting for me, mostly because of the unexpected elements of the etching. For instance, working with the acid – it creates patches that can't be controlled, and that's an element that hadn't exactly appeared in my work before. I could have used techniques that were better suited to the character of my work, like silk-screen, for instance, but the approach to the etching was in full awareness that the medium could offer me new surprises.

N: The cooperation during the process also seems very important to me.

H: Yes, Ran's assistance, both as a printer and as an artist, had a big influence on the creative process. Progress was due to the technical ideas that he showed me, and our dialog was reflected in the work. If there's someone else who is part of the process in a very intimate fashion, that creates a unique working format.

N: Towards the end you got to making woodcuts. How did that happen?

H: Woodcuts were suggested to me by Arik. I was very surprised, because I'd never ever worked with wood before, and I never thought I'd be attracted to this material. I found myself working with great enjoyment, without worrying about whether what I was doing was good or bad. I really was amazed, I wasn't prepared for it. Usually I work with paper cutting, and by comparison the wood gave me a kind of "contra" with enormous force.

N: Wood has its own character, its texture, growth patterns that affect the work.

H: Working with wood, I was aggressive, as if I attacked the wood, so that the image also happened in a less controlled way, giving up the outline, and so I found that I was **struggling** less, was more absorbed in it.