

Defunct Figuration

Nimrod Reitman

Jacques Grinberg's body of work is as elusive as Grinberg himself. Bulgarian born, Israeli raised, and French acculturated, Grinberg's oeuvre traverses the incommensurable tensions of his biographical itinerary. The attempt to locate a place that would be nourishing, however, not too nourishing, and that would be worthy of occupying the position of "home," is apparent in his works. And yet, Grinberg was always a dissident, refusing the narcissistic comforts of being-at-home. His painted themes were as diverse as his biography, and despite his fervent pursuit of the new – be it in the Israeli New Horizons movement (*Ofakin Hadashim*) or later the in the *Nouvelle figuration* of the 1960's, which led him to present his works in the most respectable Parisian salons – he managed to disappear from critical scrutiny. Though always oriented toward Israel, Grinberg became one of those artists whose contribution was forgotten or disavowed from the history of Israeli art, something that calls for a repeated recalibration. Grinberg signifies an unstable *atopos* that resists easy spatial and temporal definitions. Despite having presented his work mainly in France, his painterly gesture is resolutely Israeli and deserves a critical review. Let us try and understand the nature of this forgetfulness.

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In one of my conversations with Nahum Tevet, I was intrigued by his description of Israeli art as an ongoing act of misprision.¹ For Tevet, Israeli art is embedded in gestures of fruitful misunderstanding and mistranslation. One should be careful of such a reduction; however – and I am being proleptic here – for Tevet, Israeli artists usually served as harbingers of something akin to a deterritorialization of artistic phenomena and trends. The process generally unfolds as followed: An Israeli artist travels abroad,

1 In this context, misprision is a term coined by Harold Bloom to describe deliberate acts of misreading or misinterpretation as a tactic for creating a clearer imaginary space for poetic creation. See: Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Misprision also calls for acts of concealment and misconstruction that may have legal inflections, without making claims for genre definitions.

and, being inescapably exposed to the artistic occurrences in her or his new setting, inadvertently decontextualizes what he or she thinks they understood. (Understanding and the way it relates, or fails to relate, to the artistic process is something that requires another interrogation.) Outrageous as this rendition may sound, I was fascinated by this perpetual misunderstanding as an axiom for the migration of artistic knowledge, or even for an artistic *event*, an event that discloses itself, as we have learned from Heidegger, in its withdrawal and disappearance. An artist, always on the prowl for fruitful misprisions, must participate in something that occurs and exceeds the artistic experience *ad hoc*. Art, therefore, assumes contours of a violent appropriation.

When I first encountered the works of Jacques Grinberg, I had to ponder and review Tevet's description of an 'Israeli misprision' and tried to understand what occurs when an artist immigrates to a different place where he implements an artistic world-view and modes of artistic articulation that might not, at the time, be fully commensurate with what happens, or fails to happen, in his new habitat. Grinberg came to Paris in the mid-sixties after being schooled by the Israeli artists who belonged to New Horizons, possessed by Israeli rage. While showing some enmity to certain artistic elements prevailing in the Israeli artistic scene of the time, namely those of lyrical abstraction, he could not have fully severed himself from the teachings of his mentors. His early work in Paris, which soon evolved into the New Figuration with which he became associated, still echoes, on many registers, trends that were prevalent at the artists' workshop in the Kibbutzim of the New Horizons movement.

Grinberg's early works uncover his genealogical origins in ways that are quite telling and may therefore explain his complicated relation to figuration. As one of the founders of New Figuration – a movement that later evolved, if only paratactically, into *Figuration narrative*, and eventually into French pop art – Grinberg's work overtly turned toward the power of the figural. However, resorting to an aestheticized figure in post-war France, and certainly in post-1968 France, could not have allowed for an ornamented figure, to the extent that *figure* "as such" may imply exactitude or certitude in terms of the hermeneutic distance between *figure* and *figurant*. In his reading of Nietzsche, Derrida demonstrated the inexistence of this "as such" in relation to figurality and the rhetoric it carries. Figuration, unlike figure, meant distance and measure: Nietzschean tropes of thinking capable of breaking with the metaphysical clichés of

