



Ori Gersht: Layers of Time

By Amy Bauer Haddad (former E/W Docent)

Editor's Note: Amy's Blog is (artdiversions.com).



There is a magnetic draw to the artwork by Israeli-born photographer, Ori Gersht. The moments he captures are intense and captivating. A video work depicts a bird making a slow, vertical descent into a dark abyss causing a violent rupture of water; or a bouquet of flowers depicts the very moment of demolition. Uncovering the multiple layers within each image is most alluring, which is his goal: "I am hoping for a visual engagement of the viewer with the work, and slowly the images will unfold."

Ori Gersht, who now practices in England, acknowledges how his past influences his art. War is something he grew up with. Born just three months before the Six-Day War in 1967, Mr. Gersht recalls seeking shelter when the sirens of the 1973 Yom Kippur War sounded, *The New York Times* notes. And he experienced two other wars: the first Lebanon war in 1982 and the first intifada in 1987. Despite moving to England in 1988, ideas of war and violence are weaved into his art. "It's part of my DNA," he adds. But Mr. Gersht's acute art historical knowledge also permeates his artwork: he richly fuses 18th-century still life paintings and 19th-century landscape paintings with digital technology, for example. It is a dichotomy of opposites—past and present; attraction and aversion; creation and destruction; among others—that unfolds over time.

"[Time] is a major concern" for Mr. Gersht. And it is a prevalent theme at his current exhibition at the Columbus Museum of Art, in conjunction with the Pizzuti Collection, *Ori Gersht: Still Life*. This exhibition demonstrates the many forms of time, not only past and present. Time can be represented as a process; it can also be illusionistic. And the exhibition's title points to this very illusion, or perhaps more aptly, tension: what appears to be a still life, is in fact, far from it.

Falling Bird (2009) is one such example. It is a nod to a still life by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, an eighteenth-century French painter, in contemporary terms by using HD digital film. What begins as a still life of an upside down bird and a ledge of fruit comes alive: the bird plunges slowly into a black void that turns into a tumultuous plunge of water. The falling movement is gradual; the impact of the dark water is violent until order and tranquility are finally restored. What would conceivably take seconds for a bird to plummet into reflective water takes 5 minutes and 53 seconds for the entire process to complete.





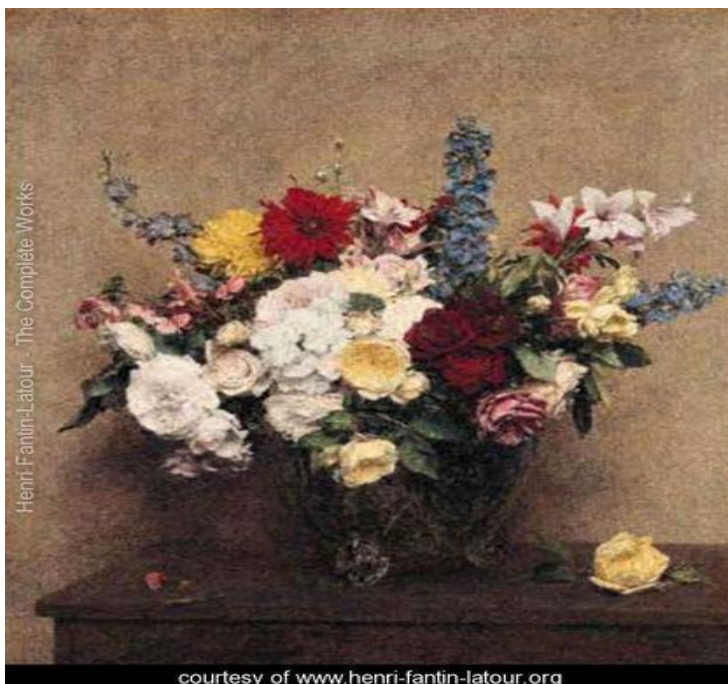
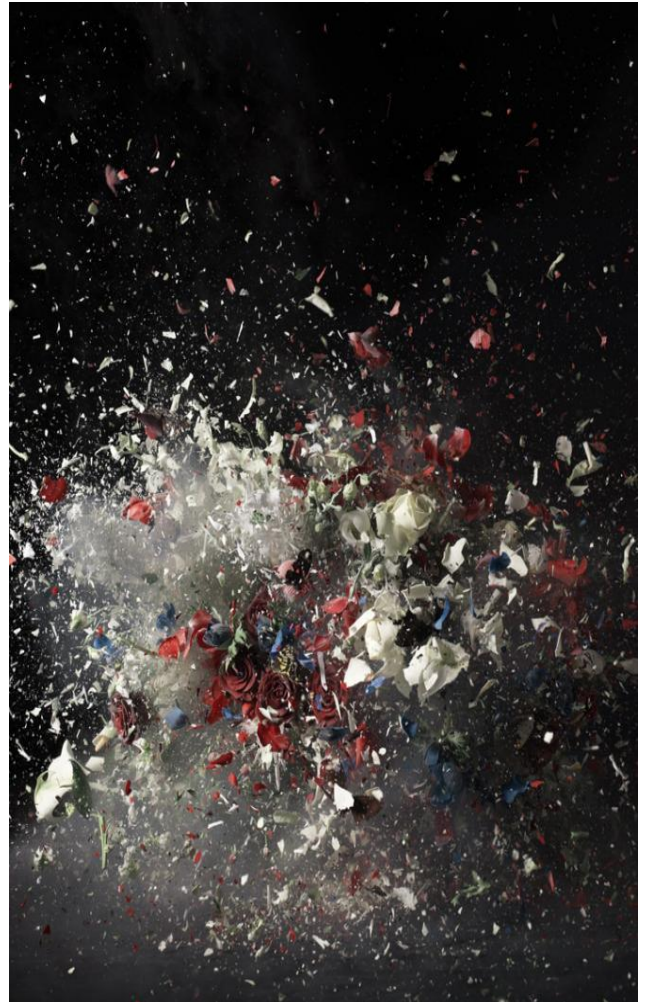
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Blow Up #1 (2007) captures the opposite effect: an instantaneous moment of explosion. This photograph depicts a bouquet of flowers with liquid nitrogen photographed at the moment of “explosive destruction.” It is spellbinding. It depicts red and white flower pieces sprayed to the edges of the photograph; a few lucky roses and butterflies remain intact.

