

Dialog between Amnon Barzel
and Daniela Papadia

Rome, January 7 2006.

Amnon Barzel: Daniela, looking at your work, one could say you are an idealist. Your painting irradiates a socio-political message, a message that often has to do with feminism, or more generally, with women's issues. Regarding this subject, we are on the verge of a complete revolution. The socio-political analysis is present not only in your digitally produced works, but also in your earlier works, where, in addition to the theme of women, you also confront those of emigration, multiculturalism, injustice, oppression, inequality, the weak and the ostracized. Your vision expands to distant places, translated into images where a ritual is performed. This further underlines the idealist quality of your work; perhaps we could symbolically define the creative process of your painting as a gestation.

Daniela Papadia: One can only define her research after it has been completed, if that point is ever reached. Most likely, I am an idealist—my attention and interest are focused on the destiny of man and humanity. A humanity that walks, works, moves, searches for other places where it may live with greater dignity or realize a dream. But what is man's dream and, above all, what is his destiny? Perhaps this is the real question that drives me, not as an accusation, as my work on massification is sometimes considered. I have always worked on the masses because they contain a great power, a potential, which can be directed towards terrible forces, like wars and domination, or towards forms of liberation.

AB: Yes, but above all, one can see the synergy of the masses.

DP: That is true. In fact, it is not by chance that some of my paintings extract moments of prayer, of work, of travel, moments of congregation in a common action.

AB: So, it is as if they were all performing a ritual together.

DP: It is clear that whenever there is the presence of community, there is always a ritual being performed: it may be a ritual of travel, of work, of prayer ... in any case, it is a ritual that joins the people.

AB: Let's talk about ritual. Our reality, daily life, the presence of ritual. I'm not referring only to women or men in the desert, but also to passengers on a modern bus, to the thousands of women in offices behind computers, as in Andreas Gursky's digital photographs, so well appreciated by New Yorkers ...

rituals are born with man and are, as he is, primitive. In your representations, with a historically revolutionary perspective, the same primitive rituals are carried out in modernity by people in offices, in schools, praying, by Islamic women closed inside their robes, like prisoners (*Profughi d'identità*, N.o.E.). These contexts, enclosed within the limits of the canvas, are a closed force, which, in the successive canvases, with the use of digital applications and photography, are liberated and become themselves. Here, the individual is a part of the masses. The group of individuals shows the situation, as that of oppressed women, but when they are together, in cooperation, they are stronger and convey a sense of the potential before an explosion.

DP: It is important to seize the moments that we live daily, that we see on television and in newspapers, or that we hear in the stories of others. They

are all moments that elude us. To stop them, frame them in a painting, is to give them another possibility for reflection and an individuality. A crowd, if seen quickly, is simply a mass; but when we stop it and begin to paint it, to know it, we reendow it with an identity and a reality ...

AB: You speak of stopping a moment, a situation; I understand how this has brought you the use of photography and digital applications. This is the nature of photography, whereas painting takes time. This is one of the possible keys to interpreting your work—the use of photography as an element of your painting that comes later, which you use and abolish. Let us say that your composition, the construction of your canvas is conceptual. You have an idea, an uneasiness that you wish to communicate, and this is what counts, because it is not only an aesthetic choice to display a moment, whether it be through women or faces. I think you have an unconscious desire to charge the masses with energy. Like in one of your works from 1995 (*Profughi d'identità, N.o.E.*) where everyone is in a certain order—everyone is praying, which is not freedom. Your idealism brings you to painting in this way, this way of composing the canvas. Your idea is to give, to charge the masses with this energy, whether they are women or men—but why? Can we find a key to this? Your works are like batteries, giving energy. It is as if you were saying, “Take this energy—move!” This is a behavior characteristic of idealism, of justice ... it is a call to action by a female artist, of which there have been few in the history of art ...

DP: Painting has always been an exclusive prerogative of men. But women have been able to cultivate it, if even as a hobby, a bit like embroidery ...

AB: Like the tribes that do not allow women to study, to read, because knowledge would create a dangerous situation.

DP: Certainly! Culture is a means of liberation. Women have long been constrained to take care of men, of children, of the house, never taking a roll of primary action. Thanks to the feminist revolution, this possibility has been created, women have earned a chance; I believe that a portrait of a woman by a female artist is different.

AB: Your women are beautiful, angelic, but they are not angels (*Sospesi,*

N.o.E.). These figures float, they move beyond the constraints of gravity, they dance, they fly, and it is interesting how all of the other figures within the paintings watch and stare at these women in the air. What were you thinking when you created these totally free figures?

DP: For me, it is fundamentally the representation of non-identity. A theme which is dear to me, in my personal research, is the comprehension of identity; in fact, an earlier work, appropriately entitled *Profughi d'identità*, was born from a need to deeply understand the individual's responsibility to himself and with respect to his place in the world.

