



The Female Body Reconstructed

Beatrice von Bormann

The female body is key to the work of Ruthi Helbitz Cohen. It “performs” on the canvas in different shapes and guises: dressed or undressed, in the role of a clown, witch, child, or femme fatale; as a mythological goddess or historical figure; hanging from the ceiling, floating, lying down; fragmented in space, alone or in the company of other complementary figures. The artist takes the body apart and reassembles it, like a mechanic might do with a car or an engine, or a scientist when dissecting and studying the body of an animal. It is as if she is searching for the inner essence of these women by pulling their bodies apart, by painting heads, limbs or organs separately and then putting them back together like a mismatched puzzle, in which the individual pieces don’t quite fit. A sense of uneasiness arises at the sight of a skull-like head on top of a semi-transparent torso, of a body dissolving into a dark cloak, or of arms taking the place of legs, reaching up towards the torso.

The female body has been an object of art history for many centuries. Male artists have depicted it nude, semi-nude, or in the guise of deities, saints, mythological figures. Only from the late 19th century women no longer had to pose as someone other than themselves. In modern art, female bodies have been idealized, vilified, depicted as larger than life, as fragmented, imprinted on the canvas, abstracted. Only in the 1960s did female artists really begin to claim their own bodies through their art, turning it from object to subject. In performance art and the Fluxus movement, the body itself became the medium. Helbitz Cohen does not use her own body in her art nor are her painted women necessarily self-portraits. They do, however, represent a complex internal dialogue with both painter and viewer. Hanging from the ceiling, draped over chairs or lying on the floor, they seem to act like performers in the exhibition space forcing the viewer to interact with them, to walk around or between them, thus demanding a much more confrontational approach than that experienced before a two-dimensional wall painting.

Whispers, installation view, Gordon Gallery, 2015
"לחשים", מראה הצבה, גלריה גורדון, 2015

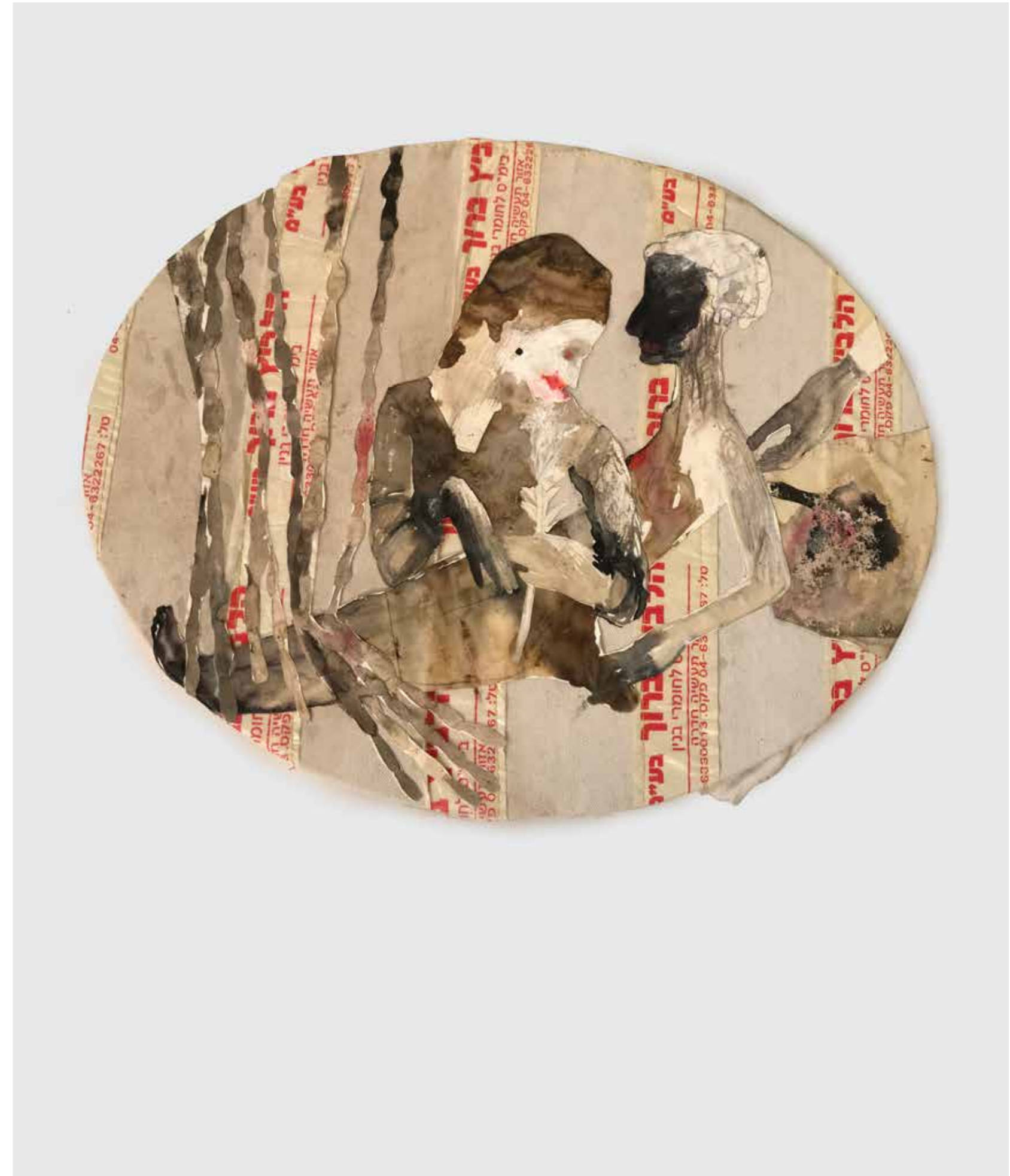
1
Artists quotes are from
conversations with the
artist, April – September
2019.

