

The Indifference of the Underground // Lihi Turjeman

“See and sense the indifference on the part of the underground to become surface”

Pesach Slabosky

From an early stage in her career, Lihi Turjeman’s practice has been characterized by various and stratified layers of material and physical actions that wish to dig into them and expose them. Turjeman layers paint and different materials on the canvas and then carves, scrapes, sands, and peels them, simultaneously constructing and dismantling the image. Much like an archeological excavation or a psychoanalytic inquiry, she strives to unearth the subterranean, what lies beneath the surface, not only of the psyche but also of the painting, of the image, and of the place in which it was made. The act of painting seems very physical, almost extracting the subterranean from the strata in which it is embedded, allowing it to emerge as a flat pictorial image. Sometimes she finishes a painting in the *strappo* method (Italian, lit. tear or rip), a technique that usually serves for detaching murals and moving them to other locations. She glues the canvas onto the wall, and when she removes it, the plaster that sticks to the wet paint is ripped off the wall, becoming a part of the painted image. With that, the site in which the painting was made becomes inseparable from it, carried in its body without directly referencing the concrete reality it represents (like in the *Horse from Turin*, 2021, and the series *Lost Cause*, 2021).

Turjeman’s wanderings between different countries, cities, and studios have deepened her fascination with “fictional archeology” – archeology that isn’t anchored in specific time and space, and takes shape in her paintings as an existential excavation. The exhibition features work created over the last three years, in different places in Israel and around the world and in different methods, demonstrating her interest in transitions between spatial and temporal layers, between depth and the flatness of the painting, and between the real and the imaginary. A recurring image in her work of this time is receptacles arranged around various openings and holes. Like in Renaissance painted ceilings, in Turjeman’s work too, the opening becomes the subject matter of the painting itself, and the other elements are circling it, luring the eye into the hole that leads to infinity. However, while the opening painted by church artists is full of light and stands for salvation, in Turjeman’s work the dark openings bring to mind black holes, whose magnetic pull threatens to engulf the viewer. Such are the black openings in three vase paintings, painted from above (*Empty Vases*, 2022). Placing them on the floor turns them into a place, like deep wells or openings to burrows that lead deep into the heart of the earth. But the bird’s-eye-view cancels the image’s dimension of depth, and the black hole becomes a flat shape. The pair of paintings titled *Wormholes* (2021) also depicts amorphous receptacles that resemble vases or conch shells, or possibly body organs that were blown up to gigantic dimensions, whose strange orifices draw the gaze in and give them an ancient-futuristic appearance.

The paintings’ titles allude to Turjeman’s interest in transitions and liminal spaces – the transition between points in time and space, between layers of material, between inside and outside, and between the visible and the hidden. A new triptych (*Tempo Rubato*, 2023) depicts a woman in the window, painted over three layers of canvas. The paint placed on the upper layer of canvas bled into the lower layers, staining them and creating an image that gradually fades and blurs, becoming increasingly hazy, until it completely disappears in the bottommost layer. As if the fading paint tries to give tangible shape

to the passage of time. It is joined by the monumental piece *Horse from Turin*, which references an equestrian sculpture hidden behind mesh building wrap while it undergoes restoration work, and now stands like a huge block in the Italian city square. Hiding the original voluminous shape of the classical sculpture transforms it into a cube-like object, associating it with a completely different sculptural tradition. Its concealment not only detaches the sculpture from the art period it represents, but also overwrites the history of the events it was meant to commemorate. All that is left of the sculpture's original shape is a two-dimensional shadow, whose dissolution alludes to the ravages of time and material transience; a flat black shape that in itself, functions as a black hole of sorts, allowing the transitions between times; an anti-space that obscures and consumes the actual shape.

Ravit Harari