

Nogah Engler

"I took images from art history... I'd imitate their beauty, then bring in destruction to suggest that something terrible had happened"



1 **Landscape (2) (2004)**
oil and glass paint on canvas
39 x 40cm

2 **Green Hole (2004)**
oil on board, 20cm diameter

3 and 4 **Untitled (2 of 22 Virgins)** work in progress (2004)
oil and glass paint on canvas,
21.5 x 21.5 x 5cm

NOGAH ENGLER is an Israeli who studied philosophy and literature as well as art. She paints haunting landscapes which play on classical beauty but at the same time dissolve it. This tension is driven by her particular personal history, which is overshadowed by the Holocaust and its brutal impact upon her family, and which disturbs and fragments the otherwise idyllic scenery. The resulting canvases speak eloquently of the difficulty of articulating such emotional history within a highly-charged landscape painting tradition. Yet the fragmentation, which occurs through her use of gaps, partially-completed elements and shifts in tone, leads in turn to a new harmony. **INTERVIEW: Paul Cary-Ross**

What does your name mean?

Nogah is a poetic term for strong light or shine in Hebrew, and also the name of the planet or star Venus.

How did you come to the UK?

I grew up in Israel, though I was born in America as my parents were academics working abroad at the time. I came to England to study for my MA in Fine Art at Chelsea School of Art. So I am very much between countries with a feeling of exile, wherever I am.

Your recent paintings derive from your family history, don't they?

Most of my images from the last few years are landscapes based on an obsession I had – not so much during life, but more whenever I was painting – with the Second World War history of my family in the village of Kozov [then in Poland, now in Ukraine]. Over two thousand Jews were murdered there. My grandmother was also murdered by the Nazis in that area. My grandfather and father hid and eventually escaped. It became a huge place which occupied my thoughts, but with no photos of it, I took my images from art history, such as Cranach and Leonardo's backgrounds. I would imitate their beauty, but then bring in destruction to suggest that something terrible had happened. As time passed, I became interested in what would happen if I physically went there, which I did in 2005. I worried, almost, that I would see it as just another place, whereas for me it had existed mainly in my imagination – but an interesting gap emerged between, on the one hand, the beautiful, pastoral mountain landscapes and, on the other, my projection onto it of what had happened years ago. I continued to live it as if it was 60 years ago.

How did that experience feed into your paintings?

When I came back I wanted to leave traces of the actual place in a way which captured its contradictions and how fragmented my sense

of it was, being based largely on memories of memories. Generally, my aim in painting is to capture traces of people who cannot talk – but I can't talk for them and so I don't want to describe a place fully just suggest the situation. So I have moved increasingly to fragment the scenes and leave gaps.

Lots of your post-Kosov paintings look like snowscapes. Are they?

The white started off as snow, as I was there in the winter, but then became more just a means of generating blank space as a way to open up the painting. And I'm now trying to do that with dark colours also.

Do you aim for beauty despite the fracturing you introduce to the image?

I want as much disturbance as beauty, but when I take a classical landscape to pieces I try to keep the underlying proportions. Today the options are very open – painting is always talking to other paintings, and I want to negotiate with a certain tradition of beautiful Renaissance paintings, with their ideal proportions and structures.

Do you ever include people in your work?

I just didn't feel they fitted. I want the evidence of human intervention, so there's always something like fences, but I didn't want to focus on one person. But I am currently working on paintings which may include parts of people... And I am also working on a series of portraits, which will be faces which have a starchy feel and lack something, and will form a whole roomful of virgins.

What's with the big fruit in, for example, Night and Day (2007)?

The lushness grows from Bosch, as a trap to get you into the painting – only to find sinister night animals and arches which take you nowhere. There is a related tension between dark and light areas. Night and Day was also influenced by WG Sebald's book *Austerlitz*, in which a person recollects his

past while on a journey he takes to a zoo – where he finds night animals in the Nocturna section, and where day and night are confused.

How do your paintings develop?

It's all about adding something, questioning it, and coming back two days or two months later and thinking, "Oh, I have a solution to that." I like to work on the same painting in different moods, to increase the differences within it. It's a long journey, up to a year. I just hope to come to a point where there is enough there and I don't need to edit it any more. Sometimes I go too far, and a painting is ruined, as I can't go backwards.

Are your drawings preparation for your paintings?

Originally they were, though the paintings developed very organically from them. But I really enjoyed the pencil and they became independent ways of tackling the same concerns. I like the feeling, with a drawing, that something is always incomplete.

You have recently experimented with round canvases?

Yes, perhaps I was drawn to them because I had given birth just before! And it was a change, which I enjoyed. But I do feel more attached to the conventional rectangle.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

It might be a little harsh to live with, but I'd like to spend some time with the version of Pieter Bruegel's *Massacre of the Innocents* (1565–67) in the Queen's collection. A previous owner had the massacre painted out as it was too disturbing, so there is a history of erasure in and of the painting. Bruegel the Elder is a big influence for me: there is something very human about his work.

Exhibitions: *Nowhere is Home*, Fruchtwagen Contemporary Drawings, Berlin, until 25 Oct



Night and Day (2007), oil and glass paint on canvas, 190 x 200cm



Dusk (2007), oil and glass paint on canvas, 120 x 150cm



Landscape (red sun) (2007), oil and glass paint on canvas, 38 x 46cm