AB: And this floating, above the crowd, has something to do with the research of identity?

DP: In reality, from my perspective, the figure of this woman, of which I have also created a video, floating in the air beyond the forces of attraction, somewhat represents the more obscure side of her own identity. She is a woman because in some way, the feminine is the obscure side of the masculine, as a sort of potential waiting to come out. I imagine it from the outside, from outside of that which happens in the world, in the working world, the searching world, the world of children. The non-identity belongs to

man, but to women as well. It is interesting how an investigation of the Hebrew word for woman, tzell, reveals another meaning, “the side in shadow,” the hidden side of man. In the current interpretation of the Old Testament, it has been understood that the woman was created from Adam’s rib; however, with the discovery of the meaning of the word tzell, I have gained the understanding of a scenario that I had only supposed and imagined.

AB: So, in Hebrew, tzella means rib and tzell means shadow.

DP: Therefore, it is a meaning which is very close, depending on the interpretation you make, but “rib” and “shadow” are two very different things; I am more interested in seeing it as a shadow, as the potentiality that comes forth. Thus, the female figure flying above without the gravity of the earth, of history, of laws that have always served for the oppression of the woman—to give her this lightness, this liberation, was my point of departure for rewriting history, not only of the woman, but the history of the relationship between man and woman, of this reciprocal understanding. The feminine comprehends the masculine and the masculine comprehends the feminine because I feel that this reciprocity can generate a deep comprehension of both man and woman. With oppression there can be no liberation.

AB: Let us discuss the painting that deals with the liberation of the woman. There is reality and symbol, the symbol is reality. In *Sospesi*, the women who float and dance—these anti-gravitational women—you paint them with abundant light and remove them from this world, which, on the other hand, remains in shadow. Your message uses a pictorial language to convey an ideal—the form floats as it moves towards the light and, no longer in shadow, reveals itself while encountering its own identity. In *Inside Me*, I see a way out, at the end of a pictorial reflection on pregnant women, you represent this woman with great complexity and beauty, with great liberation and suffering, almost portraying her as a saint who has experienced suffering. The important point is that it is a positive suffering.

DP: The work, *Inside Me*, is a series of forty-five paintings comprising the story of a pregnant woman, an “icon of humanity,” a woman who carries humanity within her along with the pains of this difficult labor. She has a dual task: on one hand, her own personal need to be reborn, as seen from a sociohistoric perspective as a sort of evolution of the female path; on the other hand, a future to guarantee this humanity to be reborn. You spoke of suffering before. The arrow pierces this woman, an image seen in both the video and the paintings, yet you never see this woman suffering.

AB: According to your own words, it is an arrow intended not for her, but for humanity. This implies that the situation we are living in is one of great danger: terrorism, war, and threats. This is much more interesting than saint Sebastian being struck by arrows; this is a situation of danger, of doubt towards the future of humanity, which is always in tension and which knows not where it is headed. But there is also the procreation of new life, which means humanity. In these paintings, *Inside Me*, the fruit is not the child, but rather the future of humanity. You also incorporate the theme of eroticism, which is optimism, in this situation of tension, which is interesting from a historic perspective—the women in this series of paintings are, in fact, beautiful and erotic. In this series, the women carry on their shoulders and on their bodies the image of humanity, which is endless. The woman is responsible, carrying it all on her own shoulders, on her own body, and she

generates, she proceeds with great energy. I see this as well in the floating women, who have liberated themselves as women who move forward, creating humanity. I am interested in your choice of pictorial means, which are parallel, completing the idea and the image, mirroring your idealism, your concepts, your reflections. There is always a woman, a mother, a daughter, who assumes the responsibility of the world; she is the crucial point of procreation, which is synonymous with future. There is also great beauty in the pregnant woman, the dancing woman, like the goddess of a lyrical opera or ballet, giving great hope. There is a saying that explains the importance of a woman's beauty: "When a woman is beautiful, she carries within her the promise of a marvelous future." Why is beauty so important after all? Because it holds a promise.

DP: Plotinus said that "beauty is the splendor of truth." It is as if beauty and truth were somehow connected. Often, one sees the representation of beauty as an end in itself—superficial, mortified in its own greatest value, which is one of stupor and revelation. Behind the enchantment of beauty is the truth. And the truth is none other than consciousness, assuming one's own destiny and responsibility for the future.

AB: Looking at your first catalog, *Noli me tangere*, a great energy is apparent. These images of women that go together can be compared to the great images of the October Revolution ... They all go together with great force: in the factories, in the production of food, in traveling ... Here again, you show large crowds and the charges of great complexity. But even in the series *Profughi d'identità*, where there is a crowd that forms a spiral and, like in a centrifuge, dancing within the space, it is an expression of energy.

DP: It is a potential of energy that has to come out, of a compressed energy that needs to find a path.

AB: Shall we say it becomes a utopian image?

