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Ori Gersht, *Blow Up Untitled 4*, 2007. Light jet print mounted on aluminum. Santa Barbara Museum of Art, purchase with funds provided by an Anonymous Donor in loving memory of SMD and Tangerine from EAD.

SBMA's *Ori Gersht: Lost in Time* Represents
Artist's First Solo Museum Exhibition in Western U.S.

On View May 20 – September 4, 2011

April 27, 2011 – Ori Gersht depicts scenes of natural beauty that perceptively disguise and reveal a history of violence. Bringing together for the first time the artist's trilogy of films and related works based on 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century European still-life painting, and two new series based on Japanese history, *Ori Gersht: Lost in Time* represents five years of recent work. This exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA) of 28 works marks the artist's first solo museum exhibition in the Western United States, and is accompanied by his first museum catalogue produced in the United States.

Pongante (2006), *Big Bang II* (2007), *Falling Bird* (2008), and related photographic works featured in the exhibition fuse the past with what the artist has called the "ultimate present." This is achieved through the creation of sublime scenes that become precipitously unsettling through both sudden and gradual obliteration. Each work renders a prolonged moment of suspense through the use of stop-motion photography and slow-motion film. Yet the visceral level on which these works operate most closely mimics that of their inspiration: painting. Referencing historic paintings by Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560-1627), Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904), and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779), among others, these photographs and films provide a meditation on life, loss, destiny, and chance.



Left image: Ori Gersht, *Time after Time Untitled 8*, 2007. Lambda Print. Collection of Manny and Jennifer Simchowiz.

Right image: Henri Fantin-Latour, *Chrysanthemums of Summer*, ca. 1887. Oil on canvas. Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of Mary and Leigh Block.

“...to blow up the harmless, genteel flowerpieces of Fantin-Latour: what else but modernist hostility to the decorums of the aesthetic domain and the pictorial tradition could lead a gentle photographic artist like Gersht to do such a thing?” This poignant question by Carol Armstrong, in one of the essays to be included in the exhibition catalogue sums up, perhaps, what is on the viewer’s mind when taking in the artist’s work for the first time. Gersht seemingly answers the inquiry during a gallery talk on separate occasion. “It’s all about pulling tension between the old masters and new technologies... We see a simultaneous moment of destruction and togetherness coincide.” (posted by Joseph Caputo on Smithsonianmag.com, February 25, 2009).

This tension and, ultimately, a sort of beautiful destruction are illustrated in the work *Blow Up Untitled 4* (top image), a recent SBMA acquisition from Gersht’s series, *Blow Up* (2007). Named after the critically acclaimed 1967 film of the same title by director Michelangelo Antonioni, this series visually references the paintings of Fantin-Latour. The flower arrangement central to this work is composed of royal blue, white, and red—the colors of the *Tricolore* or the national flag of France, which is based on a design that was modified by the artist Jacques-Louis David in 1794. Gersht rapidly accelerates the demise of this arrangement by literally blowing it up, which involves a special technique of freezing the flowers with nitrogen and, with the aid of a pyrotechnics expert, creating a violent explosion. The action is captured in vivid, enhanced detail by a special high-resolution camera at 1/6000 of a second, and the most pivotal moments are then selected for publication. The effect of this image is stunningly mesmerizing, yet deeply haunting as it evokes the random acts of violence that are not only a part of European history but also a part of the artist’s experience growing up in Israel.

This body of work extends beyond the literal destruction and atrocities of war, but also comments on the dichotomy that exists between chaos and serenity. Gersht states during an interview with Joseph Caputo for *Smithsonian* in 2009, “My work is not so much a direct commentary as it is an open-ended observation of the absurdities around us... I’m thinking about scenarios where, in one place, there is a very bloody war, while in another place people are living a comfortable, decadent lifestyle. I’m intrigued by that kind of parallel existence, and how one sometimes weaves into the other.”



Left image: Ori Gersht, *Pomegranate* 2006 (video still). The Jewish Museum, New York. Purchase: Nathan and Jacqueline Goldman and Simon Lissim Funds, by exchange, 2008-219.

Right image: Ori Gersht, *Chasing God Fortune, Imperial Mantis, Night Fly #1*, 2010. Archival Inkjet Print. Collection of Sandra and Jerry Le Winter.

Gersht’s trilogy of films, based on still-life painting, illustrate these points. *Pomegranate* (2006), based on a still life by 17th-century Spanish painter Juan Sánchez Cotán, shows a bullet crossing the frame in slow motion and destroying a suspended pomegranate. *Big Bang* (2007) shows a flower arrangement exploding moments after a sirenlike wail has faded. *Falling Bird* (2008), based on Chardin’s still life, depicts a hanging pheasant that is suddenly unleashed of its string and free falls toward a mirror-like black surface. As it penetrates the liquid, it triggers an epic chain reaction, reminiscent of a geological disaster.

The yin and yang of beauty and destruction carries through to Gersht's latest series of work produced in Japan between April and May 2010—this time an exploration of symbolism. The cherry blossom has traditionally been the enduring metaphor for the nature of life, but its extreme beauty and quick death has also been associated with mortality. During World War II the flower was used to motivate the Japanese people, to stoke nationalism and militarism among the population. Gersht captures the essence of the disparity of this symbol in the series *Night Fly* and *Out of Time*. As noted by Michele Robecchi in her essay "Ori Gersht – Breaking the Silence" for the exhibition catalogue, "...[the works] have a slightly sinister post-atomic quality. This effect wasn't completely unintentional. When Gersht visited Hiroshima, his interest in the outdoors was equally split between investigating the lost innocence of cherry blossoms...and how nature flourish on nuclear-contaminated soil."

Ori Gersht Lost in Time is accompanied by a 64-page exhibition catalogue with essays by exhibition curator and SBMA Curator of Contemporary Art, Julie Joyce; Carol Armstrong, Professor, History of Art, Yale University; and London-based writer Michele Robecchi. This is the artist's first museum publication produced in the United States.

Ori Gersht was born in Tel Aviv in 1967, and has lived and worked since 1988 in London, where he received his BA at the University of Westminster, and his MA at the Royal College of Art. His work has been exhibited at institutions including the Tate, Britain; the Victoria and Albert Museum; the Tel Aviv Museum; Frankfurter Kunstverein; the Jewish Museum, New York; and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, among others.

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