

Crimson Peels

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Crimson Peels has emerged from my continued interest in the subject of the female body, both as an artist and as curator at the Antea Gallery for Women's Art in Jerusalem. The idea to embark on a curatorial project at the Jerusalem Print Workshop took shape as a result of my conversations with Arik Kilemnik, the Workshop's director, and Irena Gordon, its curator, in keeping with the Workshop's endeavor to encourage different types of collaborations with artists and curators. In the framework of this project, seven women artists, all of whom contend with the notion of the female body as a site of occurrence, inquiry, or observation, were invited to create at the Workshop. Each of the artists, Jenifer Bar Lev, Hilla Ben Ari, Nomi Bruckmann, Rakefet Viner-Omer, Orna Bromberg, Noa Sadka, and myself, represents a different background and diverse artistic domains and disciplines (painting, photography, performance, installation, and video art). Each offers a different perspective with regard to the female body, while focusing on the medium of printmaking in its variety of techniques. The Workshop provided the artists with an additional platform for the exploration and elucidation of the issues relating to modes of expression and representation of the female body, alongside experimentation with the medium of printmaking: the possibilities it offers and the limitations it imposes.

The project lasted two years. During this period, the artists frequented the Workshop for varying amounts of time. They worked in intensive collaboration with the staff of printers to produce nearly eighty new prints: engravings, screenprints, and woodcuts. As the curator, I had the opportunity to closely accompany their work and to apprehend the connection between the processes occurring at the Workshop and their overall artistic production, as it also emerged from our conversations, recorded in the Hebrew section of this catalogue.

First-wave feminism broke out about a hundred and fifty years ago in the United States and Europe, seeking equal rights and equal opportunities for women. Second-wave feminism took form in the United States in the 1960s, demanding a shift in consciousness with respect to women and an overall change in the socio-political ground rules. Third-wave feminism emerged in the 1990s, aiming to expand the limits of the feminist struggle, by means of pluralistic and multicultural approaches. Despite the great power and impact of the feminist movements throughout their period of activity, social,

economic, and cultural constructs that are oppressive to women have remained deeply rooted in our world. Women often feel as though they are still constrained, and continue to experience what Griselda Pollock termed the woman's "traps of visuality." The external gaze constantly examining the woman has, in many ways, been assimilated as an internal gaze, while the desire to experience the body as hermetic and confined has turned into a need of the women themselves. Many women are uncomfortable in their own bodies, perhaps due to the irreconcilable gap between the ideal of beauty flooding us from every direction and the individual physique.

An iconic image in Western art history, underlining the difference between masculine and feminine existence, is known as *Venus Pudica* – modest Venus. The pose of a nude woman, covering her nakedness with her hand and inviting the viewer to partake in an erotic game, has been appropriated so many times that it almost seems natural and a matter of course. Yet, it is treated otherwise by contemporary critics, who see in *Venus Pudica* a representation of the woman as a vulnerable, sexual object. Its art-historical origins may be traced to *Aphrodite of Knidos*, attributed to the Greek sculptor Praxiteles, who sculpted it around the year 350 BCE. In contrast to nude male sculptures of the same period, depicting a man standing upright and proud without hiding anything, the goddess of love Aphrodite, covering her nakedness with her hand, appears to suffer invasion into her personal space. The fact that she conceals her genitalia and her bent, embarrassed posture direct the viewer's attention to her sexuality, thus reducing her presence to the sexual aspect alone. Is it a matter of modesty? Of female sensibility? A fear of the intrusive gaze? Undoubtedly, this prominent goddess comes across as a vulnerable figure, defined primarily by her refusal to be seen. Observation is perceived as trespassing and the viewers become voyeurs, desiring to see what they are being denied.

Many women report that life inside a woman's body is accompanied by a sort of rejection or unexplained difficulty with respect to the body, one that is fundamental to the female experience. Every attempt to come into contact with the internal parts of the woman's body or with the more profound elements of her personality is perceived by those same women as corruption, sabotage, defiance, while the less hermetic parts of her body are considered to be "object." Each of the artists in the exhibition *Crimson Peels* illuminates another, at times contradictory, aspect of this experience. Through the artistic medium, they examine worldviews and behavioral patterns deeply ingrained in the language of art

itself; it is for this very reason that, in it, they also identify the possibility for a change in these views.

The term "abject" refers, according to Julia Kristeva, to the transgression of the border between the interior and the exterior of the body. It excludes anything that is unclean or impure and rejects or denies any bodily function considered to be "dirty" or "antisocial." Conditions such as menstruation or pregnancy breach the barrier between the interior of the woman's body and its exterior; consequently, abjection belongs, according to Kristeva, to the women's realm, which stands in opposition to the symbolic patriarchal order. A sense of uncleanliness and physical and emotional corruption is evoked by **Noa Sadka's** works. Sadka insists on honing the connection with herself and with her body through her art, while keeping background noises out. Her engravings address details from her daily life and seemingly trivial or insignificant phrases ("I don't spend a cent on cosmetics, I hate creams"), as well as contents considered to be "improper," such as bodily secretion, internal organs, and complex emotions arising from the relationship between the body and its surroundings. In the course of her work on the prints, she also engages in incessant hypothetical conversations with the world of art; traces of these conversations are apparent in the works ("can a print be organic?"). Phrases of this sort and such as "I don't know where it comes from, I don't know where it goes" undermine the separation between interior and exterior, between high culture and life as she experiences it. Attentiveness to the body enables her to experience the totality of this living organism, which is in constant flux.

