

RAWART GALLERY

Eran Wolkowski | *Mirage*

Solo show

June 13 – July 20, 2019

Talk of the Town

Tal Niv

*"The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough."*¹

1. Eran Wolkowski, a man who is an artist, walks home from his studio, and back, every day, taking pictures of the street with his phone; Back in the studio he takes plywood and industrial paint, and looking at the photo, he recreates the burning hot city, with its young moving bodies. They stand tall or look at their phones. Some are rushing, some are waiting for their bus to arrive. Painted with brown, red, yellow, orange color stains – a mass of youth, indifferent (to him, not to each other, as it seems). From this urban vortex – suddenly a face emerges. A dog's face.

Is there a "proper" way to draw a dog? No.² But there are some touching possibilities to do so: The beautiful, black eyes of a white dog – one of many in Wolkowski's new series, *Mirage* – looks right at us. Blue and pink stains around them and a coiled nose in between. It has three legs. It does not qualify to be a *mirage* on its own: It is not an effect of multiplying, nor a multiplied object, with one reflection or more. No. The dog is singular, a being that seems to be living inside the painting, looking back at Wolkowski, "recognizing" him.

It is worthwhile dwelling on the dogs – those led by a leash and those who are not, in Wolkowski's painted city. First of all, because Wolkowski has painted animals before – cows, specifically – emotively but not sentimentally, in his earlier series, depicting agricultural landscapes showing and dairy farms. Dogs are domesticated pets, unlike cows, which are domesticated but are certainly not pets. Dogs are both pets-companions – a sign of man's alienation from nature and a deep-rooted need to co-live with animals. In his influential essay "Why Look at Animals",³ John Berger referred to dogs, as part of his discussion of the innate paradox of modern-capitalistic living: Animals are both marginalized and anthropomorphized at once/The less we see animals in the wild, or even at farm, the more we eradicate real animals, to the point of extinction – the more we attribute "pest" our own qualities in our representations of them (film, cartoons, etc.) Berger simply puts it as a truism: "...pets come to resemble their masters or mistresses. They are creatures of their owner's way of life". Man's best friend (best but not equal) lives with him in a small space while, isolated from other dogs, neutered, fed with processed industrial food. This best friend is in a state of symbiosis with his/its owner, reflects the owner's characteristics and echoing the owner's love. Berger notably further shows the cruelest form of marginalization of animals is putting them on display at zoos. Dogs are slightly better off than they are epistemologically added to the category of "family".

In *Mirage*, dogs are shown to be an integral part of the street view and of the Tel-Avivian lifestyle (Tel Aviv's dogs-humans ratio is one of the highest in the world – 1:17). But Wolkowski does notice them, as an object of his artistic attention and fondness. They are not marginal to him but rather stand out, painted with precise and personal tenderness. Within this painting phase, on the current step on which Wolkowski is standing – a certain tendency towards abstract expressionism – the dogs belong in the figurative-lyrical polar of his work.

2. Like the dogs, who are new to Wolkowski's depictions of a city yet echo some of his previous sensibilities – *Mirage* includes few images of the "empty" city which echoes Wolkowski's beautiful, subtle early works. These series showed an empty city, painted from afar, usually from a high point of view, white curvaceous buildings. It was his

1 Ezra Pound, *In a Station of the Metro*, 1913.

2 Consider, for example, Picasso's dogs drawings.

3 John Berger, "Why Look at Animals", *About Looking*, 1980.

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Eugène Atget-ous paintings, if we were to borrow from urban photography jargon. The French photographer showed early 20th century Paris as a ghosted crime scene, a lyric phantom.

Wolkowski is somewhat a school of his own, but in the background of his current past and “Empty city” painting lays a spectrum and a corpus of local Tel-Aviv paintings. It runs the gamut from Nahum Gutman 1930s’ Tel Aviv beach and harbor paintings to today’s “The New Barbizon”, a five-women-painters collective who paints mostly the immigrant’s communities and anti-heroic street scene done on the spot. Wolkowski’s Tel Aviv was always suspiciously quiet. Nothing like the “rattling, noisy tin swing” described by poet Meir Wieseltier. For Wolkowski, painted Tel Aviv was, until now, a world made of buildings with curved balconies, alienated and familiar at the same time and most importantly vacant from people. It was, in fact, echoing with an unnatural silence.

And now all of a sudden, a new street bursts into Wolkowski’s pictorial frame: Allenby. Specifically, its southern end with its hipsters, immigrants, refugees, up and coming youths – old and new all coming together. Allenby of buses, food markets, an array of small authentic shops, smallish business and new cafés, as one can learn from the painted sign “Carmi Verner Café”, located on Allenby 95. A frontally-painted city, not from above nor from afar. Since *Mirage* is based on photographs, one could think of the city Wolkowski sees as the same one Berry Friedlander saw in his early series of photographs, like *Kasit*, documenting the iconic café on Dizengoff street in the early ’80s, or *Friday*, composition photography of scenes from Sheinkin square done in the early 2000’s (series preceding Friedlander magical digital compositions). Furthermore, one cannot think of street photography without acknowledging Canadian artist Jeff Wall’s, “near-documentary”, well-staged large-scale works, especially *Mimic* (1982). In this life size lightbox, Wall re-staged a scene in which a man on the street is gesturing a rude racial gesture toward another person, mocking him. This seminal work demonstrates how street photography, in a broad sense, is a net that is cast into the world: fishing naturally created choreography performed by strangers living together. City life is arguably the most intense, collective experience of this current moment in history. Therefore, when Wolkowski calls his exhibition a *Mirage* he is not just referring to the optical effect of the multiplication of figures – but also to the temperature which caused the visual effect. Wolkowski’s street is hence painted “hot”. It’s not empty anymore, not blue and cold but rather flaming, crowded, breathing, busy, dirty and dense.

3. Wolkowski’s streets are busy – but what is who is the object on his artistic attention? The answer is in plain sight. Women. Occupying their space without folding or limiting themselves to decorum. Women everywhere. An ongoing movement so powerful that Wolkowski cannot restrain himself from painting. Even though his Allenby features young men, boys and couples, *Mirage* has a focal point in women: stand in a frontal row, like in a commercial ad for Castro jeans, with short, tight, red pants, sandals, little tank tops, short skirts. A female bicycle rider (the bikes brilliantly depicted from the front) lay her flip-flopped foot on short poll, her knee shows from underneath her dress. She is not self-conscious; her gesture is not timid. This is a young people’s city. It shows in their glowing full heads of hair, in their clothes and in their vital body poses; in the way they are crossing the street with a can of soft drink in their hand. An abundant city, like the women’s hips on the bus stop. Abundant like the figure of the woman with a black backpack hanging over her grey top. Wolkowski depicts her in profile – faceless, as if he is weighing abstract expressionism over realism. Behind her, in the gap between her and the guy on the right, the plywood surface is covered with a jet of a feverish yellow paint. A golden projectile raw material. Wolkowski does not meddle with the crowd. He stands in front of it – or his own photograph of it – and looks: At the skinny blond and her friend, who wears a tight short jean. At the one holding her cell phone so intensely focused on it, as if another “self” is locked inside the device. Holding it like some of the men hold their dog leashes. Wolkowski looks at that – and he rejoices. No more cold, vacant and somewhat soothing pretty city, but a warm, alluring and a vibrant one. A new mirage.