representation in a way that inescapably provokes a violent devaluation of affect and the seductive excess from “the figure.”² Grinberg’s figure was therefore necessarily defunct, ontologically so, to the extent that in his earlier works, a figure “as such” is hardly present, and certainly difficult to trace. The disappearance of “the figure” for the sake of figuration, namely in favor of something that purports figure but still calls for a degree of meaningfulness, despite itself, is what characterized Grinberg’s work in its entirety; a work whose figuration is heavily premised on abstraction, the abstraction he learned in Israel from mentors like Stematsky, Streichman, Argov, and Krize. The contours of Argov and Striechman are vividly traceable in Grinberg’s early work, most notably in a series of three canvases painted in the early sixties (all *Untitled*, c. 1960, cat. 1, 2; c. 1962, cat. 3), where the basic geometrical structures that would instruct his work throughout his life are still manifested as an abstraction, and not yet fully developed in terms of the pure figure. These contours would evolve throughout Grinberg’s artistic work into a more distinct line, but already here one is struck by his strong and assured painterly gesture. The color palette is distinctly in tandem with the colors that were in vogue among the artists who belonged to the Israeli lyrical abstraction style, with a grey background, drops of red and accents of light blue. The thickness of the color hints at the gestural line that would evolve in Grinberg’s later work; however, here one is met with a young Grinberg who still pays dividends to his mentors as he searches for a differentiated voice.

Grinberg’s artistic activity was affected by a myriad of referents and images that penetrated his body of work. His oeuvre uncovers his capacity, and at times his failed attempts, to assimilate the artistic and political occurrences. Seeded by French poetry (mostly Rimbaud and Baudelaire), Kabbalah, and the political events of his times, Grinberg relentlessly took recourse to defunct structures in order to present the faulty mechanisms – be they political, artistic, or personal – that pervaded his surroundings.

2 Many readers and scholars of Nietzsche have pointed to the destructive force of Nietzsche’s tropology. One could hardly do them justice or enumerate them all; however, in this context it is worth noting, in addition to Derrida’s reading in *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985 pp. 10–33), also Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s “Apocryphal Nietzsche” (*The Subject of Philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 37–56), and Paul de Man’s readings of Nietzsche in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

Like many of the painters of his generation, he tried to come to terms with the long-lasting and destructive effect of fascism. Considering himself a survivor, throughout the sixties and seventies he painted a series of fascistoid figures that bore their own mutilated disfiguration. The figure of the fascist – a rigorously disruptive formation – kept recurring in his work from the sixties until his late work in the 2000's. Two paintings entitled *Grand Carnaval* (1965, cat. 11, 12) unveil some of the central motifs that are repeatedly circulated in Grinberg's work. Grinberg's figure is always already *not* itself; it is doubled and divided, questioning the fate of what remains from the *anthropos* beyond the catastrophe. The two images present a double-faced figure, like a Janus face. Yet unlike Janus, Grinberg's figures hold no promise for futurity, nor can they secure a safe passage to an untainted past. These are morphed and heavily disfigured images of a body devoid of any trace of humanism – a concept so perniciously corrupted in twentieth century politics and philosophy. Instead of a body we are met with a dismembered shell that uncovers the maiming effect of the carnivalesque: exposed bones, excess of teeth, missing organs and prostheses replace the fiction of "body." The images retain an undecidable edge in terms of what constitutes their uncanny effect in ways that situate these figures – no longer figures but defunct figurations – on the trajectory of the common artistic fascination with the mutilated body; a body without transcendence, no longer holding any promise for resurrection or restitution. Detached from any distinct pictorial plane, the figures are held floating on a grey or a black background that hides as it holds, but certainly cannot contain, these excessive *figurants*. The background, while still retaining something of his debt to lyrical abstraction in terms of the veiled and nuanced colors, clashes with the drama that has been incommensurably juxtaposed unto it by the figure that emerges at the center of the painting.

Another example of Grinberg's vigilant scrutiny of repressive regimes is given in *Untitled* (c. 1965, cat. 10). The painting portrays an unidentified figure, a soldier whose identity is uncertain. This may even be a deracinated portrait of Hitler, and yet the duplication that pervades the image does not allow for an easy identification. As in the previous images, the figure is doubled and excessively masked. The painting engages the uncritical and catastrophic usage of the figure by which one is continuously interpellated. The gas mask, which may also be a kind of death mask, is anamorphotically placed, doubling for both the loss of face and the gain of

too-much-face that the figure displays. The remaining figure is stripped of any identified corporeality in order to uncover the problematic structure of body: It is there even when it is not there, always double, but missing in action. Grinberg's work displaces the painterly moment of a rotting *nature morte* into the rotting body, gravitating toward proportions of classic portraiture now ironically posited. The gas mask may also metonymize a defunct phallus or even a Nazi salutation that has lost its ability to say or command; however, Grinberg remains obscure and effaces the ciphers of meaning into the background of the image.

