

Orit Hofshi: Deep Time

by Sarah Kirk Hanley | May 17, 2019



Orit Hofshi, *Laver* (2019), carved pinewood panels, woodcut, rubbing and ink on handmade Kozo & Abaca paper, 105 x 320 inches. As shown in the installation “Orit Hofshi: Pulse,” Wilfrid Israel Museum, Kibbutz HaZore’a, Israel, 17 May – 26 Oct, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, RI.

Orit Hofshi is one of a number of contemporary artists who embrace printmaking processes in the production of expansive works that are materially visceral, politically smart and emotionally compelling. In the vein of Anselm Kiefer, Christiane Baumgartner, Swoon and Nicola López, Hofshi employs the tools and techniques of relief printmaking and matrices on an expansive scale, and like them she uses her work to address the moral and political complexities of her cultural inheritance. For Hofshi as an Israeli, this encompasses not just ethnic conflict but the fundamentals of land, water and time.

“Pulse,” Hofshi’s recent installation at the Wilfrid Israel Museum, included three large works: *Aurora*, *Laver* and *Doubt*, each depicting natural water sources. While founded in the act of cutting wood, none is simply “a woodcut.” At more than eight feet tall and twelve feet wide, *Aurora* is the smallest of them. Lit from behind, the translucent handmade Kozo and Abaca paper glows with Hofshi’s image of a narrow, dry riverbed with rocky outcroppings on either side. The other two works, vast in scale, are built from a combination of carved wood panels and printed woodcuts. In *Doubt*, a blackened bas-relief wood carving is placed to the left of a horizontal relief print that shows two people navigating a marshland. In the mammoth *Laver*, two oversized woodcut prints flank 12 carved-and-inked woodblock panels, altogether depicting a desolate, rock-strewn landscape with three small springs of water. (In ancient Israel, a laver was a basin containing water for ritual ablutions.) The bottom panels, depicting the largest and most prominent of the pools, jut into the room at a slope, as if inviting the viewer to step into the



Orit Hofshi, *Disillusionment* (2005), monotype, transfer drawing and woodcut on paper, 50 x 38 inches. Courtesy the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, RI.

composition. An audio track by Roy Yamaguchi, commissioned for the project, filled the space with sounds of footsteps on the earth, a heartbeat, heavy breathing, clanging and scraping, overlaid with wind, rain, distant thunder and sonorous bells. All three works demonstrate Hofshi's gift for descriptive drawing with a knife and her predilection for weathered surfaces. (She prefers to print by hand rather than with a press, which allows her more control over the nuances of the image and results in a rough irregularity.) Together with Yamaguchi's score of human exertion and stormy weather, they center the viewer's attention on water as a vital resource.

"Pulse" was inspired by the current West Bank dispute between Palestinians and Jewish settlers over access to natural springs, important water sources in an arid place. The subject is local, but as always Hofshi's aim is to place "difficult historical events in a universal human context."² Hofshi has studied and worked in Argentina, China, England, Iceland, Ireland and the United States, and in each location has found resonance between local histories and topographies and those of her homeland. Her landscapes are pictures of nowhere and everywhere, amalgams of places she has lived and traveled.



Orit Hofshi, *Upon this Bank and Shoal of Time* (2006), woodcut, ink drawing and watercolors on paper and pine wood panels, 102 x 400 inches. Courtesy the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, RI.

Born in 1959, Hofshi hit her stride relatively late, completing her master's degree in 2002 after concentrating on raising a family. Her early mature works show experimentation with various techniques, themes and formats—relief prints, monotype, drawing and rubbing, landscape and figuration. In a black-and-white woodcut/monotype titled *Disillusionment* (2005), a man crouches on desolate ground beneath a dark sky, projecting a nonspecific sense of loss. His isolation and oddly hollow appearance are suggestive of evanescence and mortality, while the landscape—printed in heavy, expressive woodblock lines—appears solid and unchanging.

Though more than four feet tall, *Disillusionment* is diminutive compared with Hofshi's work to come, which quickly expanded to architectural scale. She also started to include the wood itself in her artworks: *Datum Collectanea* (2005) and *Kairos* (2006), for example, were entirely composed on wood panels. The former was a breakthrough work—an ink and acrylic drawing on 18 wood panels, together more than eight feet high and 35 feet long. It pictures a cinematic expanse of rocky coastline, at the edge of which stands a small cluster of standing people, perhaps stranded, perhaps lost.

