

Meir Pichhadze | **Sundown**

09.03.2017 – 22.04.2017

Current exhibition *Sundown* showcases a selection of works by Meir Pichhadze (1955-2010) that reflect the sensitivity of a visual poet. During certain periods, Pichhadze painted himself, creating several alter egos that personify a sense of being an Outsider, Other, Foreigner. This is probably how he perceived himself ever since he arrived in Israel from Georgia at seventeen. Pichhadze concealed, within images of himself – and of others as well - inner wisdom. It protected him and allowed him the freedom of true expression which is painful and can sometimes also seem dangerous.

A reproduction of the 18th-century painting *Gilles (Pierrot)*, by Jean-Antoine Watteau, had captured his attention and he copied it in a watercolor drawing. Modern artists saw Pierrot as an image of one who is lonely and suffering, constantly punished for having a sensitive spirit. Pierrot alludes to an alter ego of artists in general, and especially of any artist who is reticent, and feels isolated, as if on a desert island. His white blouse and his face that is painted white, indicate not only his innocence but also the paleness of death. Pierrot probably symbolized for Pichhadze, a figure of someone struggling to be accepted in the bourgeois world, a struggle with which he could probably identify.

Pichhadze did not name his works. This allows for an interpretive space through which we can look at a marvelous watercolor drawing, as a description of an exciting scene from the opera *La Bohème*: a young bearded poet, looking up (the object of his gaze is not included in the picture) at his neighbor, asking him to light her candle so that she can find her way to her room upstairs. We can only see in the drawing her hand, holding a candlestick; the look on the poor poet's face, his gaping mouth, and wide open eyes express both wonder and admiration – serving to convey to her what a fundamental part poetry (or drawing) play in his life.

Pichhadze is an artist who is investigating his medium. He demonstrates a profound knowledge of the history of Western art, but furthermore, through his paintings he also clarifies what is the right way, in his opinion, to view, hang, and even frame pictures. His virtuoso classical painting techniques are revealed through his methods. On the one hand, he is adept at placing colors that create an illusion of volume by using light and dark tones, and on the other hand, he attempts to "mutilate" the outcome through erasure and color distortion, in ways

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that mimic reality. He struggles to reverse the 3D illusion and bring the painting back to flatness.

In one of his paintings, a pipe-like vision in gray hues is presented through skillful manipulation of light and shadow, echoing early cubist paintings by Georges Braque. The composition consists of visual illusions and different styles that are placed side by side. On the right side, we see images of flowers and butterflies that seem to have come from an old encyclopedia, framed within "neutral" lines of the wooden board. On the left side, the illusion is framed within a black embossed frame. Both parts are glued on top of a wooden board. In another painting, Pichhadze presents a frame, into which he introduces elements that have nothing in common: elements that can seem like some scientific devices, to which he attributes volume, and then the flatness, over which he had drawn silhouettes of hands. To a well-crafted frame, composed of rectangles and ellipses - perhaps of geometric art deco style, Pichhadze added "plant-life" motifs resembling tendrils with round fruit, dropping from twigs.

Frames separate the inner-world that is depicted in pictures, from the actual world outside them. They focus our attention on the subject in the picture and impact our perception of it. The frame does not only serve the purpose of highlighting the drawing while being in line with its style. It might also act as some kind of intermediary between the image and its surrounding. Pichhadze is aware of the fact that even today, museums debate over how to frame the paintings in their collections. Museums tend to use period frames (which can themselves be works of art,) in keeping with the style of the artwork. Opposing attitudes prefer neutral framing because simple shapes and colors (gray, white or bare wood) are considered best suited for paintings with vibrant colors. According to this attitude, "neutral" frames do not violate the internal content and color balance of the paintings in them. Some of the frames designed by Pichhadze for his paintings are indicative of his perception of the frame as integral to the artwork and of his derision for the framing concepts mentioned above.

Except for outlining and highlighting paintings, frames have a long history of outlining mirrors as well. A frame, typically used for a round convex mirror appears in a drawing by Pichhadze, of a man sitting on a bench in the shadow of a tree, reading the newspaper. Pichhadze presents him to us as if he had just noticed that we are watching him at which time he would turn his head so that his eyes can meet ours. The format of the round frame that appears in the drawing entices the viewer to ponder whether the reflected figure is one of us.

Such a random gaze also occurs in a painting depicting a child walking outdoors. He suddenly turns his head towards us, and our eyes meet. His facial expression reflects him being worried and intimidated. In this painting, as in many others, Pichhadze locates the figure in an open landscape that is unlike any local landscapes of Israel. It is a "foreign" grass prairie with shrubs and trees. The light

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that is shed on Pichhadze's open spaces paints nature's elements in green and yellow tones. Blue and red hues that usually help us associate painted landscapes with a particular time of day are missing. A light shining out of bright skies may imply that the time of day is dawn or twilight, but the artist's choice to use a limited color scheme for the lighting in this painting is not true to real life light. Thus, a sense of mystery and horror is created. The supposed peacefulness of being outdoors in the open air is violated and is turned into terror. The character and his changing facial expressions, in composition with the landscape, create an atmosphere of menace, anxiety, grief and pain.

That same mild derision for the bourgeois taste returns in a drawing of a rose sprig, blooming over black background. The sprig is cut out of context and devoid of a place. It is not set in a vase, nor is it growing on a bush in a landscape. External aspects of a flower have always been closely linked with the love for all that is weird, strange, and unusual. Artists are required to exhibit extraordinary painting skills and virtuous abilities to mimic color and texture, in order to satisfy the whims of patrons who admire perfect mimesis and optical illusions. It is as though Pichhadze is saying "I know how to get the job done" when he paints the roses. But, he is not satisfied with just slinging criticism - he has removed from his painted flowers every aspect of blossoming optimism by placing them over a dark background which can only bring about a sense of anxiety and of withering away.

Unlike his colleagues who often address issues that are on the mind of the Israeli collective society, Pichhadze describes in all of his paintings his personal experiences, through which he shares his personal pain with his audience. He is a visual poet, and his paintings still make a strong impression on us.

Alec Mishory, February 2017

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