Grinberg's work constantly vacillates between the duplicity that he attempts to create in his paintings: a double figure, a duplication of face or an excess of other facial organs. However, this excess amounts to the basic dysfunction to which his paintings point. Working with duplications inescapably evokes questions of origin and artifact – an aporia that has vexed philosophy since Plato at least as far as mimetological structures are concerned. Derrida and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe revisited this aporia in their work on mimetology and the way it yields, and fails to yield, basic metaphysical and aesthetical relations – the very relations that concern us here. Grinberg's doubled figure uncovers the problem of duplication and duplicity: the problem of monstrosity and the way it is given over to systems of representation by constantly destabilizing the border between margin and center, as well as between background and foreground.

Grinberg's paintings carry a toxic element that may have penetrated his painterly gesture during the period in which he was experimenting with the effects of LSD, at the end of the 1960's. While his portraits were ironically probing classical models of portraiture and the way they could become disfigured, Francis Bacon-style, when he experienced his own period of inebriation there was not only a sheer effacement of figure – one way of saying “new figuration” – but also a recalibration of the background and what is considered background and center. Two works from the late 1960's (both *Untitled*, 1968/69 (?), cat. 22, 23) mark a radical revision in the treatment of what was previously considered a mere background for the appearance of floating figures. The paintings forge a new understanding of the background and the painting's space. The pictorial plane is distributed differently than in his portraits and quasi-portraits. It seems that under the effect of LSD, Grinberg resorts to a more basic division between the lower and upper planes, with something like a ground that gradually protrudes and invaginates the diminishing upper parts of the painting. Upon this

basic construct of a quasi-landscape painting, Grinberg sprays the canvases with falling objects or impression of gestures by which the image's planes get re-distributed and lose their spatial grip. Grinberg offers something that resembles a surrealist experience, if only to refute it eventually or perhaps echo a movement whose artistic and political offshoots were as pernicious as the fascist figures that are now missing from his paintings. The bold coloring of backgrounds in the 1960's will gradually disappear from Grinberg's painterly gesture and palette, exposing the basic impatient fervor that pervades and characterizes his work in its entirety. Grinberg's daughter-in-law described to me the way he was able to paint a work on paper in twenty minutes, as if impelled by an urge to translate "a vision." As mere vision, the aesthetic value of the work and its medial refinement became secondary, almost redundant.

It may well be that as Grinberg's work matured, so did the intensity of his visionary gaze. (Grinberg had always shown an affinity toward religious themes in his work, something that developed in tandem with his painterly gestures. As his works on paper became a more prominent fraction of his entire oeuvre, one notices his religious themes in a more vivid and at times succinct manner.) His artistic fervor, given in the form of an excess of meaning and a repetitive mode of creation, follows the intricate and extravagant system of *excription* – what Jean-Luc Nancy defined as a "spillage of meaning," given as an enfeebling attempt to say over and over something that is "imperceptibly and insuperably *excribed*."³ Grinberg's version of *excription*, at times religiously pitched, or inflected by tropologies borrowed from his understanding of the Kabbalah, opted for a translation of what he saw as well as reflect his attempt to efface the critical distance between what is imagined and what eventually comes forth. The completion of a work becomes ever more superfluous; this may well be a translation of Bataille's concept according to which a project deserves only to be dropped. We must now return to Nahum Tevet's reading of Israeli art as a grand misprision; a misprision that, perhaps, is the only way to fathom and incorporate – without fully appropriating – the violence of the subjects that get painted or subsumed under the signifier of "art." Such a misprision may allow for an unmediated and perhaps even esoteric approach to the painted subject, something that we repeatedly see in Grinberg's work: Such

3 Jean-Luc Nancy, "Excription," *The Birth to Presence*, trans. B. Holmes (CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 320.



is his personal take on the 12 apostles, a theme he approaches with a more personal interpretation, modeling the titular figures on his acquaintances (2003, cat. 38, 40, 41, 43). But it also invites a degree of distance, with which he was able to easily move from one canvas to another, from one paper to another, in order to continue something on the canvas in front of him that he had begun elsewhere – a canvas or paper always already tainted, thus jeopardizing everything that might occur thereafter.

Grinberg remained loyal to his youthful verve and to his relentless desire to refute *figure* for the sake of *figuration*. His technique of duplicating the image or of creating a myriad of works, impatiently pitched, cancels the sovereign and privileged position the “figure” may have had, even for the New Figuration. Instead, an excess of figuration, on the verge of negating its own meaning, occurs, in which even the process that created the defunct figure gets morphed, and at times dismissed. In these moments of seeming defeat, marking a closure of transcendence, despite itself, one locates Grinberg’s continuous battle, thwarting, on the verge of demise, and yet unrelenting.