

ARTFORUM

Bracha L. Ettinger

CALLICOON FINE ARTS

“Painting is not about representation,” according to Bracha L. Ettinger, but that doesn’t mean it’s about abstraction either. Her work registers the ambivalence of the image, photographic in origin—its way of insisting on its own presence while seemingly putting itself under erasure through a destabilizing instability of focus or refusal of clarity. The resulting sense of vagueness or veiling might recall Gerhard Richter’s famous blur, though Ettinger’s defocusing produces an effect that’s different than the one conjured by the German master, who once said, “I blur things so that they do not look artistic or craftsmanlike but technological, smooth and perfect. I blur things to make all the parts a closer fit. Perhaps I also blur out the excess of unimportant information.” Ettinger’s blur, on the other hand, seems to result from a determined, if not obsessive, desire to return, again and again, to the charged image, to rehearse it endlessly, to assuage something by going over it repeatedly until it dissolves. The images Ettinger works from are of women and children about to be slaughtered in the Nazi death camps. Her blurring of them is neither tactically banalizing, à la Richter, nor seductively sensational, as with the work of Francis Bacon; nor does



Bracha L. Ettinger,
Ophelia and Eurydice
no. 1, 2001–2009, oil
on canvas, 20 ¼ × 8".

it represent a determination not to see, as does László Nemes's 2015 film *Son of Saul*, in which the protagonist's face dominates the screen while everything around him is usually out of focus, as if his refusal to look at the horror around him is his only hope for surviving it. In Ettinger's case, rather, it's as if her effort was constantly to get closer to the image, so close that it finally reveals itself at some cellular or molecular level rather than as a tangible surface.

In any case, as Griselda Pollock has said, Ettinger's work "involves de-archiving, de-documenting and de-photographing," and so by the same token (despite Pollock's description of the results as emphatically "*abstract paintings*") it would be more plausible to refer to them as "de-representing"—the present participle in all these cases implying that the action has not been completed but is ongoing. Ettinger's recent paintings begin with images printed onto canvas, even though the viewer can no longer make out the traces of the underlying imprint and experiences only the austere radiance of the light refracted through layer upon layer of translucent oil paint applied in delicate interweavings that take years to realize. (The earliest of the six canvases in this show, *Ophelia and Eurydice no. 1*, was dated 2001–2009, while the most recent, *No title yet*, was completed relatively speedily in 2013–15.) A psychoanalyst as well as an artist, Ettinger knows that it takes a long time to dig back into the past.

Along with the paintings, the exhibition included a multitude of drawings, insistently organic and mostly from the past few years, and notebooks dated from 2000 through the present. The latter are dense not only with pictorial marks and material traces but also with writing in English, French, and Hebrew. The English inscriptions, at least, are full of curious wordplay, featuring resonant neologisms such as *WITHNESSING*, perhaps the best description of the artist's own effort. We are often enjoined against "aestheticizing" atrocity, as if beauty constituted a refusal to recognize reality. Ettinger finds beauty in the attempt to allay the horror she never stops approaching. There's something to be learned from that.

—Barry Schwabsky