

The Figurative Drawings by Moshe Gershuni

16.1-22.2.20

To anyone not closely familiar with the work of my father, Moshe Gershuni (henceforth: 'Gershuni'), the title of this show might come as a surprise. Among Gershuni's admirers – even those who followed his work closely over the years – only few were aware of the existence of a body of work that could come under the title of "Figurative Drawings by Moshe Gershuni," less so of its extent. There are, in fact, more than 200 works that fit that label, some quite large in format, drawings in graphite or charcoal made directly from observation, from a live model in the studio.

Gershuni had made these drawings during live drawing sessions he had been holding at his former studio (at the time, still new), on George Elliott Street, in Tel Aviv. Taking place around the mid-1980s, they had been conducted over a period of time, though for how long exactly is hard to tell nowadays. The group that assembled around Gershuni included a changing mix of friends and acquaintances, colleagues and former students who came to together for drawing sessions that lasted several hours at a time, taking place every week or two. As 'poses' were switched frequently, each such session produced a multitude of works. (I can only assume, and know from personal experience, that the attraction, at least in part, was due to a sense of "togetherness" they provided, to the experience of drawing side-by-side with others, from the same model, based on a shared premise; a "togetherness" that, no doubt, offers momentary relief from the overwhelming solitude of one's own artistic practice in the studio, from the constant battling of demons and angels.)

Gathering in the damp, dark basement that served Gershuni as studio, at the backyard of a derelict apartment building on George Elliott Street, four or five attendees would position themselves around the model (a man or a woman, some who sat regularly for the group and others for numbered sessions). Gershuni was then in the midst of the most crucial phase in his career, engaged in a "return to painting" that would come to characterize his work from 1980 on (the year he was chosen, together with Micha Ullman, to represent Israel in the Venice Biennial), having forsaken the minimalism and conceptual art of the late 1960s and 1970s. It is thus that at each session, new and fiercely expressive works could be seen scattered all over, a theatrical backdrop of sorts to the participants who were turned towards the middle of the space, where the model had sat. Fresh from that night or the one before, they were hung on walls or laid out on the floor, commanding the space with a silent roar.

To many, Gershuni was a quintessentially modernist artist, one who worked well from within the arena of the avant-garde. Many would have wondered at his willingness to commit to this form of art, archaic and supposedly obsolete, of drawing from life; to submit to such an exacting discipline. To those who knew him closely, however, it was clear how profoundly attached he was to this great tradition of pre-modern European painting, that of the renaissance and the baroque. The choice of seriously undertaking to draw the nude body from observation had meant, for Gershuni, to singlehandedly partake in that tradition, to pursue a "cult" that laid the groundwork for the training, activity an ongoing practice of every artists he held dearly, from Masaccio to Matisse.

And yet, Gershuni's figurative drawings are in no way "academic" (in the negative sense of the word): they never avail themselves of some pre-existing, ready-to-use language of drawing, nor do they try and emulate the appearance of masterly drawings from the past, to work "in the manner of" some great artist or other. They never strive to, or claim to satisfy, any kind of standard of "correctness". To them, the model is a springing source of life and bounty, something to begin from anew. Knowing and never

naïve, and yet with great candor and simplicity, Gerhuni's drawings go about erecting a bridge to a humanist worldview that has all but disappeared.

Of varying dimensions, the great majority of drawings were made using charcoal and graphite pencils, on papers that varied between, most often, inexpensive non-archival paper, and occasionally chrome-laminated sheets. There is nonetheless a consistency to them, a homogeneousness that is almost surprising given the drawing language that Gershuni had used: contour-based, the line is always fluid, vibrant, open, seeking – again and again, constantly searching. Painter Shir Shvadron, a regular participant in the drawing sessions at Gershuni's studio, had frequently told me how these drawings reminded him of the studies of Tintoretto. This, to me, is an apt comparison: as with the fiery Venetian renaissance painter, so are Gershuni's nudes charged with a forceful and essentially erotic energy. Everything is in flux. The hand travels across the paper; the eye longs to touch; the hand is made an extension to the eye. These drawings are committed to the act of observation, to representation, too. They grapple in earnest with key issues of perspective and foreshortening, and even in their negotiation with human anatomy they do so out of a clear sense of respect. At the same time, there is never an attempt at adding tonality – shading, chiaroscuro – to a basic language of lines common to all his drawings. They dispense, in fact, with means that, to so many skilled draughts men, were a way of lending mass and volume, of enhancing plasticity. Apparently, it never occurs to Gershuni, as draughtsman, to resort to any of these; or yet he considers them to be beyond his reach. Settling for line only, he draws with an unsteady hand, producing drawings that, with a certain crudeness to them, are never rarified, never given to mannerisms; drawings that radiate authenticity, that originate from a desperate need to feel things, tangibly, to know.

It is hard to say what Gershuni himself made of these drawings. He did take the effort of preserving them, keeping them in file cabinets in his studio, though he could have done otherwise: he never included them in his shows, least of all as a unified body of work, nor did he offer them up for sale. They seem to represent only a marginal aspect of his work at the time, or indeed, in general. But the same can be said of the great artists of the past, whose oeuvre always spanned a public and a private dimension. Nowadays we marvel at the flair and spontaneity of so many studies, sketches and preparatory drawings that, during the artist's lifetime, were never intended to be viewed by the public. Nevertheless, there is a clear linkage between, to take one example, the aforementioned studies by Tintoretto and the frescoes he based on them, works that comprise the public portion of his work; in Gershuni's case, the connection between the two calls for a closer examination.

Gershuni himself, it would appear, had sensed this, trying in different ways – consciously and unconsciously – to bring closer the side of his work that was known publicly with the supposedly marginal practice of drawing from a live model. Some of those modest drawings he subsequently "treated" – as can be seen in the current show – adding "touches" to them that spanned a wide spectrum of interventions: from the symbolism and ornamentation that concerned him in his principal work at the time, to written expressions that, likewise, are emblematic to his work, on to the near-complete coverage of a drawing by painting over it, or yet by pasting a drawing onto a larger, more ambitious work of painting, essentially "weaving" it into it. These interventions were not always done in the spur of the moment, that is, immediately following the completion of a drawing or a session, or once the model had left. It seems, therefore, that these drawings captured his interest long after they were made, long even after he was no longer involved in the drawing sessions.

Back in the 1980s, I myself had participated in some of those sessions. I was in my teens, in high school, and later in the military, and even though I drew constantly, having had the urge since childhood, the experience of drawing a model in the company of senior artists much older and more experienced than me – with my father especially – had had a tremendous, seminal impact. Obviously, I could not have known at the time that one day I'd become a teacher myself, one for whom drawing and painting with the students, together, form a live model, is at the core of a daily practice. In a sense, I now realize that I kept on drawing from the place where he had left off.

I wonder how Gershuni would have reacted to a show entirely dedicated to his figurative drawings, so many years after they were made – with reservation, perhaps, or even appalled at the presumption to do so. At the same time, he might have felt pride and satisfaction that these drawings – which he did out of a keen urge, purely as studies, not expecting any reward – have been found worthy of standing on a par with his more familiar work, shedding light on it from a new, unexpected angle.

Aram Gershuni