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Dana Harel at the Palo Alto Art Center

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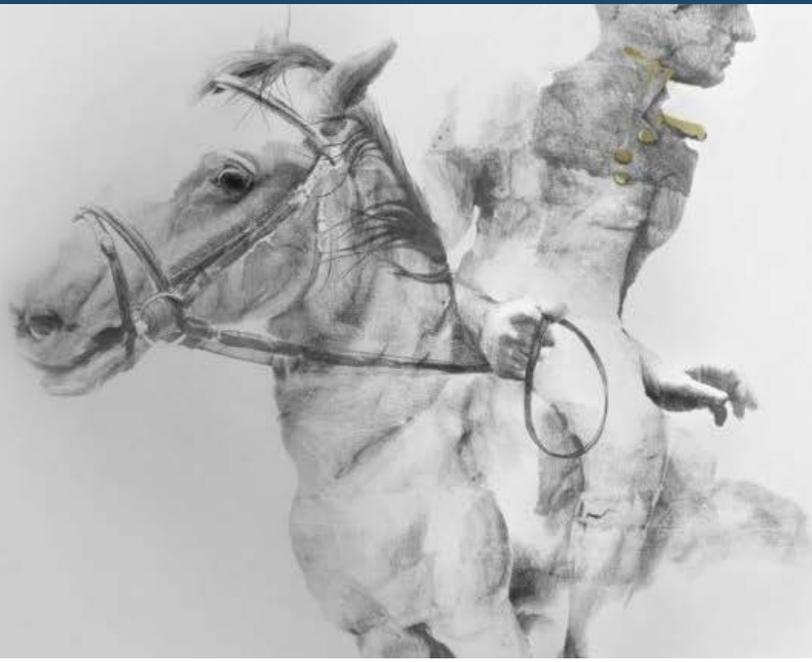


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Shotgun Review

Dana Harel: Between Dreams and Nightmares

By John Zarobell

September 24, 2014

On View

Palo Alto Art Center

June 13 - September 7, 2014

Solo Show

After reading about the recent destruction in and around the Gaza Strip, I was provided access to an unfamiliar side of violence through Dana Harel's work. Harel, who migrated from Israel to San Francisco some years ago, had previously served in the Israeli military. Of course her background is in some sense the basis of her large-scale drawings, but what transfixed me was the fragility of human experience that the work transmitted. Looking at this series of drawings, I felt the deep human capacity for love and destruction.

The exhibition had traveled from the Laguna Art Museum and had been powerfully installed by Lisa Ellsworth, the curator at the Palo Alto Art Center. The gallery featured large sheets of paper hung against dark walls in a dimly lit room. Such a theatrical effect is not always effective, but it worked in

this case. The drawings are so rich, so exquisite; a viewer was drawn in to look carefully at the effects the artist conjured through techniques of image transfer and erasure and the use of graphite. The artist's process is complex, and the results are visually subtle: the figures do not overwhelm the sheets of paper, and the tonal balance leans toward the lightness of the empty sheets. The imagery is deceptively simple but the accumulated effect is shattering, in the best possible way.



Dana Harel. *I Know Something of Steep Places 5*, 2013; mixed media on paper; 46 x 36 in. Courtesy of the Artist and the Palo Alto Art Center.

In an interview with Paula Birnbaum, Harel stated: “When I am drawing, I am allowing myself to move freely between the roles of victim and aggressor. We always see one or the other, but I want to explore the moment that they overlap within one individual.” In Harel’s drawings were truncated forms, human figures reduced to essential expressive elements, but some were populated by animals: a wolf, a falcon, and lions. One of these, *I Know Something of Steep Places 5* (2013), was placed on its own gilded wall. The transferred image had been erased and redrawn in such a way to make the creature’s eye appear gouged out, yet the beast reclined and suggested a commanding tranquility. It was as if our very edifice

—civilization, perhaps—had been carved out of some sentient body. Trained as an architect, Harel is interested in glorifying the ruin, but the power of this image contains more than that.

After twenty minutes alone in this darkened space, I felt that I could see myself in these haunting figures. External struggles, so often the cause of our concerns, can conceal the internal pain caused by violence. In Harel's work, I could see for a moment where those struggles reside in me. In the drawing *When I am Gone* (2013), the figure of Napoleon was an echo, no more than a fragment, a figure on a horse turning back to look into the void. To live is to know decay, and to feel is to suffer, but compassion is the light that draws us into ourselves. Is there anything more that needs to be said about violence, whether in Israel, or anywhere else?

***Dana Harel: Between Dreams and Nightmares* is on view at Palo Alto Art Center, in Palo Alto, through September 7, 2014.**

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