

## Guardians of the Threshold

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*Mirrors, no one has ever yet described you,  
figured out what you honestly are.  
You are merely a few sieve holes  
inscribed on sliced regions of time hopelessly far.*

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Sonnets to Orpheus – Part Two, III*<sup>1</sup>

The concrete modernist building of the Israeli pavilion<sup>2</sup> was transformed for the duration of the 2007 Venice Biennale into an outer shell for Yehudit Sasportas's complex installation, *Guardians of the Threshold*. A symbiosis of drawing, painting, sculpture, and architecture, her work subordinates the given space to multi-layered readings and stratified interpretations.

Sasportas's artistic practice has, from the very outset, manifested an affinity for modernist architecture, an echo of its "utopian vision" which she absorbed during her childhood in Israel. Her earlier piece *The Carpenter and the Seamstress* (2000–01), was based on the floor plan of her parents' home, a public housing apartment in the southern city of Ashdod.<sup>3</sup> Thus, not only does the Pavilion building in the Giardini appear congruent with Sasportas's interest in modernism; it becomes an integral part of the work as a whole. The installation is strewn with architectural elements: from the blind at the entrance and the monumental structure (a modernist façade with windows and trees) covering the highest wall of the building opposite the entrance,<sup>4</sup> through the two gates with the sliding doors in the intermediate level, to the large gate on the upper level. Components associated with architectural apertures, with means of entry and exit, they undermine the definition of the building's inner structure, generating an oscillation between interior and exterior. The Pavilion's clearly-defined real space has transformed into an optional outdoor space; the doors and windows have opened it into a realm of fantasy, a virtual, apocalyptic space.

Entering the pavilion/installation, which is shrouded in darkness and conjured up through the shadows of trees, the resonance of Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave (*The Republic*, Book VII) makes an immediate impact upon us, bringing to mind the flickering shadows on the cave's back wall, the only sight discernible to its dwellers. Plato's perception of the relationship between the darkness of the cave

and the world beyond it corresponds to the relationship between the empirical world and the world of ideas and forms. For Plato the sun is a source of growth and light, of reality and truth, which lends intelligibility to objects of thought and the power of knowing to the mind. Walking through the space, one encounters several openings/holes that function as light sources; these are light-absorbing and light-emitting drawings and paintings depicting forests, glades, and mountains. The "hole" projected on a wall on the second floor opens into an enigmatic landscape with a swamp, evaporating into a distant mist – possibly twilight, possibly dawn. The viewer experiences an illusionist view in a single-point perspective, which stretches out behind the plane of the wall, behind the "Albertian window", exposing a picture of another world, a point of departure.<sup>5</sup> The foliage around the hole/opening, and particularly its shape, call to mind Marcel Duchamp's secret work, *Etant donnés*,<sup>6</sup> where a fantastic landscape with a woman's body can be seen through two small peepholes in an old wooden door and through a hole in a brick wall behind the door. Sasportas's projection is an amalgam of principles inherent to early perspective painting, a still projection and a computerized photograph. The two paintings inside the adjacent gates reveal the only urban images in the installation. The fragmental geometric forms combined with shapes of quasi-buildings produce entropy, a metamorphosis towards another fictional reality and other vistas. Reduced to hues of black, gray and blue, the color scale reinforces the nocturnal atmosphere of the entire installation.

The swamp image reverberates in a large three-dimensional round sculpture on the top floor, with a reflection of the forest clearing in the painting installed next to it. Countless thin sticks/needles come out of the swamp, hinting to the underwater world and occurrences. The large sticks lying around the swamp are possibly magnified, Gulliver-size tree-needles, parts of roots or spears guarding the threshold, the subliminal, while playing in a three-dimensional drawing of lines in the space.

The painted image of an opening/glade between the dark trees initially appeared on the blind screen at the entrance. This was the viewer's first encounter with the image of an ambivalent clearing and with the question of his location inside – or outside the cave, inside or outside the forest.

At the heart of Martin Heidegger's philosophy of being is the notion of the *clearing*, based on the metaphor of a forest clearing – the image of a pleasant glade flooded with sunshine, surrounded by dark, forbidding trees.<sup>7</sup> Into the clearing, and into the light of human consciousness, emerge all those things that are discovered or encountered in the world. This is a compelling image which constitutes the world at a basic ontological level to already be a mixture of the material and the personal, the natural and the cultural. The clearing is a material space and a field of unconsciousness at the same time. The poetic image of a pool of light with its inner space and depth, lying in the darkness of a foreboding primeval forest, is found not only in one of Rilke's poems,<sup>8</sup> but also in the meditations of Henry David Thoreau, who in the mid-19th century went to dwell in the woods near Concord, at Walden Pond. "The act (of knowing) is both a discovery about what the world is like (or ought to be) and what he himself is like. In the same act he organizes his perception of himself and of his world. A clearing in the forest is not only an instance of what consciousness can do, redeeming a piece of nature; it is also an image of the redeeming consciousness itself, the cleared space within which one stands and does one's relating to experience. Furthermore, whatever consciousness gains through these creative acts leads to an increase in the content of the mind."<sup>9</sup> Thoreau knew that a part of the self must have a direct and immediate relationship with experience. The clearing must be within, not instead of the forest; the clearing must be part of and not set apart from all the tumult that makes dynamic experience.

