

The Trees Weep for Rain: Thoughts on oblivion, partings, and longing

Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea... oblivion“¹ is the life force of memory and remembrance is its product” – Marc Augé

Yudit Varol, born in Edirne, Turkey in 1933, now lives on Kibbutz Lehavot Habashan in the Galilee. Paralyzed after a stroke, she can no longer share her memories with her granddaughter, artist Yael Serlin. The state of deep forgetting where her grandmother now dwells has led Serlin on a “roots’ journey” of return to both her personal and collective root. Yael embarked on a journey tracing the Jewish .community of Edirne, Yudit’s birthplace, which has no one to make its narrative heard

Serlin’s artworks employ various means to reflect the longing for the memories shrouded in oblivion. The exhibition attempts to examine how personal memory and collective memory are shaped by the act of imagining, at the foundation of which lies the act of forgetting. Both mechanisms are shaped by images comprised of authentic components, events that actually took place, and from imagined parts. However, we must differentiate between the two: in contrast to collective memory, in which the act of forgetting is applied to conceal, silence, and exclude narratives likely to disturb the collective ethos and the hegemony, the mechanism of forgetting and repressing serves as a defense mechanism protecting the .individual from trauma, forever leaving its imprint on the soul and the memory

The exhibition title, “The Trees Weep for Rain,” is taken from a Ladino *piyyut* – a liturgical poem – by Haim Yapaci, known as Haim Effendi, a renowned liturgical poet born in Edirne. The melody playing in the music box installed in the center of the exhibition space evokes the trees’ deep longing for the rain that forgot to quench their thirst. During the Shoah, Greek Jews deported to Auschwitz adopted this *piyyut* as their hymn of yearning for their lost homeland.

The images in the exhibition are themselves sites of oblivion, moving between visibility and disappearance. The projected images fade away when the light disappears. The plaster hands will crumble and decompose as time passes. The board at the center of the exhibition becomes a surface on which Serlin draws and erases, exposes and covers up, forming connections and eroding them. Her actions on the surface simulate the way in which remembered images are woven into the soul, filtered

¹ Marc Augé, *Oblivion*, Trans. M. de Jager, and J. E. Young. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

through imagination and reality. Through this action, Serlin corresponds with Freud's article of 1925 on the "Mystic writing pad" in which he used metaphors of writing and erasing to describe the relationship between the conscious and subconscious.² Thus, Serlin follows other artists such as Cy Twombly, who created a series of untitled drawings on board (1968), or Tacita Dean ("More or Less," 2011).

Serlin traveled to Edirne where she also visited the Jewish cemetery. She was surprised by the anonymous portraits on the gravestones with images denoting the profession of the departed. Serlin selected the image of scissors which she then had digitally embroidered in gold thread on a white curtain. The golden scissors seem to call up the spirit of the dead, ghostly traces of Yudit's birthplace, while she is shown still alive, breathing, but just barely. Yudit's image flickers through the film screened alongside the curtain, depicting her from the back as her granddaughter films her.

The image of the golden scissors brings to mind the Fayum portraits and John Berger's poetic essay about them.³ The portraits were unearthed in the late 19th century in a necropolis near the city of Fayum, Egypt—paintings on panels meant to be placed on the subject's mummy for burial. Berger posited that the relevance of the Fayum portraits to our time lies, among other reasons, in the experience of migration, displacement, and separation characterizing the 20th century. He assumes a special intimacy between painter and subject originating in the preparation for death, "preparation which would ensure that the soul remains." The painting embodied a promise of continuity, similar to the continuity ensured by Serlin's art, based on the anguish of sudden longing for something that no longer exists.

Gaby Hamburg Fima, Curator

Yael Serlin, Artist

² Sigmund Freud, "A note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad,' *General Psychological Theory*, (1925), 207–212.

³ John Berger, "The Fayum portraits," *Portraits: John Berger on Artists*, Tom Overton, ed., (Verso, 2015).

