

**OFER
LELLOUCHE**

Exhibition Facts

Duration 29 June – 19 September 2023
Venue Column Hall
Curator Elsy Lahner
Works 46
Catalogue Available for EUR 29,90 (English/German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via www.albertina.at

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Ofer Lellouche

29 June – 19 September 2023

Isolation, burnt skin, disfigured faces. Ofer Lellouche depicts human beings in a way that is as mystical as it is radical. The output of the artist, who was born in Tunis in 1947 and has lived in Israel since 1966 after studying in Paris, is shaped by the experience of threat, persecution and extinction. Lellouche raises the oldest, universally valid question: "What is man?"

Against the backdrop of millennia of persecution, however, the question has a special place and explosive power in the history of Jewish thought - sadly, to this day. Lellouche also approaches this theme in light of his own multicultural identity: with the "why" always being central. Be it in the Bible or in the Talmud: in Hebrew, this existential interrogative shares the same numerical value as the word for human being (Adam), thus referring to the existing close and eternally valid connection between these two words.

The self-portrait and the human corpus are the most important themes of Lellouche's oeuvre. His bodies are naked and exposed as God created them. How or why they were disfigured remains a mystery in a Kafkaesque way. Lellouche does not offer any ways out, nor does he provide a possible iconography of liberation: his figures, who seem dark and threatening, greet us with blank stares. Despite their passivity, however, the mere presence of these bodies forces us with shocking power and unsurpassed intensity to confront the question of being.

Lellouche began experimenting with video art and painting in the 1970s and has explored a wide variety of media throughout his career, including drawing, sculpture, etching and woodcut.

Of essential importance to the process of creating his works is the unity of content and form: instead of imposing an abstract idea on any medium, the specific characteristics of, for example, a woodcut, a metal plate or a bronze casting consciously determine the final result of the work.

Klaus Albrecht Schröder

Introduction

The alienness of man in the world has been a prominent theme at all times and in all cultures. Ofer Lellouche (b. 1947 in Tunis) approaches it also against the background of his own identity. It is a universal existential experience that prompts Lellouche to create his monumental woodcuts, drawings, and sculptures.

The work of the artist, who lives in Tel Aviv and Paris, is characterized by a fixation on the human form—stark naked—and on the head and face, which makes it akin to that of Alberto Giacometti or the self-portraits of Jim Dine. Facing us, his figures are mute. Despite their passivity, solely by their presence, these bodies confront us with the question of being through their shocking power and unsurpassable intensity. In their constant repetition, Lellouche's self-portraits are a form of continuous self-reflection that comprises inner and outer perception at the same time. Reality and image alternately adapt to each other in a relationship of tension, while the artist assures himself of his own existence.

Ofer Lellouche seeks to grasp a simple inner structure in its complexity and express it by reducing it to its essence. Behind this is a basic mathematical understanding. The artist proceeds slowly, step by step: he adds when modeling with clay, or he removes or subtracts when making a woodcut. Like zero and one, black and white represent binary values that call for a clear decision for the one or the other and thus depict exclusively what is substantial—which, however may represent a reality of its own for each of us, based on our own biography and our own experiences.

Quotes by the Artist

“For me, the starting point of my art on a conceptual level was **self-portraiture**. This is what I almost exclusively dealt with between 1975 and 1982. Every day I would draw myself in front of a mirror. A self-portrait is not necessarily about me. It’s not personal. A self-portrait is not a selfie. It is not even a portrait of the painter by himself. When someone poses for me, I can paint the person smiling, reading, listening to music, dreaming, or even sleeping. I can paint the person in profile or from behind, but I cannot paint myself by actually painting myself, facing myself, looking myself in the eyes. What I see in the mirror is a painter painting himself. The subject of a self-portrait is about the act of painting and not the artist’s portrait of himself.”

“I have painted and drawn hundreds of **self-portraits** over the years. My features have gradually changed, and so has the way I paint. Places can also play a role. A self-portrait painted in a hotel room in Shanghai or São Paulo will have a very different atmosphere than the one painted at home. Could those changes show some pattern, could they be linear? I’m not sure. The artist is more like a geographer who explores and maps an unknown country. It is more about geography than about linear history. Although you explore a different part of this country each time, you can be certain that it exists as a whole. It’s like putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, leaving a lot of holes in between, but knowing with certainty that the whole image exists.”

