

Suspended:

Lorraine Shemesh's Underwater States of Being

by Steve Nash

Since their inception in the early 1990s, Lorraine Shemesh's *Painted Pool* drawings and paintings have immersed viewers in a fluid, shifting world of underwater aquatics. It is a realm both familiar and alien, where swimmers amuse themselves but also participate in a weightless dance in which silence, isolation, and the distorting optics of refracted light and moving water disrupt our spatial and emotional equilibrium. At first, these compositions intrigued by their placement of the viewer in pools, above or below the water line, as a close-up observer of figures at play and of the surprising effects of perception-warping environmental conditions. In recent years, however, the series has evolved to a new level of complexity. An increased degree of abstraction in the handling of paint and interpretation of visual fact has led to scenarios at once more sensuous and somber, with action seemingly slowed down, bodies often severely cropped, and dazzling passages of liberated light and color dissolving our sense of the here and now. This evolution is not just the story of an experienced artist further honing her skills, it is also a journey into deeper psychological content and recalibrated formal ambitions. Along the way, a range of diverse influences has come into play, including the paintings of Edward Hopper and Jackson Pollock and Shemesh's own work with patterned ceramics. The present exhibition, combining recent paintings, drawings, and works in clay, is a strong measure of how far Shemesh's development has progressed.

The Beginnings

Starting well before her *Painted Pool* series, Shemesh produced a sizeable body of work in varied realist modes, dealing with a variety of themes including still lifes, figures, cityscapes, and interiors. Figuration was not the most obvious career path for a young artist in the 1970s, given the international prominence of minimalism, color field painting, and other forms of abstraction, but Shemesh explains that it was a natural course for her to take. She was classically trained at the College of Fine Arts at Boston University, working directly from life as the basis for her classes in painting, drawing, printmaking, and sculpture, and she credits her teachers for their influence, including James Weeks, the Bay Area figurative painter, who introduced her to the work of Richard Diebenkorn. In Diebenkorn's balancing of abstract and figurative styles she saw the possibilities of integration of these two modes, which for many at the time were considered diametrically opposed, and, as she puts it, learned the potential for "allowing the two directional forces to increase the power of each." She ignored the factional politics pitting one aesthetic stance against the other, and "simply made the work I wanted to make . . . Figuration is what juiced me!"¹ A brief review of a few key paintings from that era demonstrates the range of her interests.

Train from 1976 (fig. 1) shows a young woman reclining on a seat in a railway compartment with a window looking onto landscape rushing by. The draftsmanship underlying its composition, the fluid brushwork, and the construction of a complex spatial format with various converging diagonals and an inside/outside dynamic, all show an early confidence of handling. As Shemesh was working only from life at the time, she decided to buy a real train seat for full authenticity of

form in her studies. She says she had trouble resolving the landscape view until she found a reproduction of an Edward Hopper watercolor that she used for inspiration for the passage out the window.

Hopper's influence also appears in *Dusk* from 1982 (fig. 2), a cityscape painted from Shemesh's apartment window in New York. She notes that she was attracted by the underlying structural quality in Hopper's paintings—his use of basic geometric shapes for his compositional frameworks—a strategy apparent also in *Dusk*, where the apartment building across the street and surrounding forms are simplified into a planar grid of verticals and horizontals. The views through windows into empty apartments, whether consciously planned or not, also echo a favorite expressive device of Hopper's, his use of windows as apertures into or out of lonely spaces.

In her still life paintings, such as *Flip Flops* from 1986 (fig. 3) and *Bagels and Lox* from a little later, Shemesh moved her focus indoors, to colorful studies of everyday objects arrayed on table tops.² There is a clear nod here to the paintings of Wayne Thiebaud, work she knew very well from the time she was a student. *Flip Flops* and *Bagels and Lox* are first cousins to Thiebaud's brilliantly lit, thickly brushed studies of cakes, pies, canapés, other confections, and diverse household implements. Shemesh notes, however, that she was not particularly drawn to Thiebaud's brushwork, pointing out that the long, sinuous strokes in *Flip Flops* are more closely related to the flowing impasto strokes of Willem de Kooning. She does credit a different aspect of Thiebaud's work for encouragement with her soon-to-follow pool paintings, that is, the vertiginous views in his cityscapes and landscapes as exemplars of spatial distortion. As she began the pool compositions, “. . . the shift in vantage point was palpable and powerful. When I began to come up close to the figure in the early paintings in the water, foreshortening the form of the figure as in *Side Stroke* from 1994 (fig. 4), the use of space in my paintings became more energized.”