"Abjection" is also associated by Kristeva with the mother in patriarchal society. It is particularly manifest in Jewish law, in which the necessity to separate the interior of the body from its exterior results in the marking of the newborn in the circumcision ceremony, as a ritual of purification from the mother's impurity. The baby's emergence from the mother's internal bodily substance is seen as a constant threat to its identity, as though contaminated by her internal bodily substance. To this day, many women sustain a complicated attitude toward the process of motherhood. The desirable, valued female body is slender, young, and firm, unmarked by signs of pregnancy; therefore, pregnancy is perceived by many women as a process foreign to the body, as a "play that unfolds within [the woman's body] and in which she is not personally concerned," in the words of Simone de Beauvoir.

In her screenprints, verging on the abstract, **Nomi Bruckmann** creates images of prehistoric matriarchal figurines. The process of abstraction produces ambivalence in the deciphering of these images: it is not always clear whether what is depicted is a whole body or a close-up of female genitalia. Through these prints, Bruckmann attempts to reconstruct the pre-patriarchal woman, symbolizing, for her, timeless principles that have not yet undergone the indoctrination of Western culture. The feminine curves and folds open up the possibility of a broad, wild interpretation and indicate the existence of an archetypal womanhood in the collective subconscious.

In **Orna Bromberg's** works, the woman is represented by a childlike image of a butterfly fluttering around the head of a girlish figure. The butterfly's beauty is hypnotic in its resemblance to a big flower; yet, its symmetric form is also reminiscent of female genitalia, while the antennae are like teeth or deadly stingers. At times, the butterfly appears to grow so large that it threatens to entirely obstruct the delicate figure. The bright shade of red creates the impression of a closed, internal, womb-like environment, where the distinction between sexual fantasy and existential anxiety is blurred. Alongside their richness and multidimensionality, the screenprints also evoke the disturbing sensation of something hermetically sealed, defensive, and endangered. Luce Irigaray has claimed that the conventional approach to the body and to its modes of expression derives from the way in which men experience the world, and so too does visual culture, which is inattentive to the subtleties of the female point of view. This attitude is sometimes manifested by aggression, anger, and contempt toward so-called “feminine” modes of expression, while these, on their part, may promote a lack of visibility and evoke a sense of threat.

The atmosphere of an endangered, internal realm also arises from **Hilla Ben Ari's** prints. The nearly flat, insubstantial body of a girlish woman appears over and over again in her works, suspended between heaven and earth. In the enigmatic world created by Ben Ari, it is impossible to recognize whether the figures hover in an enclosed space governed by appliances and accessories, or in a breached, open outdoor landscape. The minuscule, fragile figure seems like a marionette operated by forces beyond the frame of the work. Thus, a relationship is also established with us, the viewers, who may act as invisible players in this balance of power. The figures' vulnerability in extreme situations is further emphasized by the violent cropping of their body parts. Is it external sabotage or an

outcome of internal conditioning? Either way, the sensation is of a womanly body on the brink of the abyss.

Jenifer Bar Lev examines accessories of dress used in sadomasochistic practices, which place the body in extreme situations of constraint, suffering, and pain. This, in her view, expresses her complex approach to conventional gender roles, whereby femininity is associated with “nourishment” and “containment,” while the man alone is permitted to express aggressive aspects of his personality. By means of these accessories, enabling role reversal among the couple, Bar Lev proposes changing relations and more fluid positions between the sexes. Through the accessories’ integration into the fixed pattern and the use of texts with multilayered interpretations, Bar Lev reduces the threat presented by these accessories and opens up a broad spectrum of possibilities at the intersection of intimacy, sexuality, and body. As in the works of women artists active in the 1970s, the pattern, decoration, and texture of her prints serve as instruments of protest against exclusive “high” art. The confusion of gender roles, which Jenifer Bar Lev seeks to create, is related to Judith Butler’s proposition that the approach linking sex, gender, and orientation is fundamentally mistaken, and that all of the terms defining sexuality, orientation, and gender should be as fluid as mercury – should interflow and be formulated anew for each person, according to his or her tendencies and choices.

Rakefet Viner-Omer’s series of etchings evokes a profound sense of existential discomfort of a body incapable of constructing a coherent identity for itself. In her prints, at times reminiscent of scribbles on the doors of public restrooms, the body leaks, is not hermetic, and dissolves into its surroundings, in spite of its apparent struggle to maintain a distinct identity. The space surrounding it is regarded as threatening, drawing the body to it in an attempt to submerge it. The lack of boundaries also blurs the distinction between “feminine” and “masculine”; therefore, almost none of the figures are fully identifiable in terms of gender. This identity lingers only as a reminiscence of an anachronistic existence.

My own works are mainly preoccupied with creating renewed intimacy with the body. I, **Nomi Tannhauser**, have chosen to record myself and the garments I wear, as they are experienced in their most intimate contact with the body, but also as a source of external constraint. The recurrent pattern draws a veil that distances from the body, while also corresponding with artistic genres featuring handicrafts attributed to women. This type of

work demands vigilance and attention to detail, as well as prolonged proximity with the body and with the work, creating a closeness that enables reconciliation between different parts of the consciousness.

Although two years have passed from the outset of this project, I still see the Workshop's adoption of this delicate subject as no less than a small miracle. For this I would like to pay my deepest gratitude to Arik Kilemnik and Irena Gordon for their vision and willingness to undertake this path and all of the Workshop's staff for their

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