“The way I stand in front of the mirror resembles the way I build a drawing on a sheet of paper. When composing a drawing, if I think the head needs to be inclined further down, the man in the mirror understands this before I do and lowers his head—as if he were able to anticipate my intentions. This is a kind of strange dialogue between the painter and his own image.”

“At the beginning of the 1980s, my self-portraits became more and more abstract. The more I tried to grasp the face I saw in the mirror, the more it escaped me. The more obscure and anonymous it became, until it looked like a rock or a stone. My self-portraits became landscapes. And so I decided to start working outdoors. The landscapes I chose then were not agreeable or intimate, but rather virgin places where nature had retained the memory of its genesis: the mountains around Jerusalem or the sunsets over the sea. Later I reintroduced self-portraits into these **landscapes**.

“Since the figures became more and more sculptural, and the background wider and wider, I went back to sculpture after an intermission of over 25 years. The themes I had developed along the years were recreated in three dimensions, such as the nude self-portrait, the head, the head and the hand, the ‘ateliers.’ What fascinates me about **sculptures** is their density: the way the material is compressed. For example, when I look at a head sculpture, I like to look at the back first, at this volume in which nothing really happens, but which can be strained by a force that would come from inside out, like the belly of a pregnant woman. This image must be remembered, because any death mask is beautiful, but art must not be frozen or reduced to funerary art.”

Studying portraits, the divide between frontal and profile views made me think, the artist’s choice for the one or the other—or for the three-quarter view, a combination of the other two. The profile view is mostly used in portraits of kings, as well as in sculptures or medals. The focus is on him, a powerful and distant figure, whereas the frontal encounter is a symmetrical dialogue with the other. It was around such reflections that Two was imagined. The sculpture is composed of two heads, almost identical, placed at a 90-degree angle, so that one is seen from the front and the other in profile.

The theme of tension between two objects has haunted me from the very beginning. This is also the reason why I prefer diptychs to triptychs. The composition of a diptych is more dynamic. You hesitate between the two parts without being able to decide where to direct your attention.”

“**Darkness** can provoke many associations, but for me it’s mostly the landscape of my childhood. The obscurity of the living room after closing the window shutters, which protected us from the heat and violence of the sun outside. To me, darkness mostly means coziness. But I know that many people associate the color black with pain, melancholy, and fear. Art should be able to express one thing and its opposite as well. But above all, the work of art is a musical score that the artist gives to the viewer to play. You should be allowed to play the way you feel: oppressive and dark, or luminous and positive. But for you to be able to play, the artist must step back.”

“I discovered the **color black** for my art when working in the mountains around Jerusalem. I had been given the opportunity to stay there for several weeks to take in this landscape. But every time I brought the pictures back to my studio I was disappointed with them. They resembled the landscape paintings of Provence, with this soft light of Paul Cézanne. Nothing was left of the intensity and the violence of the light I had been exposed to. One day I did an etching, and I left the plate in the acid by accident. I still printed the plate, and the impression was almost black. At that moment I suddenly realized that I could translate the intensity of the light into black, and it became clear to me how luminous black can be. It has also something to do with the strong light in Israel and in the south in general. Many paintings that seemed to me very colorful in Tel Aviv looked rather dark in Paris.”

“As in most of my compositions that include several objects, the starting point for **Portrait of the Painter with a Bust of His Father** was a random arrangement of sculptures in my studio: a large self-portrait in profile, installed in a slightly elevated position above another seen from the front. The large sculpture dominated the other by its dimensions and raised position, but at the same time seemed absent and distant because of the profile view. The smaller figure, although almost crushed by the other, was more alive and tauter because it was finished in more detail and facing us directly.

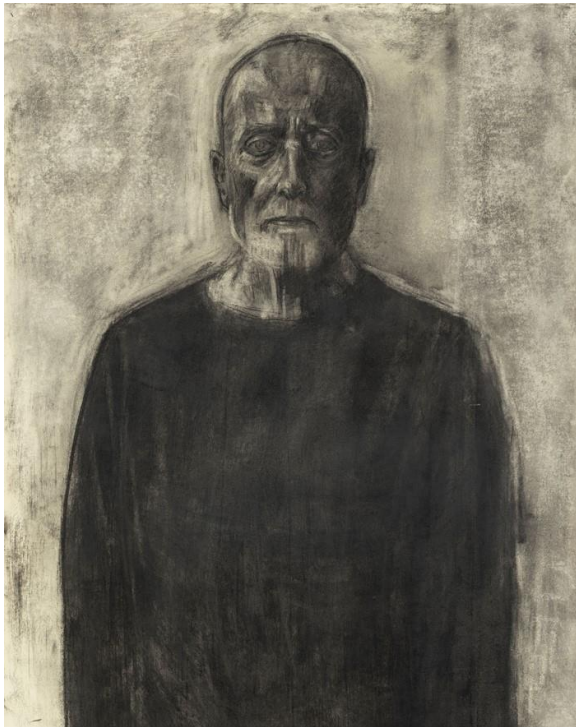
In my eyes, the father is of course not meant to be a biological father. He is Dante’s Vergil, the ghost from Hamlet, or Moses in the Bible. One of those mentors who abandon the hero on the threshold of the promised land. He is the father whose presence we all feel behind us. Superior yet absent. The poet’s guide who must disappear the very moment his pencil touches the paper, the one who must vanish so that we can be. We cannot make this ghost disappear—the most we can do is to transform it into a Roman bust or an African sculpture.”