One of the influences on Heidegger was Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, based in part upon an archaeological metaphor whereby the structure of the life-world could be discovered by excavating the layers of knowledge and beliefs accumulated within and upon it.<sup>10</sup> The limits of excavation, like the edge of the forest clearing, mark the boundary between the unknown and the known, between something seen or revealed and something hidden and covered. For what is excavation if not the clearing of a material space where objects and patterns previously hidden or buried can emerge into the light? In *Over Against the Woods*, Abraham B. Yehoshua recounts the story of a watchman of a planted forest and of his Arab worker.<sup>11</sup> After a devastating fire the whole forest is *cleared* and the painful truth is revealed – the

ruins of an Arab village, theretofore hidden under the trees. This surprising evidence breaks into our social and political sphere. The edges of the visible were extended to bring the edges of the formerly invisible into the field of human perception.

Like excavation strata, the multiple sources of Sasportas's drawings and paintings overlap in a process of hybridization. Drawings based on memory of her direct experience of nature blend with drawings executed intuitively from memory or from a still-life arranged in her studio and with yet other drawings traced through the technological mediation of a projector screening photographs taken by the artist. Emerging as different phases of her unconscious, the drawings simultaneously report the same experience of being physically in nature/forest and technically outside, above and below it. Sasportas refers to her memory as "the archive of the unconscious," which duplicates itself, refracting and reflecting images and perspectives, warping and bending, turning inward and outward – an inner world in which dreams and reality blend and merge.<sup>12</sup>

In the Renaissance treatise *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*,<sup>13</sup> Poliphilo dreams about being in a threatening dark forest and narrates the many things he saw during his quest for his spiritual love Polia. He tells of ancient marvels, architectural monuments, about forests, gardens, fountains and rivers. On his way he encounters confusion, order, illusion, fear, determination, and finally wisdom through an intoxicating call of the senses. It is a dream about a duality of nature (forest) and culture (architecture), a duality also discernible in Sasportas's installation.

Sasportas's work is a synthesis of many dual identities and dichotomous meanings, such as East and West,<sup>14</sup> rational and spiritual. It embodies tensions between the modernist, formal sculptural structure and the emotional and painterly ones, between the rhetoric of intellectual discipline and the narrative content. Sasportas's fascination with modernist architecture culminates in the precise constructions of doors, windows and gates, executed in a strict minimalist language. The technically clear compositions of rectangular forms contrast and simultaneously blend with the drawings and paintings – the result of a time-consuming process of artisan virtuosity and the source of a spiritual, revealing experience – to form a single unit, attesting to the totality and

post-postmodern heterogeneity of Sasportas's approach. Her work is like a three-dimensional poem one undertakes to read and decipher.

## Notes

- 1 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus, Bilingual Edition*, trans. Willis Barnstone (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), p. 161.
- 2 Designed by architects father and son Ze'ev and Yacov Rechter, the building was inaugurated in 1952.
- 3 In her essay accompanying the artist's exhibition "By the River" (Matrix, University of California Berkeley Art Museum, October 2002–January 2003) Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson speaks about modern Zionist architecture. The nascent State of Israel had to build the infrastructure, cities, and buildings that would facilitate a modern, prosperous and secure country. In the same essay, art historian Andrew Renton is quoted as saying: "Modernism in Israel was highly politicized. The buildings were about asserting sovereignty over place ... Sasportas's work is about the utopian aspects of Zionist Modernism and the public celebration of immigration, without being a solution to all of its problems."
- 4 A similar composition of a wall sculpture, albeit on a much smaller scale, is found in Sasportas's *The Guardian of the Pearl's Shadow* from 2005.
- 5 In *De Pictura* (1435) Leon Battista Alberti instructed painters to consider the frame of the painting as an open window.
- 6 Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
- 7 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 171; Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking* (1969), trans. Joan Stambaugh, paras. 31–43, Heidegger Reading Room: "The forest clearing (or opening) is experienced in contrast to dense forest ... To open something means to make it light, free and open, e.g., to make the forest free of trees at one place ...".
- 8 H. E. Holthausen and F. Kemp, eds., *Egriffene Dasein: Deutsche Lyrik des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1959), p. 393.
- 9 Frederick Garber, *Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination* (New York: New York UP, 1977), p. 11.
- 10 For a detailed discussion, see Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1972).
- 11 Abraham B. Yehoshua, *Over Against the Woods* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1968) [Hebrew].

As a child going to Hebrew school in London, Simon Schama in his *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 5–6) recalls saving to help plant trees in Israel: "We were never exactly sure what all the trees were for. What we did know was that a rooted forest was the opposite landscape to a place of drifting sand, of exposed rock and red dirt blown by the winds. The diaspora was sand. So what should Israel be, if not a forest, fixed and tall? ... All we knew was that to create a Jewish forest was to go back to the beginning of our place in the world, the nursery of the nation."

- 12 Samuel Klein, "Secrets of the Forest and River," *Jewish Quarterly*, spring 2006, pp. 43–48.
- 13 *The Dream of Poliphilus*, 1499, presumably written by Franciscan friar Francesco Colonna. Our thanks to Dr. Leah Dovev, Tel Aviv, who brought this work to our attention.
- 14 The East in this context refers to Morocco from which Sasportas's family immigrated to Israel, but at the same time there are also references in her work to the temporary architecture and garden layouts in the Far East. The West refers to Israel, but also to Europe (Berlin) where Sasportas lives and works at present.