The Spectator as Voyeur

In this exhibition, *Beloved*, there is a room which is inaccessible to visitors. They can only look at the works through holes and slits in the walls. This automatically turns spectators into voyeurs while also functioning as an enclosure, a *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden) for the female figures shown within. There is no way out, no possibility of escape, but at the same time no one can come in, which turns the “scene of the crime,” into a safe space for the blonde, partly deconstructed women that hang from the ceiling like painted sculptures. However, the nature of the crime remains shrouded in mystery. The bodies seem to be partaking in a brutal rite of passage whose outcome is uncertain. They appear to exist in liminal space, a term from anthropology that describes, in a rite of passage, the time between what was and what will be. Ruthi Helbitz Cohen: “There is always a ‘gap’ in my work. Empty spaces are very important in my work, so there is also a physical dimension. When you break something, you never know how it will be mended, what the outcome will be.”¹ Liminal space is transitory, connected with waiting, not (yet) knowing. It is where transformation takes place, if we are patient and let it shape us. Helbitz Cohen’s female figures are all about transformation, about the dichotomy between conscious and unconscious, passive and aggressive, light and dark, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness and the beauty that exists in ugliness. Their gestures and the symbols that accompany them, betray them. Gestures can hide trauma and are often cultural constructs and ritualized expressions of the unconscious.

Inside the enclosure are the “blondes”: light-haired women that are the counterpart of Helbitz Cohen’s many dark figures. They hang upside-down, their eyes covered in gestures of grief and horror; they lie on chairs, their genitals exposed; one of them seems to be falling into pieces. Helbitz Cohen showed them in 2018-2019 in the exhibition *Poem/Po-Eima. A Hair at the Crime Scene* at the Open University Gallery. There, they were enclosed in a space demarcated with the “Helbitz Baruch Ltd” builders’ tape she uses in many of her works, referring to the construction company founded by her grandfather and succeeded by the following generations. Presenting these women as victims seems to imply that the transformation process has been halted. This introduces a finality that is new in Helbitz Cohen’s work. Using the tape to close off the space, she marked her own territory as it were, creating a protective place, but one from which there was no way out.