DP: Utopia is outside of history, but it creates history. Therefore, this requires a utopia that is certainly more projected towards a possibility and at the same time, a dimension of reality and of the unspeakable.

AB: Remember that only the impossible is possible. But how was this method of painting born, which is based on the use of digital applications?

DP: It all began in a very natural way, as a part of my path. Let's say it began out of curiosity, both because I live in my contemporaneity and it is proper that I know and use the means that my time offers me. This tie is born of the necessity to create dialogue between languages, an antique language, such as painting, and a contemporary language, such as the digital one.

AB: Do you use reality as your inspiration, or your imagination?

DP: Both of them. One begins with reality, but my reality also spawns from my vision. When it is possible, I prefer to reunify that which apparently seems in antithesis. The research is not opposition, but rather it is interaction, a necessary process to avoid falling into empty absolutisms. Technically speaking, it has been important for me to create a dialogue between different means. It is interesting to use technology as a personal instrument that can be altered, which is why I do not stop at the digital photograph; in that case, it would not allow my own intervention. By elaborating on the digital, I participate by personalizing a medium that would otherwise remain foreign to me.

AB: You use photography, which is reality, and intervene in this by changing reality. But you do so with your imagination, with your will and your message

...

DP: I often use photographs that are not mine, which I take from newspapers, magazines, internet ... when I see images that somehow correspond to the ones I want to modify, I use them and make them my own.

AB: Let's return to *Inside Me*. Intimacy and human society: two different things that you unify through a pregnant woman who speaks of the world's future.

DP: I unify them because, fortunately, I believe that there is no such thing as an individual deprived of the social; I believe that these two necessities travel together—my life correlates to the social. That is why I do not find “autoreferential” work interesting; for me it is indispensable and fundamental to listen and see what happens outside. Private and social are two necessities of a single vision.

AB: I always remember a sentence, “All relevant art is socio-political.” There *Inside Me*, 2005

Olio su tela / Oil on canvas

35 x 45 cm

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is not a single important work of art that is not socio-political. You have great interest in other cultures, in Judaism, which is far from you, and also in Islam.

DP: I am deeply interested in cultures that differ from my own heritage, perhaps allowing me to feel a bit like a refugee myself. Even though a refugee risks losing himself, his own deep identity ...

AB: The trait that characterizes our time is dispersal, the movement of populations along with their cultures, carried within them, to other places. This is the history that can not be stopped. It is not the decision of any one person. The theme of emigration is part of your work and it is of utmost importance. Your latest work is *Save My Name*.

DP: It is the work that follows *Inside Me* and is closely correlated to the rebirth of the individual, man's need and deep desire to live eternally, to leave a memory. This title is a wish that no one will be forgotten. In *Save My Name*, the fundamental theme is the desert as a place that must be crossed. The desert in itself has great potentiality: it can be a hostile place where nothing exists as well as a place of great miracles. I have traveled widely and, like you, have spent a period in the desert. I remember that beautiful story you once told me in regard, which is a metaphor for human potentiality. By now tired, you sat upon a rock in the desert and, glancing behind you, you saw a marvelous flower—a small tulip brought into existence by a few drops of dew. Look how, in an arid land where the days are sweltering, where the only vegetation to survive is that which has adapted to these climactic factors, in this land, a small miracle can occur. To me, that flower is a symbol of the individual potential of man.

AB: This could be portrayed in painting, or no?

DP: In this case, probably no painting could convey the grace of the true vision, because being in the desert is one thing, representing it is another. The desert is the place that was preferred by wayfarers, the fathers of the desert and prophets, where the exterior silence brings you to an interior silence, where you may ask yourself the just and necessary question.

AB: I recall the work of Mario Merz, this hanging work with the rising neon light. Doing is the question, doing is the answer ...

DP: In fact, if the question is well formulated, it also contains the answer.

AB: A question can not be formulated without knowing the direction of the answer.

DP: The desert brings you to asking the necessary question, the question is important. In *Save My Name* there is again humanity, but it is a different humanity from that which I represented in my first works because it has passed through the womb of a woman; it has taken the place of itself and therefore has consciousness; the desert is the place of the self. It is a humanity that confronts the new exodus, the exile, but this time with a conscience.

AB: In these works we see a daily reality in the desert.

DP: There is this paradigm, which is necessary to man; through the paradigm we are able, not to resolve, but to confront new possibilities. Some paintings, like the child alone in the desert with a skate, or the lunch in the desert, are the symbol and the representation of daily life that can depart from the ordinary. So, after crossing the desert, it may also occur that one takes control of one's life and wishes to be remembered forever.

AB: Contemporary civilization, that which lives at the edge of the desert, also has the doubt that those authentic places can truly be conquered by daily life, by that enormous noise that allows no room for reflection. There is this conquest of the desert that is also the elimination of prophecy, because the desert is also the place of the self.