In the evolution from these early paintings to the pool pictures, an important intervening step came through her explorations within a different medium, that of textiles and quilting. As she was working on her cityscapes and still lifes, she was simultaneously working on a series of hand-appliquéd quilts with flat and brightly colored images of figures. She recounts, “Since these images were all imagined and flat, I felt fairly free to push and pull things around in a way that I was unaccustomed to when working from life . . . The last quilt I made was of an image of a swimming pool with figures in and around the pool.” This led to a small sketch that became the first study for her earliest pool painting, *Back Float*, completed in 1991 (fig. 5). It took a number of years for the idea of the pool paintings to come to fruition. The challenge was how to bridge the gap between direct observation of models and the greater degree of imagination involved in the new works. As she puts it, “It took me a long time to figure it out. . . I am still trying to figure it out!”

Weightlessness

Shemesh's earliest pool paintings, such as *Back Float* and *Side Stroke*, are visions of endless summers and *joie de vivre*. The atmosphere is that of a backyard pool party, with the fascinating distortions of underwater space, perspective, and form contributing to an escape from the normalcy of life. Although this mood belies the hard decisions that went into the creation of a totally new body of work, it is difficult to observe such scenes without physical and emotional empathy with the warmth of sunshine and the serene sensation of fluid movement. But a different emotion also began to emerge. In *Side Stroke*, the girl floating toward us beneath vibrant surface ripples of waves and light seems to have her eyes closed, as if lost in a state of suspended animation and feeling. The hand of her friend comes close to hitting her face, but she is oblivious

to this movement. While the boy is an emblem of color and action, she is defined by isolation, both physical and mental. Weightlessness here becomes part of the expressive character of the picture.

As a device in art, weightlessness has a longer history than might first be imagined, stretching back as far as Egyptian painted reliefs depicting soldiers falling through space, and continuing through an endless number of later apotheosis scenes. A particularly well-known formulation in modern art comes in Henri Matisse's great cutout installation of *The Swimming Pool*, now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.³ And it is an important part of twentieth-century scientific lore, through, for example, Einstein's realization which led to the theory of relativity, that free falling in gravity feels the same as floating in outer space with no gravity. Bodies suspended in outer space provide an apt corollary for Shemesh's figures floating in a weightless environment, with only the most gradual movements and at least the implication of reverie. It is at once a bodily and an out-of-body experience, with emotional ramifications that find parallels in the later pool paintings.

Process

Shemesh's methodology for generating her pool compositions is rooted in her early training. It consists of drawing from models in her studio, developing the compositions through different types of studies that become increasingly more finished, and finally transitioning to canvas. For her models, she invites professional dancers to pose. Shemesh herself began ballet lessons at an early age and still attends dance classes, and she has long admired the grace, energy, and physical beauty of professional dancers. With their sinuous bodies and tremendous elasticity, they make perfect models for the pool paintings, for which the poses they must strike are often strenuous. Shemesh draws them both standing and lying down, and sometimes takes them into pools and captures their underwater positions with a camera.

Two drawings in the current exhibition for the painting entitled *Tilt* illustrate stages in the evolution of that particular work; an almost abstract sketch (*Tilt*, 2015, p. 26) plotting the basic forms in the painting, and a finished drawing (*Tilt*, 2015, p. 46) done with powdered graphite using an oil emulsion wash to bind the graphite powder. As an indication of the abundance of studies that go into each painting, Shemesh started with this gesture drawing of the model in her studio, then took that drawing and the model to a pool where the model posed in the water with an inner tube. The pose was then repeated back in the studio, supported by a chair to get the right spinal alignment. During the evolution of a painting, still other types of drawings appear, including anatomical studies, directional studies of light patterns, and sometimes colored-pencil renderings. It is a highly deliberate generative method, involving a gradual construction process and long periods of time for each composition to reach fruition.