Pietà, 2017, mixed media on paper cutouts and builders’ tape on canvas, 30x40
פייטה, 2017, טכניקה מעורבת על מגורות נייר ומסקינטייפ על בד, 30x40





Hands on Face, 2015, mixed media on parchment paper, 220x70x10
 ידיים על הפנים, 2015, טכניקה מעורבת על נייר פרגמנט, 220x70x10



Anna Mahler, *Untitled*, c. 1974, bronze after a clay figure, Highgate Cemetery, London
<https://indifferentreflections.wordpress.com/tag/victorian-symbolism/>
 אנה מאהלה, ללא כותרת, 1974 בקירוב, יציקת ברונזה של פסל חמה, בית הקברות הייגיט, לונדון

In *Beloved* this notion has been taken a step further, with the tape replaced by perforated walls, violently cut and damaged, making it impossible to enter or leave the crime scene. Defining this space as “bombed,” Helbitz Cohen appears to allude to contemporary acts of violence, yet her work is never one-dimensional. The scene before us is also an intimate one that we are invited to witness. The deconstructed blondes and the inherent horror of the scene point to violence against women that could not be more poignant in times of #MeToo. Whereas usually Helbitz Cohen’s figures seem to be invested with a transformative power that restores their agency, these recent figures seem passive and powerless.² Speaking about the blondes, Helbitz Cohen said: “I create a female figure that is anemic, with dull pigmentation. Her skin is pale pink and faded; she appears ill, almost transparent.”

Several of the blonde figures hold their hands before their eyes in a classical gesture of grief and despair. This gesture appears repeatedly in art history, from Masaccio’s *Expulsion from Paradise* (1424–1427) to the grave monument of the Austrian sculptor Anna Mahler made by the artist herself. Whereas figures displaying this gesture usually bend their head and often their upper body forward to accentuate the sense of despair or shame, both Mahler’s and Helbitz Cohen’s female figures stand upright; they are slim, and their legs are

²
 Beatrice von Bormann,
 “Ruthi Helbitz Cohen’s
 (Female) Transformations,”
 in: *Ruthi Helbitz Cohen,
 Curtain of Tears*, 2015,
 exh. cat. Herzliya Museum
 of Contemporary Art, 2015,
 pp. 47–48.

close together. The focus is entirely on the hands and head. The arms of some of Helbitz Cohen's blondes are a three-dimensional element attached separately and folded over to create this gesture, thus accentuating it even more. There is a double protection here: the images of these women are shielded by the closed-off space, and with their hands they hide their emotions from the penetrating eyes of viewers. What or whom they protect themselves from remains in the dark: the viewer cannot know what happened or who the perpetrator might be.

Touching the Scar

The way out of all the violence and horror is love. This is represented in the series *Beloved*, portraits of women Helbitz Cohen loves or admires, including women from her family (her mother and daughter), friends, colleagues, and also historical figures like the Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir (1898–1978), the poet Lea Goldberg (1911–1970), Anna Mahler (1904–1988), the forgotten Viennese painter and graphic designer Erika Abels d'Albert (1896–1975), and the Israeli Special Operations Executive and poet Hannah Szenes (1921–1944). Through these portraits of mostly Jewish and Israeli women, Helbitz Cohen's cultural identity comes into play and her art becomes firmly rooted in time and place, in her personal geography. For the artist, the working process also reflects her dialogue with the actual geography of Israel: she balances the arid dryness of the country by working with water-soluble materials, such as watercolor, coffee remains and fabric softener. Helbitz Cohen says she "drowns" the portraits and lets them dry, a process that leaves red or blackish stains on the faces, like puddles after the rain. This lends the portrayed figures fluidity, their expressions and features unset, still evolving.

For Helbitz Cohen, painting these women is in a way also painting herself. The "puddles" of color that remain on their faces often appear like wounds or like some liquid seeping from the mouth, nose or eyes. One of the women portrayed is Neta Sobol, a former actress who now teaches Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah. Sobol is depicted with a red clown-nose and at the same time with a very serious expression. She appears to have a wound or scar on her right cheek, marked by a reddish stain, and is tentatively reaching for it with her hand. The artist compares this gesture with the eroticism of Saint Thomas touching Christ's wound, as in the famous painting of the subject by Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi) of c. 1601–1602 (p. 40). In this painting, the wound is a slit into which doubting Thomas puts his finger, his hand guided by Christ.

