

From Mount Moriah to Epirus: Cécile Lempert on the fragility of human existence

I cannot love without trembling is the title of Cassandra Miller's new viola concerto that had its world premiere with the violist Lawrence Power and the Brussels Philharmonic Orchestra under Ilan Volkov on March 11th 2023. The concerto is a piece of marvelous beauty, 25 minutes of mourning and yearning that is truly spellbinding. All five sections of the work (four verses and a cadenza), following one upon the other uninterruptedly, are based on a rather simple tune, *Epirotiko Moiroloi*, an improvised mourning song recorded by the famous Rembetiko violinist Alexis Zoumbas in his American exile in 1921.

The central motive of this song, heart-breaking in its reminiscence of sobbing and trembling, in its flickering and drifting away, is repeated throughout the tune and only slightly varied in its course. It seems to move in circles that are only slowly shifting. With these rather minimalistic means it achieves an intense effect because it compels the listener to fully concentrate on the feeling of loss and longing. It is this material that Miller takes up and permutes, preserving its soul and spirit and re-evoking it on a different level.

so fragile a thing, the title that Cécile Lempert chose for her first solo exhibition at Efremidis Berlin, is, one could say, the complement to the title of Miller's concerto. Taken together, they yield the core of a quote from a letter that Simone Weil, the famous French philosopher and mystic, wrote to her friend Gustave Thibon, shortly before her death: "Human existence is so fragile a thing and exposed to such dangers that I cannot love without trembling."

Nevertheless, the choice of this complementary fragment as the title that integrates the individual works at display should not be regarded solely as a completion of the quote (or rather: an addition to it, since it remains elliptic even after reuniting the two fragments): There are, beyond this reference, beyond this bow to Cassandra Miller, obvious reasons in terms of *content* that justify assembling the ten paintings of the exhibition under this heading: From different perspectives, they all focus on one or another aspect of the fragility of human existence, from the very private and intimate to the violent and intruding, with a view that is sometimes analytic and distant but always finds back to the affectionate.

We see this in a painting of two hands, a young one that tenderly holds a carnation and an old one right beside it; of a face in the midst of leaves, perhaps smelling a flower we cannot see, nearly dissolving into an abstract pattern of light and shadow; of a child in their father's arm, both in peaceful sleep; of a shimmering eye, red-cornered, tired and full of melancholy; of the face of the painter herself, shifted away from an elder bush, a single strand of her hair falling in front of her eye; or of the exposed legs of Isaac lying on the soil. In the depiction of a concentrated face in nearly full profile it is precisely this perfect dedication of the profile that reveals a vulnerable intimacy. Thus, the face on the right side is almost erased, dissolved, and while the image on the left strongly resembles Renaissance frescoes, the right side evokes the color losses over the centuries.

It is hard to assess the influence Miller's composition had on Lempert's recent work, for much of it is indirect and rather subcutaneous (how do your brushstrokes reflect the music you listen to or think of while painting?). The relatedness to Weil's thoughts is arguably even less graspable since it is primarily mediated by Miller's music. All comment on the relation

between Miller's music and Lempert's paintings is an interpretation that requires some prudence to avoid disambiguating the ambiguous.

This being said, some similarities, some reverberations come to mind when comparing these different works of art: Both Miller and Lempert engage deeply and unmistakably with works from the history of art, all the way to the direct quote: Miller by taking Zoumbas' violin play as the starting point for her compositional work, Lempert by taking details from paintings from the "Old Masters" as the raw material for some of her paintings, most obviously, perhaps, in case of the two large paintings reflecting on Rembrandt's *Sacrifice of Isaac* that are presumably the central pieces of the exhibition. In both cases, however, the original material is in some sense detached from its former context and rephrased in a modern form of expression.

In both cases, the choice of format plays an important role in re-contextualizing the thoughts, feelings, and motives taken from the history of art: This way, a short piece for a small Rembetiko folk ensemble that lasts just four minutes grows to a concerto for viola and a full orchestra that lasts nearly half an hour. Lempert, on the other hand, isolates a detail from Rembrandt's painting and transforms it into a larger-than-life representation in a large format.

When Cassandra Miller describes singing along with Zoumbas' play in a 'ritualized, meditative' process, which she calls 'automatic singing', and points it out as an important step within her process of creation, one is reminded of Lempert's drawings which, too, are an intermediate step leading from the original material to the final painting. Six of these drawings are presented at Efremidis. And aren't they a bit like the humming of a musical motive in search for the final form?

Miller points out that her method of automatic singing, giving immediate expression of her bodily reactions on a melody or a layered record of her own voice, has an effect of simplifying the material and amplifying details. You can hear the 'zooming in' that she describes in her concentration of the vibrato and glissandi in Zoumba's piece. Lempert, on the other side, zooms into details of paintings, photographs, film frames, extracts them and amplifies certain aspects.