Her early sketches of models, done with fast and fluid strokes, are particularly important in this progression (*Bridge*, 2011, p. 20). Shemesh generally works on these drawings over and over again, concentrating on the dynamism of line and form. She says this is a way to "get movement into the paintings," and she is very attentive to keeping these movements alive as a composition matures.

At the other extreme of the development stream are the large black and white finished drawings, which, it could be said, have two lives (e.g., *Totem*, 2014, p. 43). On the one hand, they serve as preparatory studies for the paintings. Based on them, Shemesh is able to plot each painting's basic components; although sometimes the paintings and drawings progressed simultaneously, one informing the other. In addition to their preparatory function, however,

these drawings have an independent life of their own. They are marvels of tonal and textural variation as well as chiaroscuro lighting effects. Shemesh's use of oil emulsion and graphite, not a common drawing technique, allows her to work the sheets much as she does her paintings. "The oil emulsion wash binds the graphite powder to the ground support (a sheet of mounted mylar) . . . It keeps the graphite wet a very long time, allowing me to push it around easily with a brush or stick, and has the quality of fluidity that I am seeking in the paintings."

Without the luminosity of color, these drawings have a somber complexity. The eye is not stimulated as sharply. Instead, it meanders slowly, indulging in the subtle ranges of tone and surface treatment. Whereas color helps define precisely the forms in the compositions and their positions in space, grisaille presentations blur definition slightly, leaving certain passages more ambiguous and, hence, more abstract. *Totem* (p. 43) is an outstanding example. The floating figure at the bottom of the composition seems to merge with an upward spiral of warped reflections shooting off into space, leaving us to try to separate solid form from optical effect and, finally, to enjoy the dissolution of the figure into a beautifully nuanced abstraction of fluid black and white shapes. Such works represent some of the finest draftsmanship in all of contemporary art.

The Later Paintings

At some point around the year 2000, Shemesh's handling of the pool paintings began to take a different direction. Asked about this development, she provided a clear answer: "A simple phrase pretty much sums this issue up for me: control and surrender. I have spent a lifetime building form with all that entails. At a certain point it became clear to me that the closed-off contained forms I was working with needed to be opened, broken, and exploded . . . I began to turn the painting upside down when I worked, to see how the movement worked from different vantage points, and then I put the painting on the floor, turned the brush around, using the stick end to paint with, and began splashing the surface of the canvas, which opened up the edges of the form. So, in other words, I began to address the conflict between controlled analysis and surrendering to the emotion of the process."

She credits the work of Jackson Pollock as having a particular influence on this new perspective, noting that there appeared around this time a Pollock show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

What does Shemesh mean when she says that her forms needed to be "opened, broken, and exploded"? A side-by-side alignment of earlier and later versions of the pool theme provides a visual answer. Compare, for example, *Back Float* (fig. 5) to *Surrender* (p. 17), one of the more extreme examples of Shemesh's "explosion" of her figures. In *Back Float*, the figures, despite the morphing action of light passing through water, are concretely plastic forms, discrete and self-contained. Contours are clear and we have a sense of their weight and mass. In *Surrender*, the artist has indeed surrendered "to the emotion of the process," giving way to her instincts to almost totally dissolve the solidity of her floating figure and absorb him or her into a spectral array of optical stimuli: rippling highlights, refracted details, passages of blazing light and incandescent color. The painting is a swirling tide pool of color, light, and dynamic brushwork, pulling us into an almost totally abstract visual experience.

Many artists before Shemesh explored the transitional states between representation and abstraction, between the physical and ethereal, or the real and the surreal. In his famous storm scenes, J.M.W. Turner melted ships and landscape into swirling maelstroms of climatological assault. Claude Monet's water lilies in the later of his garden paintings from Giverny dissolve into

diaphanous clouds of light and color (fig. 6), and the dynamism celebrated by Italian Futurists transformed bodies into pure states of energy (fig. 7).

Shemesh's studies of reflection and refraction chart similar transformations. She reports that she enjoyed the liberating effect of this increasing reliance on imagination and invention. Far from rote translations from her highly finished black and white drawings, the paintings offered new levels of exploration, as indicated when she speaks of turning them upside down, viewing them from different angles, and splashing them with paint. It is important to note that Shemesh's work with ceramics, as well represented in the current exhibition, also had an influence on the development of her paintings. (See the artist's introductory statement in this catalogue.) She notes that her physical manipulation of clay—kneading and shaping it with her hands—helped stimulate her interest in the abstract patterns that break up her figures in the paintings. “Suddenly the controlled development of the figures was surrendered to the dissolution of the form as the shapes melted and the refractions, both observed and imagined, became a more prominent part of the compositions.”

