

Interview with Shoshana Dentz

by Carlos Motta

artwurl.org, INTO16

Carlos Motta: Presently you are drawing and painting rural and urban fences. Unlike your previous paintings of "the fenced space of a Holocaust camp", these don't seem to directly reference a specific political situation. What are these new fences there for and what do they divide?

Shoshana Dentz: These fences came out of work based on a holocaust camp. I wanted to use the same visual imagery that was not sourced in a specific political situation. I was exploring whether a political — and emotional — content could be assigned to these spaces without the imagery coming directly from that politicized source.

I visited rural fences that I had seen in the country and found them interesting as representations of Americana; for me, they were about an absence of political strife. I thought of bucolic farmland as the projected image of the perfect American ideal, the antithesis of what a holocaust camp or the security fence in Israel represents.

I think of these fences in terms of containment, isolation and prevention, as both a personal and a larger, socio-political metaphor. I draw the fence to define a certain kind of space that is empty, and I fill that with the volume of my intentions. The fence, as a physical and graphic boundary-maker, makes an immaterial volume visible and present.

CM: Some of the drawings seem to be drawn from photographs and others are actual photo-collages. Camera angles and photographic perspective seem to have influenced their composition. What kind of photographs are you looking at?

SD: They are photographs that I took. The angles were intentional. How I took the photographs was informed by how I had explored the camp space in the earlier work, through drawing. I had one photograph of a camp with one single perspective from which I generated a body of drawings with as many perspectives of that space as I could imagine. The photograph showed a view down the aisle of two fences. I started imagining what it meant to be inside or outside those fences — physically first and then emotionally, psychologically, culturally and politically. Those intentions were brought into this current exploration of the same imagery — fenced space - of a non-politically charged origin. The angles and views reveal an insistent attempt to inhabit and confront the many implications of this contained, trapped, isolated space. It is this insistence, palpable in each drawing and in the extended series of drawing after drawing that can provoke the viewer to ask why, what are the implications. This is where the viewer may begin to enter into my thinking and go beyond what he or she is seeing and appreciating

aesthetically

CM: I am interested in the relationship and differences between photography and drawing when it comes down to representing an object or situation embedded with political resonance.

SD: Both of those languages, in addressing a political subject, have to balance representation and abstraction — specificity and non-specificity. I can imagine a photograph of a white cloth blowing in a particular setting. Something about the way that that cloth is sitting in the world gently conjures a KKK hood. The picture may be beautiful and wistful and may suggest many things but somewhere in the viewer's visual memory that particular reading registers among others that function to expand and experientialize that one "political" or literal reading.

This is the first time I am relying on my own photographs. I had to consider why the photographs themselves were not the end product. The answer is in a very romantic idea that the contribution I own as an artist lies in the commitment of my hand in my medium of paint to generously transform and surprise my original interest in this visual material. One photograph becomes many drawings that each explore choices I make with what I see, feel and want.

CM: That seems like artistic intentionality. Are you insinuating that the current fence drawings don't have a specific relationship to any historical or political situation?

SD: Not at all. I am saying that is very much what I am starting with, but instead of using a very clear and direct reference I am using the stand-ins for that, and by using the stand-ins other readings open up. The viewer isn't directed on what to see or feel and brings their own life to their response to the image. I trust the capacity of my intentions to be translated and I trust the viewer to find their own way to that.

CM: Can you speak about your use of symbols in your paintings in the past, in particular the Yellow Star of David and the Kuffieh?

SD: Those paintings are an attempt to recontextualize the symbols of the canonized — and paralyzed — events surrounding the Palestinian Israeli conflict, and the Holocaust fence paintings are part of that. I was taught to see and fear the Kuffieh as if it were the same as the Swastika. The paintings confront my own indoctrination and response towards those symbols, and aim for the possibility that the viewer might do the same. As symbols, they are so much more specific but their effect can be more obtuse than the fences — either too closed or too open, too literal or too abstract. Some people never realized that those were Yellow Stars of David or Kuffieh paintings and some people can only see Yellow Stars of David or Kuffieh paintings. The information that exists in those paintings is very present within the fence imagery. It is a continuing exploration of how such a beautiful and slow language as painting can contain the information I am

after.

CM: I was intrigued when looking at your current drawings by the ambiguity of their content. Some even looked to me like traditional landscape painting.

SD: The drawings that are more green grass-horse farms were less about the final product but about learning this information and this place on its own terms, so that I could mess with it and manipulate the idyllic towards a more psychologically rich image.

CM: I responded highly to one of your drawings in the recent drawing show at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery. I am referring to the one of the chain-link fence, barbed wire and the pipes. The perspective of the fence made its shape resemble the Kuffieh pattern. The framing/composition and associations triggered by it were complicated yet ambiguous enough for me to feel uncomfortable and question their "political" intention.

SD: One of the reasons I was drawn to the chain-link fence is its resemblance to the pattern of the Kuffieh. That fence lines the waterside walk to my studio in Williamsburg, and frames a glorious view of the Manhattan skyline. It is also graffitied with Pro-Palestinian sentiment, and so I have a certain affinity to this otherwise urban "eyesore". It is a forsaken, ugly place — a ubiquitous sight that most people don't register in their gaze but seem to resent. It speaks of the conditions in Palestinian refugee camps and sections of the Israeli security fence. It encompasses an allusion to that subject, but also to a loaded beauty I find in the idea of forsaken places and in the social construct of defense.

CM: I objected in your Star of David-and-Kuffieh paintings to the possible negative or stereotypical reading of these symbols. To me these symbols are so rich with meaning, complicated, beautiful and poetic. They represent diversity and culture, religion and history, as well as social confrontation and political, religious and racial intolerance. I appreciate your use of a fence as an open-ended signifier; any additional cultural or religious context is projected onto the drawing by me.

How concerned are you about painting per se? Is your painting self referential to the medium? How do you position yourself within contemporary painting theory?

SD: I am a painter and I demand a lot from painting, materially and conceptually. I deal with the representation of ideas through my understanding of formalism and abstraction. For example, a recent large work of the rippled surface of an aluminum wall section of this fence is composed of bands of slightly shifting grays — it references the work of one of my heroes, Agnes Martin. I am trying to find my way to feel that beauty, power and integrity in painting again — its about composing a painting through issues in the living world that are urgently relevant for me.

CM: Do you actually think that through painting one can induce some kind social change?

SD: Painting can induce a state of appreciation and reflection — a back and forth between seeing and interpreting. If the images and ideas the viewer is seeing and thinking about are about social realities, then something is happening. Social change is initiated by changes in individual thinking and sense of responsibility. The experience of art brings the individual into an intimate relationship with these realities, in which some personal experience of the consequences of these realities is felt. This can reverse some of the distancing and separation that, although essential for us to conduct our daily lives, dilutes those realities.