

# Naomi Leshem

Leisere Töne (Quieter Tones)  
August 30<sup>th</sup> to September 29<sup>th</sup> 2012

“Quieter Tones” echo through the Galerie Sylva Denzler – quieter than we are used to hearing from Naomi Leshem (\*1963, Jerusalem). While 2009’s “Runways” (her first solo exhibition in Europe at Sylva Denzler) and “Sleepers” (2011) – shown in the Kunst(Zeug)Haus Rapperswil and also in cities ranging from New York, Paris, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Prague and Milan to Palm Beach (Florida) – featured large-format, vibrantly coloured photographs, here we see a mellower side to her work, and one that rewards close examination.

Her photographic sculptures, their glossy surfaces reminiscent of porcelain, appear both fragile and precious. The photos have been deliberately folded and fixed using a clear varnish, so that only fragments of their subjects can be made out and identified. They hold a secret that the artist refuses to reveal. “Trust me”, she promises, yet leaves us in the dark. The crafting of the photographs into three-dimensional shapes establishes new connections within the images’ content that tell a story of their own. They are compressed and folded until only the select essence can be seen, while all else remains concealed. The protective, fixing layer of varnish ensures that the sculptures retain their shape. It is impossible to unfold the photograph without destroying its surface.

Two large-format black and white photographs appear in the square format typically associated with Naomi Leshem’s Hasselblad camera. They depict lightly rippling waters populated by a boat and birds floating peacefully on the gentle waves. The boundaries between water, land and sky seem to merge. As if in a whiteout, space becomes impossible to grasp, the frame into the infinite is broken. There are no points of reference to place and time, and in their stead comes solitude. The only focus is on the boat; it gives the image the constancy and orientation for which we search amid the uncertainty. The same environment, consisting of sections of the Sea of Galilee, was depicted in the colour photographs of the “Way to Beyond” series. The new images are entirely drained of colour, and as a result our gaze is directed towards other elements of the composition.

A sequence of small-format pictures likewise demands careful scrutiny. They show sceneries which unemotionally and randomly presented themselves to the artist in the 1990s, and which she captured in a series of Polaroid images. They remind us that brief moments which make the difference to life are all too often forgotten in favour of grand drama. Naomi Leshem vividly illustrates the transitory nature of such moments using a special technique whereby she detaches the topmost layer of the photograph and transfers this wafer-thin skin to watercolour paper. The pictures have a transparency that emphasizes the fragility of these instants and the ease with which they can be damaged through carelessness. Unlike conventional photographs, Polaroids are unique images from which no further prints can be made, and thus represent a single moment that will never return. The use of Polaroid is a departure from the large-format compositions that are characteristic of the artist’s work. Only when examined up close do they reveal all their details, for each photograph contains its own little world that is already past.

All of the works on show manifest a certain fragility, a thin skin that seeks to engage in dialogue with the discerning viewer. Whether the quiet tones that Naomi Leshem strikes in the exhibition die away into silence or culminate in a loud bang, is up to the beholder. For the moment, we prick up our ears and listen to the stories that Naomi Leshem’s pictures have to tell us.

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