With his poem *Un coup de dés* (English: *A Roll of the Dice*) from 1897, which consists of a long, single phrase, the French poet Stéphane **Mallarmé** broke with the conventions of poetry. He experimented with the arrangement of text, the use of space characters, and various type sizes to augment the visual effect. The poem is hard to decipher in terms of content and even harder to translate, as it has no clear narrative structure. The phonetic similarities of such French terms as “maître” and “mètre” (master/meter) or “coup de dés” and “coup d’idées” (roll of the dice/spontaneous idea) allow a wide spectrum of associations. It is about the relationship between language and meaning, the poet’s role and the essence of poetic creation. Mallarmé fathoms the limits of language and expresses his visions in his poetry, encouraging readers to play an active part in the creative process.

“What fascinated me were the extremely succinct mathematical structure and the existential main theme, both the necessity and futility of writing a poem. In my earliest beginnings as a young artist I came across Mallarmé’s work in the way one bumps against a wall. But I soon realized that it was not an obstacle blocking my view but rather a wall that does not hide anything once you get around. At that time, art went through a moment of crisis: the crisis of representation. Eventually I found a hypothesis in Mallarmé’s poetry on which to base my work. The role of language or the role of art is not to describe nature, but to deal with it critically. Nature must not be seen as an object to be copied, but as a text that must be interpreted. But above all, one should read the world in the same way in which you touch an individual pebble you have accidentally put into your pocket at a sudden impulse and now try to feel with your fingers without looking at it.”

Press images

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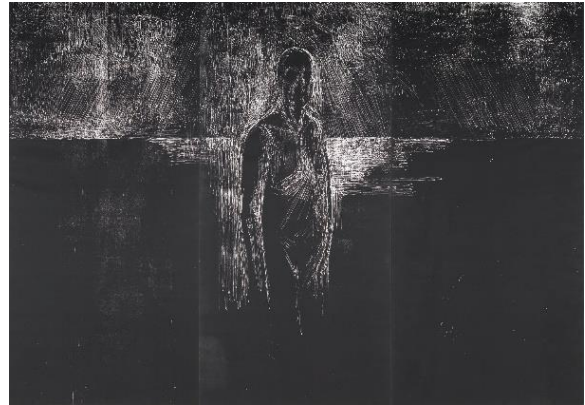
Ofer Lellouche
Self-Portrait, 2022
Charcoal on Paper
110 × 80 cm
ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Donation Ofer
Lellouche 2023 in Memory of Dov Gottesman
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Ofer Lellouche
Self-Portrait of the Painter with Bust of his Father,
2022
Oil on Canvas
195 × 235 cm
Litvak Collection, Tel Aviv
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Ofer Lellouche
Self-Portrait with a Raised Hand, 2012
Charcoal on paper
80 × 120 cm
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Woodcut
170 × 90 cm
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Ofer Lellouche
Woman and Man, 2009
Woodcut
190 × 290 cm
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Ofer Lellouche
Two, 2005
Bronze
25 × 35 × 35 cm
Collection of the Artist
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Ofer Lellouche
Self-Portrait, 2000
Bronze
130 × 45 × 45 cm
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Ofer Lellouche
Head, 2009
Wood
65 × 30 × 40 cm
Private Collection
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Head, 2009
Terracotta
30 × 25 × 30 cm
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Head of a Woman, 2009
Wood
80 × 35 × 50 cm
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Ofer Lellouche
Self-Portrait, 2008
Woodcut
160 × 120 cm
Collection of the Artist
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Ofer Lellouche
Atelier, 2011
Woodcut
170 × 80 cm
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