Neta, Beloved, 2019, mixed media on paper, 44x31
ניטע, אהובתי, 2019, טכניקה מעורבת על נייר, 44x31



³ Georges Bataille, *L'Histoire de l'érotisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

Christian iconography is often linked to eroticism, especially in depictions of saints, for example of Saint Sebastian pierced by arrows or of Saint Teresa in ecstasy as in Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini's famous sculpture of 1645–1652. The French author and philosopher Georges Bataille claimed that eroticism and religiosity are complementary cultural constructions in search of overcoming the finitude and the discontinuity between human beings.³

Helbitz Cohen's work is firmly rooted in art history, she finds her inspiration in artworks (and literature) from the Renaissance right up to Modernism, but her motifs receive a contemporary and deeply personal interpretation. In modern art, the bodies of saints have been replaced by nude models or the figures of the artists themselves. In that sense, Helbitz Cohen's paintings and drawings recall the twisted, emaciated and fragmented bodies of Austrian Expressionism, particularly in paintings by Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele. An example is Kokoschka's *Self-Portrait* of 1910 for the cover of the magazine *Der Sturm* depicting himself with a skull-like shaved head, touching his wound in a gesture impersonating Christ. Schiele's dramatic self-portrait, *Seated Male Nude* of the same year, is a merciless representation of his skinny, partly semi-transparent and footless boney body. This kind of fragmentary representation of the body is a key element in Helbitz Cohen's art. Kidneys or lungs, even a heart,



Oskar Kokoschka, *Pietà*, poster for the play *Murderer, Hope of Women*, 1909, lithograph, 122.7x78.6
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kokoschka_M%C3%B6rder,_Hoffnung_der_Frauen_1909.jpg
 אוסקר קוקושקה, פייטא, ברית תאטרון למחזה רוצח, תקוותן של נשים, 1909, ליתוגרפיה, 122.7x78.6

float outside the body, as in one of her big, unstretched pieces (p. 50). In other works, sexual organs are depicted in an exaggerated manner, their redness and coarseness evoking the appearance of wounds (p. 55).

In *Murderer, Hope of Women* (2018) Helbitz Cohen refers directly to Kokoschka's 1907 play and later drawings by that name. Kokoschka based his play on the theories surrounding prehistoric matriarchy of the Swiss jurist, philologist and anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen, especially in his book *Das Mutterrecht* (1861). Kokoschka's poster for the play shows woman triumphant holding the limp figure of man in her arms, as in a modern-day Pietà. Kokoschka painted her white, the color of death, whereas the male figure is red, the color of life, thus inverting the roles. In his play, the murderer ultimately wins. Helbitz Cohen's work *Murderer, Hope of Women* sends us back to the crime scene. It shows the painted figure of a blonde woman squeezed between the fragments of an oval mirror that reflects the penis-like flowers hanging above it, as well as the viewers themselves. The phrase "murderer, hope of women" is traced in the dirty surface of the mirror. Here too, the woman seems to be the defeated, hopeless victim of a sex crime, with none of the power of Kokoschka's woman. The fact that women can overcome this suffering is shown in the *Beloved*, portraits of strong women who achieved something in life, in the past or in the present.

Letting Go

In 2018, Helbitz Cohen began a series of works dealing directly or indirectly with the death of her mother that year. The most important work in this context is no doubt the painting *White Lily, Black Lily* (pp. 22–23) which shows the outstretched figure of a woman whose black head is surrounded by a golden halo, besides whom sits a girl. Two lilies grow out of the woman's womb, while the girl is holding a third in her hand. The white lily, a symbol of light and purity that in Christian iconography signifies the Immaculate Conception, is often depicted in annunciation scenes where the angel offers Mary a lily.⁴ As a symbol of resurrection, lilies are often used in funerals. Here, despite the title, one of the lilies growing out of the woman has gone black and the other, too, is greyish. Together, the two lilies seem to symbolize the dichotomy of life and death. At the same time the lilies growing out of the woman's womb signify fertility and motherhood. The finger of the girl holding the lily as if in an annunciation points upward, as if indicating the departure of the woman toward another world.