She further says that her engrossment in the abstract elements of pattern, texture, and color could sometimes go too far. A concern for the basic underlying structure of the paintings—part of what she had learned much earlier from Edward Hopper's simple geometric shapes—would cause her to simplify passages and to “pull back on the abstraction,” as she puts it. Again we hear of that balance between figuration and abstraction that had intrigued her as a student.

It is a particular pleasure to view these later pool paintings close-up and explore not just the brilliant color and dancing patterns of rippling water but also the almost sculptural tactility of many of the abstract passages (*Spots* detail, 2012, p. 66), where paint sits up with strong physical presence. It is alternately crusty, smoothly viscous, pushed, or splattered. Gestural strokes on the surface of the water match turbulence below and radiate in all directions. The resulting surface topography of three-dimensional forms and interspersed colors, with its roots in Abstract Expressionism, also interestingly has much in common with those water lily paintings by Monet already referenced (fig. 6). In both instances we participate vicariously in the physical build-up of molten paint and feel the action of the artist's hand.

As the formal qualities in the pool paintings became more visually intense over time, their emotional nature became more complex. It is an idiosyncratic quality of the later pictures that they can be interpreted in two diametrically opposite ways, as sensuously pleasurable experiences or as solemn underwater ballets with disquieting overtones. The first reaction is most immediate, but the second grows in strength the longer one contemplates their submerged dramas.

Weightlessness, as previously mentioned, plays a major role in the expressive resonance of these works. It is a question of balance. As one floats underwater with eyes closed, there is no spatial reference. It is easy to become disoriented, losing track of what is up and what is down and one's depth under the surface. Silence and isolation prevail, and perhaps even a sensation of danger. As we look at Shemesh's figures straining upward toward the surface, it is hard not to feel, at least fleetingly, an impression of drowning. Just as outer space can be a beautiful or alien environment, so too can the world underwater.

Over-reading such prompts is entirely possible, although the artist herself acknowledges the presence of a moody tenor while disclaiming any strategic intent to create it.⁴ To some degree it is a by-product of formal decisions Shemesh made in the development of the series. While the early compositions generally feature two or more figures at play, recent works tend to focus on

one solitary figure, so that a sense of loneliness, if not entrapment, inhabits the works just as surely as it does those paintings by Edward Hopper that Shemesh has long admired. Faces are now rarely shown, making the scenes more impersonal and focusing them more on the optical sensations and the motion of the bodies, which sometimes has the look of struggle. Figures now are often severely cropped, so only truncated bodies or divided fragments are seen, creating an eerie sensation. Space is wobbly, orientation is disrupted, and existential states are tripped-up.

Looked at this way, the pool paintings attain greater psychological depth, but however one reads their emotional character, they present exuberant adventures in looking and feeling. Shemesh's work in this arena has engendered numerous followers, but none attain the same fully integrated qualities of sensual stimulation, sure-handed compositional control, and luscious paint handling. In many ways, this long series of works, with all their formal and iconographic developments, is the defining signature of Shemesh's highly productive career. When asked "Where to from here?" and whether she might even eventually move into purely abstract works, she replies, "We have to wait and see. The paintings will show me the way."

Endnotes

1 All quotes from the artist in this essay derive from a lengthy series of discussions and email exchanges between us in the early months of 2016. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Lorraine for her generous, forthright, and articulate answers to my many questions.

2 For *Bagels and Lox*, see *Lorraine Shemesh: Liquid States*, exh. cat. (New York: Allan Stone Gallery, 2004), 8.

3 See John Elderfield, *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), cat. no. 406.

4 Donald Kuspit, in a commentary on Shemesh's paintings of dancers from around 2007–08, found her coupled performers to be "fraught with tension" and "unsettling" in their existential ambiguity; emotional states that have parallels in Shemesh's underwater ballets. See *Lorraine Shemesh: Intersections*, exh. cat. (New York: Allan Stone Gallery, 2009), 7.