The circling in repetition that we hear in Miller's concerto is present in Lempert's works as well, most notably in the two motif-identical split-screen works based on the Rembrandt painting, together with the other detail—the *Study of Isaac's legs*—and the painting called *thumb*, taking up the motif of a face covered by a hand, albeit, this time, in form of a self-portrait with a thumb laid on her closed eye. *Isaac II* resembles an x-ray of *Isaac I*, an analytic disintegration. It deviates even more from the baroque style of the original. The distemper is nearly transparent due to a lower number of layers than in case of *Isaac I*. Thereby, the pastel crayon of the concise preparatory drawing is uncovered. The shift from the left to the right-hand side of the split screen is even stronger in this second painting, where the hand suddenly seems to exert even an ascending force with the face vanishing in the upper right-hand corner. Repetition with small variation thus becomes a tool for both analysis and contemplation.

One could name more analogies: Both the composition and the paintings seem to possess a certain balanced, in times even muted tone and (sound) color. Both pick up elements from

minimalist aesthetics without being minimalist. Both focus on silence, even with all the great excitement in the respective source material (and, fair enough, we have some passionate outbursts in both works). In Miller's case, the source material is a lament, a mourning song. In Lempert's case, it is a depiction of the sacrifice of Isaac. Here, a difference emerges: Where can we find something akin to a lament in the latter? Is there not an angel who falls into Abraham's arms at God's command? Of course, in the biblical story there is and, indeed, in the Rembrandt painting there is. However, there is no such angel in Lempert's paintings. In *Isaac II* the violated face and the exposed throat have a bloody appearance although the knife never hits. The events in the upper half of the Rembrandt painting are not reflected in the lower half, which depicts the action in all its crassness and offers no hope of salvation.

One might wonder whether the saving element can perhaps be found in other exhibited works. Now, depending on which of the remaining paintings you put in direct relation with *Isaac*, a positive answer seems either plausible or far-fetched. *Thumb* takes up the gesture of the Rembrandt motif and, thereby, presents itself as a counterpart to it. In this self-portrait, however, the hand on the face is no longer clearly understood as threatening. Associations might arise with the closing of the eyes of the deceased. While the face is, maybe, despite its chalky color too alive for this reading, it remains possible to see it as some tender gesture. And, finally, the third hands-related painting of the exhibition, the hands holding a carnation, traditionally a symbol for love and affection, might give the impression of a negation of the context of violence, too.

Even though immediate political interpretations are certainly foreign to the exhibition, it also seems clear that the carnation motif cannot be transferred from the Baroque to the present without considering the symbolic charge it obtained in the meantime, especially when it faces the eruption of violence in the Rembrandt painting which is violence *from above*, from the adult towards the child, a violence commanded with divine authority. The painting of (we know it: Isaac's) legs appear particularly drastic and, by extracting them from the context of the biblical narrative, inevitably evokes associations with a scene of sexual assault. The painting of a red-cornered eye is based on a detail from Werner Schroeter's 1991 drama film *Malina*. This context is relevant insofar as *the father* is a core figure in Ingeborg Bachmann's book, beginning with whom the psychological destruction of the protagonist takes its course. The gaze of this protagonist in connection with the depiction of fatherly violence in *Isaac* is thereby interconnected and dominates the room.

In one of her poems dealing with the story of Isaac, Nelly Sachs, the famous Jewish, German-Swedish poet, writes about the "Haarfeine Wunde / Wendung im Blick in der Opferzeit" ('Hair-fine wound / Turn in the gaze in the time of sacrifice') and leaves us with the suspense of ambiguity, ending with the words "und der Berg Morija mit der Gnadenkrone reisst in Stücke / denn Liebe weiß vom Sterben den schrecklichen Grund –" ('and Mount Moriah with the crown of grace tears to pieces for love knows about dying the terrible reason –'). I think we see some of this in Cécile Lempert's *Isaac*.

Now, while all the relations between the paintings – narrative, emotional, visual – are important for the exhibition, one should not lose the focus on the individual painting. After all, they do not necessarily form a unified narrative but are individual works with their very own stories. Turning back, once again, to the painting entitled *leaves with the*, or so I want to see it, invisible flower, a further poem comes to mind, this time from Friedrich Hebbel, that captures well this nuance of the fragility of things:

Sommerbild

Ich sah des Sommers letzte Rose stehn,
Sie war, als ob sie bluten könne, rot;
Da sprach ich schauernd im Vorübergehn:
So weit im Leben, ist zu nah am Tod!

Es regte sich kein Hauch am heißen Tag,
Nur leise strich ein weißer Schmetterling;
Doch, ob auch kaum die Luft sein
Flügel Schlag
Bewegte, sie empfand es und verging.

(‘Summer Picture // I saw the summer's last rose standing there, / It was, as if it could still bleed, so red; / Then I spoke shudderingly in passing by: / So far in life, is too close to death! // No breeze stirred on this hot day, / Only quietly a white butterfly brushed by; / Yet, though scarcely did the air feel its wing's tune, / She sensed it and withered away.’)

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