The following year she produced a monumental 24-panel print-and-drawing amalgamation, *Upon This Bank and Shoal of Time* (2006), picturing a solitary man in a sprawling landscape. Its pictorial elements derive from materials gathered during a residency at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation in County Mayo, Ireland, in 2004. The male figure was based on a photograph she found in the local newspaper covering a memorial service for a victim of sectarian violence, while the ruined abbey at upper left and the forest at right come from snapshots she took while hiking in the area. The Irish curator Patrick T. Murphy sees the crumbled abbey as symbolic of religion's failure to provide meaningful solace, and considers the overall composition to be an operatic work that "frustrates our expectation of the epic" through its impoverished landscape and single anti-hero. Andrea Packard, writing in conjunction with Hofshi's 2011 exhibition at Swarthmore College, views the potbellied mourner as a peer of William Kentridge's protagonists, "weighed down by middle age, harsh experiences, and cultural disconnection." Hofshi herself explains the figure as representing the need for societal groups to assume personal accountability for tragedy. The man's posture of reflection struck her: "If we could only point the finger toward ourselves and ask 'what wrong did we do?' rather than point it at the other." Though the funeral was in Ireland, she sees this notion of accountability as a universal, stretching from 20th-century Germany (Hofshi finds kinship with Käthe Kollwitz as well as Kiefer) to 21st-century Israel. The title points us again to the situation of the West Bank, which Hofshi has described as one of "mutual terrorism."



Orit Hofshi, *If the Tread is an Echo* (2009), woodcut, ink drawing and stone tusche rubbing on carved pine wood panels and handmade Kozo and Abaca papers, 136 x 287 x 36 inches. Courtesy the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, RI.

In the 17-foot long *Terra Incognita* (2007), Hofshi abandoned the figure entirely, panning from a mountainous lake to a babbling brook. (Her compositions often seem to read from right to left, like Hebrew and Arabic script.) And where the panels of *Datum Collectanea* and *Upon This Bank* align in coherent rectangles, *Terra Incognita* is laid out in an H-formation, with a horizontal center between vertical flanks. The landscape—a response to visiting Iceland, with volcanic rock formations and abundant fresh water—is composed of grease-pencil rubbings from woodcut matrices, an alternative mode of printing the block that she has sometimes used. Hofshi sees rubbings as recording the passage of time and labor. The image accrues meaning through repetitive action: “on the third, fourth, fifth or sixth round, [my monotonous] circular movement becomes very visual.” She finds a connection to the conceptual land artist Richard Long, whose documentation of walks through nature calls attention to landscape through actions repeated over time.

If the Tread is an Echo (2009), shown at Philagrafika in 2010, marks a further disruption of the standard picture plane.) She arranged 14 prints, matrices and wood panels from earlier compositions on the wall in a kind of arch emanating from the floor, and built a central armature that held a bank of carved wood panels away from the wall, allowing viewers to position

themselves in the opening. A backlit relief print depicting open water was suspended from the ceiling and illuminated, calling attention to the texture of the handmade paper and carved lines of Hofshi's composition. The blackened wood panels at the center here have since become a common motif in Hofshi's work. Some are blank, while others are carved and appear printable, though Hofshi regards them as bas-relief sculptural objects rather than matrices. The *Philagraphika* piece is a meditation on printmaking itself—the titular “echo” denotes its reproducibility.