⁴ Manfred Lurker, *Wörterbuch der Symbolik*, Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1991, pp. 435–436.



Maria Lassnig, *Beam in the Eye / Mourning Hands*, 1964, oil on canvas, 77x115
 © Maria Lassnig Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna 2020
 מריה לסניג, קורה בעין / ידיים אבלות, 1964, שמן על בד, 77x115



Maria Lassnig, *Breakfast with Egg*, 1964, oil on canvas, 130x194.2
 © Maria Lassnig Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna 2020
 מריה לסניג, ארוחת בוקר עם ביצה, 1964, שמן על בד, 130x194.2

5
 Barbara Pasquinelli, *Gebaar en expressie*, Gent: Ludion, 2007, pp. 40–43 [German].

Another hand – that of the prone figure? – makes a gesture that recurs in various works on paper from the same period: it is bent at the wrist, inactive, literally letting go. It is a gesture of powerlessness and passivity, the kind often found in scenes of grief or acceptance in art history, for example, the Veit Stoss *Death of Mary* altarpiece in Kraków, 1477–1489 (p. 25).⁵ Huge butterfly-like creatures (another symbol of the departed soul) seem to feed on the body (or feed it?), while golden teardrops fall down on it.

White Lily, Black Lily and the works on paper that feature the same bent wrist gesture as a symbol of release and resignation, as well as the flowers growing out of the body or being offered to it, recall several works by the

Austrian artist Maria Lassnig made following the death of her mother in 1964. For a while Lassnig was obsessed with this subject and kept painting her mother's body, often with her own image besides it. Lassnig, a pioneer of body art, put her bodily sensations at the center of her work as early as 1948 and kept developing this method throughout her career. Helbitz Cohen also approaches the world through the experiences of the body, albeit in a different way. Her work attends less to the different shapes and forms the human, female body might assume – a favorite Lassnig subject, which led her to identify with objects, animals, etc. – and more to the fragmentation of the body due to trauma and pain, and to ways of overcoming this.

An early Lassnig painting on this subject, *Beam in the Eye / Mourning Hands*, 1964, shows her mother in the background, with roses growing from her groin (in other paintings these are hyacinths) and the daughter sitting cross-legged before her, her hands crossed in a gesture of resignation; one of the wooden planks of the coffin passes through her eye. There is an obvious analogy with *White Lily, Black Lily*, both through the presence of the two female figures and the flowers growing from their bodies, and through the gestures of resignation and the symbolization of grief with butterflies and teardrops in one painting and the wooden plank in the other.

Helbitz Cohen's work also relates to Lassnig's notion of body awareness, as expressed, for example in Lassnig's *Breakfast with Egg*, a painting about her mother which hitherto had not been identified as such. An animal-like hunched figure is guarding an egg, the symbol of fertility and motherhood (possibly referring also to Lassnig's own chance of it slipping away: she turned 45 that year), from the group of nightmarish monsters that surround her, performing a grotesque kind of dance. A watch, held up by one of the monsters, indicates that time is running out. If the monsters manage to kill the hunched figure, the egg will become the monsters' breakfast. A sense of loss and danger, of the inevitability of death and time passing, and the destructive experience of grief dominate this painting as they do Helbitz Cohen's works from the period of *White Lily, Black Lily*. In most of them, the reclining figure is half resting her torso on her elbows. There is often a second figure with one hand bent at the wrist in the gesture of letting go, the other hand holding a lily. Sometimes, other hands appear, touching the prostrate woman, as if both helping her along and wanting to hold on to her (pp. 26–27). At times, the head of a donkey, a symbol of the Messiah, appears, or the head of a goat, an ancient symbol of femininity and nurturing.⁶

Pages 22–23: *Black Lily, White Lily*, 2018, mixed media on paper cutouts and builders' tape on canvas, 142x320
 עמי' 22–23: שושן שחור, שושן צחור, 2018, טכניקה מעורבת על מגורות נייר ומסקיניטייפ על בד, 142x320