Although inspired by the 1886 flower still life painting by Henri Fantin-Latour, *The Rosy Wealth of June*, perhaps the most telling aspect of *Blow Up #1* is the moment captured: “[The] moment of destruction—this actually becomes moment of creation that the photo holds onto,” Mr. Gersht says. Although these photographs are often associated with still lifes, these images are not still. The incredible camera speed captures *Blow Up #1*, for example, in the “folds of time” as he puts it. He uses technology to capture moments that would be otherwise inconceivable to the naked eye or human mind.



“We have a tendency to conceive time as an arrow moving in a linear direction—that one event leads to the next. What I am interested in doing is questioning the notion of the passage of time,” Mr. Gersht offers. And that he does. He draws awareness to time in all of its variants: the moment captured, the time of creation and the time to uncover the many layers within.



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Time can also refer to the artist and viewer processes, as exemplified in Mr. Gersht's landscape photographs. *Ghost-Olive #5* (2003), for instance, is an overexposed, "ghost-like," image at first glance. The visceral appeal, however, denotes the process of its creation: exposing the film to too much light. Although "killing the film" resulted in the final image, he states "information is accumulated over a long period of time."



Mr. Gersht's works are as much a process for the artist as for the viewer: "The process that I am going through I am throwing back to the viewer to go through." The time the viewer spends with *Ghost-Olive #5*, for example, reveals possible readings of its symbolism: an olive tree, whose branches often symbolize peace of victory, in Israel, a war-torn place of conflict.

But images laden with art historical and political undertones waiting to be discovered come with a consequence. *White Noise: Untitled #9* (1999), for example, represents more than a blurred winter image; Mr. Gersht captured it during a train ride from Krakow to Auschwitz. Knowing this information is critical. "As soon as the viewer is informed, the reading and understanding of the image will change forever and they will never be able to re-look at it the same way," Mr. Gersht maintains. He does not want the political undertones in his work to be at the forefront. Rather, he wants viewers to engage visually to unearth the layers within.

The initial visual seduction in Mr. Gersht's work is seemingly inevitable, given his photography medium. "There is always a subject with photography," Mr. Gersht reveals, "I can never escape from this . . . But the work is about *how* I photograph. The *how* is fundamental . . . the outcome is the consequence to the *how*." Taking the time to understand the *how* elucidates the many layers waiting to be revealed.

"Ori Gersht: Still Life" is on show at the Columbus Museum of Art, until January 4, 2015.