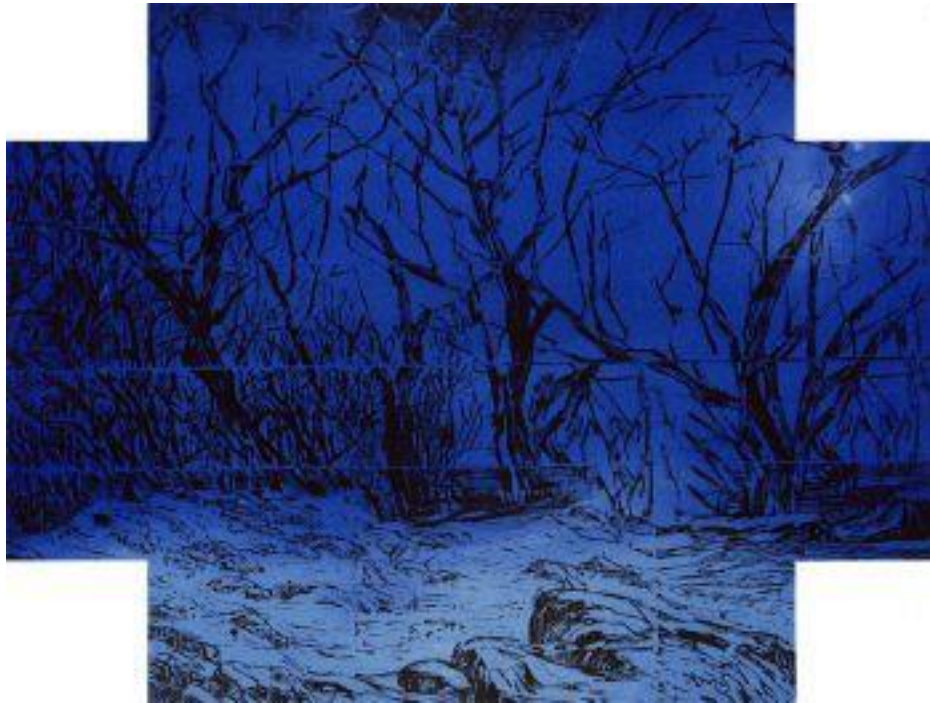


Orit Hofshi, *Convergence* (2011), woodcuts, carved pine wood boards, metal basins of oil and wooden viewing platform, 240 x 240 x 140 inches. Installation view at the List Gallery, Swarthmore College, 8 Sept – 22 Oct, 2011. Courtesy the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, RI.

If the Tread is an Echo was followed by *Convergence* (2011), Hofshi's first fully immersive installation piece, which occupied a small room in her exhibition at Swarthmore. In the center of the darkened space, Hofshi suspended a four-part woodcut depicting a landslide. Behind it, in the recesses of the room, was a chaotic topographical scene formed by the blackened printing blocks that had been used to make the images, arranged at random angles to the floor or lying upon it. A small viewing platform allowed only one or two viewers to see the work at any given moment. Four large rectangular reflecting pools below spanned the space between the platform and the woodcut objects, casting the viewer as an actor in this “troubled environment.”

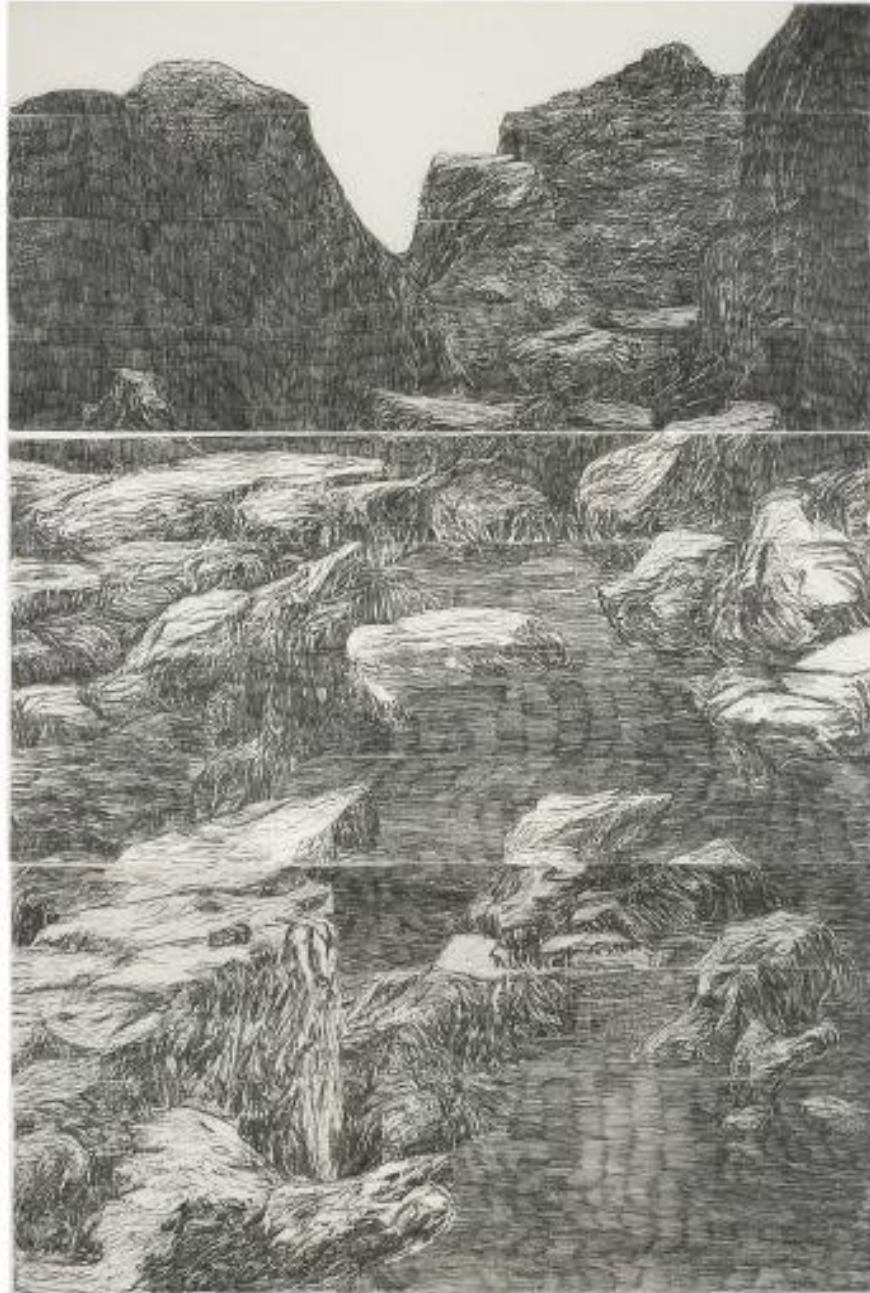
In both these installations, the wood panels assert themselves as aesthetic objects in their own right, but they also present a conundrum: they call attention to the printing process, even as their presence preempts printmaking's usual goal—the production of an edition. That said, Hofshi is not averse to the idea of editions, and she has periodically collaborated with print workshops to produce them. In 2008, she made four woodcuts with Druckgrafik Rössler in Leipzig (there she met Christiane Baumgartner; the two have maintained a close connection). In 2010 she created six etchings at the Gottesman Etching Center in Israel, which marked her first forays into the

