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A Worthy Opponent: The Later Works of Janet Shafner and Shirley Faktor

Abstract

"The hand and the rose are human terrain for the meat of us and the soul of us." Good art asks hard questions and sometimes gives difficult answers. The drawings and paintings that we celebrate here, by the late American artist Janet Shafner (1931–2011) and by South African/Israeli artist Shirley Faktor (b. 1939), ask stunningly difficult questions. The resulting works describe the tender frailty of human flesh and offer a glimpse into the melancholy of women's interior lives. Janet Shafner, "Daughters of Zelophehad" (2006). Three panels, oil on canvas. 48" × 84". Both artists inhabit rich personal worlds of family and professional obligations, woven with deep ties to (albeit very different) aspects of Jewish life and culture. For Shafner, ritual observance, textual interpretation and midrashic expression were central to the intellectual connections she claimed were the point of her gutsy, provocative paintings. For Faktor, the political and emotional ramifications of having grown up in and immigrated to Israel from South Africa, to a secular, art-centered life, inform the nuanced and extremely personal nature of her work. Most importantly, both artists direct fiercely determined attention to that from which most people avert their eyes. Janet Shafner, "Self on Blue" (2006). Wash & graphite. 30" × 22". Janet Shafner, who died in 2011 at the age of 79, was a feminist whose formidable paintings retold disturbing Jewish Bible stories in an eloquent critique of the misogynistic, patriarchal aspects of Judaism.¹ The artist's reality embodied radical dichotomy. For example, while she remained religiously observant, Shafner does not appear to have felt conflicted about portraying nudity and did not shy away from it. Yet she invited rabbinic rulings on the nudity in her work, even

when they restricted which paintings might be exhibited or lectured about in various circumstances. “If it was germane to what she wanted to express,” says her sister, Esther Chachkes, “she did it.”² Shafner raised four sons, devoted herself diligently to her art and taught for thirty years at the Lyman Allen Art Museum in New London, Connecticut. After a long and under-recognized career as a painter (under-recognized, I believe, because she was a woman, because people don’t want to see difficult work, and because artists whose difficult work is recognized tend to be men), she embarked on a series of drawings that would prove both sensational and prophetic. In 2003, when she was 70, Shafner and her husband Shalom were wintering in Boca Raton, Florida. She had planned on using one of the rooms in their rented condo for a painting studio, until she realized that it had white carpeting. And so she decided to draw instead. Over the next eight years, using graphite, sumi paints and her own aging body, Shafner created a body of work that bore witness to her own longevity and subsequent aging. With her cancer diagnosis in 2010, the drawings appear not only to presage her own end, but also to present a powerful spiritual overview of transcendence over death. It is in the self-portraits of her own wrinkled knees, upper arms and thighs, however, that she produced, throughout the last decade of her life and during her final illness, a place for us to mourn not only her but our own aging as well. There is also, remarkably, a profoundly wicked humor in Shafner’s urgent and thorough scrutiny of herself dressed in underpants and brassiere, simultaneously a Jewish bubbe and a Virgin-Mary-like Queen of Heaven. These works defy the incapacity of old age and illness and burst forth to become nothing less than an exuberant and joyful Ascension. Shirley Faktor, “Kahane III” (1985). 74 × 104 cm. Shirley Faktor, “Chicken I” (1973). 70 × 200 cm. Shirley Faktor’s sensitivity to and refusal to participate in abuse of human rights led her to emigrate from South Africa in the apartheid era. She eventually settled in Israel, where she raised two sons, taught for many years at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design and engaged deeply in psychological and spiritual searching. While she always opted...