

Parastou Forouhar: Poetry after Auschwitz

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Catalogues, reviews, exhibition brochures and information panels on gallery walls: they are all the terms and conditions of the business contract of the contemporary aesthetics. They determine the light in which artworks should be read, a light that previously emanated from culture and a normative aesthetics. Today, it is the responsibility of art theory to make sense of the artwork: to list the ingredients and inform the consumer of what might not be visible to the naked eye. Doses of good and bad cholesterols should be clearly indicated. The theories applied for reading 'artworks by Middle Easterners about the Middle East presented within the framework of contemporary art'—which is not the same as the Art of the Middle East—vary from the colonialist to post-colonialist approaches. They might speak of the image of a victim in need of liberation, the empowerment of the voiceless, the charm of the exotic, the clever use of self-exoticism as a chance for self-expression, an implicit critique of self-exoticism, a representation of the underrepresented, the dissolution of a stereotypical representation, a faithful commitment to the analysis of the problems 'lying at the heart of this troubled region' or a curious attention to the personal and scenes from 'everyday life' ignored by mass media. Whatever the theory, the function remains quite the same: to situate the artwork within the art world by indicating why it deserves attention. An artwork emerging from an unknown context needs a manual to be properly consumed.

In principle, an analysis of this kind is no sin. Yet, judging an artwork according to the significance of its subject-matter is not an aesthetic judgment. As such, the manuals try to balance their approach by adding comments on the visual merits of the artworks: how the colours reflect the glowing Middle

Eastern sunlight and how the lines are inspired by the sophisticated patterns of the carpet on which the artist's childhood was spent, how the artwork borrows from the profound visual vocabulary of the Islamic Art or the kitsch local culture, exploits the potentials of the geometrical design, subverts the iconoclastic visual culture, inserts the aesthetics of the everyday into the historical static decorations, revives the role of craftsmanship, brings back the real curvature of female body to the flat surface of decorated glazed-tiles.

A list of ingredients misses a judgment of 'taste'. There are more to artworks than their concept or beauty. They function in a cultural context which cannot be reduced to a description.

It is easy to justify why Parastou Forouhar is a remarkable artist. It is not difficult to list the ingredients, which overlap with those of others. It is not the relationship between her art and politics that makes her so special. It is neither the fact that she is an Iranian woman nor that her works focus on the relationship of Crime and Ornament; and not the bizarre beauty of the portrayal of torture. It is not how good she is in speaking the international language of contemporary art or to take side with her audience. It is not her life or the tragic story of her family or the courage with which she had to confront it. She is neither exotic nor anti. And she is both. And this is not important. The way she manages to surpass this, to my eyes, is cultural. She is not an unmediated response to her situation. The sum of all factors mentioned above would not necessarily have been Parastou Forouhar. Her works reflect an approach which has developed at the core of the dynamic culture she criticizes. Although working in Europe with an internation-

al visual language, although being highly critical of the inhuman practices of institutionalized Iranian culture, she is very Iranian indeed. Her simple, direct and straightforward approach has found a way to go beyond mere denunciation. She has found a way of treating a problem that can serve as a treatment for her and others. She has managed to move beyond a grudge, to live through a problem and raise it from a personal level to that of aesthetics. She gives form to the formless, succeeds to establish a vocabulary for speaking of the evil, to destroy the banality of evil which prevents it from being seen. She injects her colors in the veins of the invisible banality. And yet, she does not treat the Evil as the Other, rather as something lying deep within us, and tries to exorcise it. Instead of abandoning the building and bringing a piece of decoration as a souvenir, she works within the architecture of Iranian culture. What she generates (which can only be attained from 'within' a cultural context by someone cultured by it) is a surplus of poetry. To write poetry after Auschwitz might be barbaric but one cannot avoid the poetry emanating from such a sentence itself.

Zusammenfassung

Parastou Forouhar's exhibition titled *The Poetry of Unloved Perception* (Die Poesie der ungeliebten Wahrnehmung) was held at Kunst Galerie Fürth from 13 Jan. to 3 March 2013.

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