use of strong color. Hofshi had previously limited her palette to black, brown, gray and the white of the paper—a restriction that she felt honored the history of printmaking and presented a useful challenge. Inspired in part by the prints of Edvard Munch and Helen Frankenthaler, however, she experimented with chromatic inking in works such as the cruciform landscape *Glade*, in which swift black marks are set within a numinous blue. (The image was also printed in a black-and-white version titled *Mist*.) Most recently she made a color woodcut, *Huddle* (2018), at the Guanlan Original Printmaking Base in Shenzhen, China.



Orit Hofshi, *Glade* (2010), woodcut, photo etching and aquatint, 19 3/4 x 25 5/8 in. Printed and published by The Gottesman Etching Center – Kibbutz Cabri, Israel, edition of 6. Courtesy the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, RI.

The works she produces in her studio are nevertheless unique objects, and her inclusion of artifacts of process calls attention to drawing, carving, inking and rubbing as highly indirect and time-consuming ways of producing an image. The usual rationale for this effort is the edition, but Hofshi sees her matrices instead as a means of creating a library of stock images—templates to use again and again, in shifting contexts, similar to the methods of Nancy Spero (whom she cites as an influence) and other artists. The two vertical sections of *Terra Incognita*, for example, reappear in two smaller stand-alone pieces, *Telluric* and *Scoria* (both 2007). One can also see such repurposing as reenacting perennial human behaviors. In Israel, Hofshi has often explored Tels—earth mounds containing strata of ancient civilizations—and was made conscious of the constant construction and destruction of the built environment.



Orit Hofshi, *Scoria* (2007), grease pencil rubbing from an original matrix, 104 x 69 inches. Courtesy the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, RI.

In her 2017 work *Time...Thou Ceaseless Lackey to Eternity* the astute viewer can identify multiple blocks repeated from earlier compositions. There is the young girl, who appears twice, walking with her head down as if searching for something on the ground. The standing woman looking out at us from the center has been appearing in Hofshi's work since 2004; the artist describes her as a kind of witness. She is one of a number of stock characters Hofshi has developed over the years, often inspired by people she knows. In *Wrestle* (2016), for instance,

this standing woman is paired with the figure of a pointing man, modeled on her friend the artist Daniel Heyman. None of these, however, are intended as portraits; they are meant as anonymous representations of humanity. The rubble-banked building facade at the left of *Time...* first appeared in the 2008 woodcut *Resilience (Holešov, 1944)*, where it stands like a bulwark against surging waves of rubble, and again two years later, at the center of the triptych *Steadfastness (2010)*, where the printed debris is reiterated on either side like a stammer. The image was drawn from a 1944 photograph of the sole remaining wall of the historic New Synagogue in the Czech town of Holešov, where Hofshi's mother was from; the town's Jewish population was almost entirely annihilated in the Holocaust. For Hofshi, the standing wall represents not just tragedy but resilience.



Orit Hofshi, *Time... Thou Ceaseless Lackey to Eternity* (2007), woodcut, rubbing, colored pencils and oil sticks on handmade Kozo and Abaca papers, 80 x 166 inches. Courtesy the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, RI.

Packard wrote of Hofshi that “addressing the prevalence of violence and dislocation, she asserts the need for reflection, persistence, and understanding.” Her expansive sense of time and her preoccupation with land use reflect the realities of her native land and its millennia of territorial struggles; of use and reuse by successive peoples. The water dispute that inspired “Pulse” is a cautionary tale: while this particular situation is being played out on the fraught stage of the West Bank, water rights around the world are increasingly being weaponized as climate change destabilizes weather patterns. Hofshi’s installation exemplifies her aspirations: providing perspective on human suffering, holding a mirror to those on both sides of a conflict, insisting that natural resources and the built environment be shared and protected. “Only from a position of humility,” she explains, “can a person understand his place, his relations to other people and the world around him. It takes a measure of modesty and respect for society and the environment.”