

Pavel Wolberg looks at things from above. Yes, like God. Now he has reached perfection.

Precisely because he does not pretend to be fixing the world with his photographs, great art emerges under the hands of Pavel Wolberg, as you can see in his best exhibition yet - 'Panoramas'

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Pavel Wolberg, Hagor, Mehla'f Kessem, Israel, 2014. As absurd as life itself. Photo credit: courtesy of the artist and Galleria Dvir Tel Aviv / Brussels / Paris

We may have sung the praises of Pavel Wolberg in this section in the past, but first of all, not since 2019, and besides, his current exhibition places an ultimate peak to his achievements. "Poetic power", "magnificent battle shock" and "the man who is apparently able to convince an ISIS fighter to take a break from beheading in order to pose for the camera" are some of the names tied here to the photographs of Wolberg (who previously was a photographer for "Haaretz"), one of the three best artists in Israel whose background is first and foremost photo-journalism. The other two are Eldad Refaeli and Avishag Shaar Yashuv (who still shoots, among other things, for "Haaretz"). All three are geniuses, each one in their own way. Is Wolberg the best of them all? He is certainly not third place. It is difficult to rate because each of the three has different strengths. For Refaeli, it is the meeting between the drama of the decisive moment of the photographed event and the sensuality of the details that make it up. In Shaar Yashuv's case it is of course her instinctive human eye, as everybody rightly recognized through the iconic portrait of Ayelet Shaked.

These are general statements. Each of the three shares certain features and abilities with the other. And yet, very polarizing, Wolberg in the approach of Shaar Yashuv. The curator of the exhibition, Nicola Trezzi writes that Wolberg "undermines ideas of direct documentation, a type of documentation that is a pillar of photo-journalism" and that he "insists on an aesthetic experience". This is true, but that is not what sets him apart or distinguishes him from the rest. The ability to do photo-journalism that also functions as Art also distinguishes Refaeli and Shaar Yeshuv. Trezzi focuses on the unique display format (panorama shots that their width is double their height) – and the camera Wolberg uses to create them, which is no longer available for sale - in order to make statement number 84,739 on the possibilities of contemporary photography to escape the dictatorship of screens and the flooding of information, a problem that does not exist anymore: this issue no longer exists, it is as anachronistic as the discussion about the decentralization of music. The dominant emotion today is one of saturation, following the enhancement of the artist-photographer, of the editor, the DJ, and some would argue also of the critic.



Pavel Wolberg, Hanna, South Ethiopia, 2011. The discussion about the format is anachronistic.
Photo credit: Courtesy of the artist and Dvir Gallery Tel Aviv / Brussels / Paris

What the panoramic format does do is emphasize that Wolberg's gaze is, well, the most panoramic. This does not mean only or necessarily the monumental (something that can also be found in Refaeli and Shaare Yashuv), and it does not mean only or necessarily that he is larger than life (as above). More than Refaeli and in contrast to Shaar Yashuv, Wolberg looks at life not from the side (as Trezzi emphasized, he is not an "objective" photojournalist) and not from the outside (in every frame of his that contains people you can see Wolberg's eye level, the person that allows him to gain the trust of his subjects) - but from above. Yes, like God. Or, more precisely, like the proverb according to which (in the translation Free; in German it rhymes) "Man plans and God laughs".

Wolberg must be humane in order to achieve frames that explode with the emotion of those photographed in them, on the spectrum that stretches from peaceful and incidental, through restrained and tense to looking into the abyss in the eyes - but he is not a humanist. That is, he

is not a bad person, but a person who understands the cruelty, randomness, absurdity and ridiculousness of life, and an artist who knows how to present it in a way that few compare to him. And precisely in this understanding lies his humanism. Since most of his photographs, with or without connection to his journalistic work, focus on areas and situations of danger and crisis (the photographs in the current exhibition come from Israel, the occupied territories, Ethiopia and Ukraine), there is reason to assume that his photographers share similar understandings with him about life, certainly regarding its cruelty.



Pavel Wolberg, Kiev Barricades, 2014, Must Be Human, photo credit: Courtesy of the artist and Dvir Gallery Tel Aviv / Brussels / Paris

Wolberg is not a beautifying and empathetic photographer, he does not approach his work as a mission to fix the world, and therefore great art emerges under his hands; Great art may correct, or is a correction by virtue of being great - but that is not its function, purpose or mission. And so Terzi is correct when he writes that Wahlberg "emphasizes the pictorial quality of the photographs". Again, one can find such quality in others (another warm regards to Ayelet Shaked's photography), but it is Wolberg's panoramas that resonate "especially the genre of historical painting and in particular the heroic descriptions of figures in the landscape or the battle scenes that are common in it." This is noticeable Especially in the frames full of tense and romantic comedy from the barricades in Ukraine and in the frame of the amazing local landscape, shot from a distance, where the human figures play a supporting role and the main star is the composition of the smoke trails of the tear gas volleys. Just a view (literally in this case) from above (the indie band "Beyond Down" sings " Everything is beautiful, it's just a matter of distance") turns a moment of danger into great art.



Pavel Wolberg, Kiev Barricades, 2014, The Moment Before. photo credit: Courtesy of the artist and Dvir Gallery Tel Aviv / Brussels / Paris

The humanists in their own eyes will chatter as usual about the "aestheticization of the political" but it is impossible to understand a crisis if we stand pure from every blemish (seemingly) outside of it or deny its seductive majesty. The narrow humanistic view is sacrificial, Wahlberg's is not. It works in the intermediate situations he immortalized in Ethiopia, especially in the multiplayer frame where Wahlberg's moral distance makes room for each of them to be a whole world, and in the mentioned frames of the "just before" he immortalized in Ukraine. The subjects are in a terrible condition but are not seen as poor in Wahlberg's lens, on the contrary. They face it, so face it too, snoozers, because yesterday you were in the same situation (cough holocaust cough) and tomorrow, God knows. Life is suffering and everything is stupid.



Pavel Wolberg, Na'alín, The West Bank, 2009. Life is oh so stupid. Photo credit: photo credit: Courtesy of the artist and Dvir Gallery Tel Aviv / Brussels / Paris

The single frame in the exhibition that Rick Madman exemplifies more than any other this existentialist-nihilistic view of Wahlberg. As such, he frames the entire exhibition in a tone of grotesque absurdity, which elevates the same painterly quality recalled from the rank of

historical painting to the rank of Hieronymus Bosch's panoramas, full of pleasure and suffering so far-fetched and detailed that it is impossible not to laugh. On the outskirts of Moshav Heger near the Kasem Junction, Wahlberg found the perfect reflection of his worldview: an abandoned and crazy pile of giant heads with frozen and rotting creepy expressions, decapitated torsos, palms, pepper, chess pieces and Shimon Peres - remnants of Adelaida or some municipal parade, ruins crumbling whose condition and their random combination illustrate that even when they were in their original normative use they were actually nightmarish and scary. Like life itself. And thus, ladies and gentlemen, Pavel Wahlberg has reached perfection in this exhibition.