6
 Lurker 1991, p. 855.





Veit Stoss, *Death of Mary*, altarpiece, St Mary's Basilica, Kraków, 1477–1489, carved and painted lime wood
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/hen-magonza/21382897456/in/photostream/>
 וויט שטוש, מות מריה, עבודת מזבח, כנסיית מריה הקדושה, קראקוב, 1477–1489, עץ טייליה מגולף וצבוע

Scenes of mourning are common in art history, although they are often about the deaths of saints or kings, as in Giotto's famous scene of the *Death of Saint Francis* (c. 1309) in the Arena Chapel in Padua. Often they are a means of studying expressions of grief, shouting mouths and hands thrown up in the air or pulling out hair. In the case of these two series of works by Lassnig and Helbitz Cohen, it is the personal tragedy that makes them so moving. The contrast of passive and active is quite typical of Helbitz Cohen's work. Here, however, passivity dominates as the figures interact with powers beyond their control. The daughter ultimately has no choice but to let go.

Look at Me

Helbitz Cohen works in very different formats. The *Beloved* small works on paper depicting her loved ones are contrasted with several very large, unstretched canvases. One of them, *Black Mountains*, 2018 (p. 53) shows a female figure

Burnt Heart, 2019, mixed media on parchment paper and builders' tape, 180x50
 לב שרוף, 2019, טכניקה מעורבת על נייר פרגמנט ומסקינטייפ, 180x50

Pages 26–27: *Untitled*, 2017, mixed media on paper cutouts on paper, 31x58
 עמ' 26–27: ללא כותרת, 2017, טכניקה מעורבת על מגורות נייר על נייר, 31x58



among four dark mounts of different sizes, which could be cloaks hiding figures or objects. An upside-down skeleton is just visible by the main figure whose hands are held up beside her head, her palms facing inward, framing the face. This hand gesture is one of innocence, showing the hands to be free of blood; a submission in face of a confrontation or, in this case, before the viewer. Yet the turned palms are also a protective gesture, one with which the figure seems to say: look at me, I am still here, in spite of all the chaos surrounding me. Black tears flow from her eyes; a rabbit – a symbol of fertility and life – sits on her head. A butterfly holds up a line from which hang black objects, perhaps bombs or body organs. Life and death seem equally balanced between these various symbols. Numerous bodiless hands reach up as if from a beyond. Their specific agency and action are hard to define; they seem to stretch toward something unattainable, while also evoking prayer and plea. The hands flow into the borderline created by the open bottom hems of the black cloaks, allowing the painting to be read in two directions: from the top down and from the bottom up, coming together in the mysterious black cloaks that seem to hide a girl and, possibly, more skeletons. The mounts are like veiled figures, hiding themselves from the world and storing its horrors as if in a Pandora's box.

A second large painting shows the same kind of rounded shapes, now rising from the bottom of the canvas, at whose center is an oval shape in which a girl stands on a fish, like Fortuna on the globe. The fish, a symbol of fertility, is also a Christian symbol of God and wealth. Helbitz Cohen plays with these various connotations, allowing each viewer to find their own truth. The girl's white dress blows in the wind, its hem forming the symbol of eternity that functions as both exit and entrance into her body, her soul, her world. Another fish appears near her face while serpents rise from her head as if she were the Medusa from Greek mythology. Bombs and heads drop from above. This painting has a clear direction, but also floating shapes (the bombs and heads) and employs symbols to enhance its ambiguity. A third large painting, *Egyptian Magician*, 2018 (p. 49) shows a floating black witch with golden tears streaming from her eyes and insects holding up bombs and organs, while a skeleton reaches up from domed shapes emerging from the bottom of the canvas. A naïvely painted sun in the upper left corner illuminates the desperate scene. Does death need to be saved? Is there a way out? Perhaps the witch knows?

The floating forms and recurring symbols allude to a kinship with paintings by the Russian-French Jewish artist Marc Chagall, in which figures and forms hover in pictorial space, confusing the "reading" of the painting. Helbitz Cohen



Marc Chagall, *Birthday*, 1915, oil on cardboard, 80.6x99.7, MOMA, New York
<https://www.marcchagall.net/the-birthday.jsp#prettyPhoto>
 מארק שאגאל, יום הולדת, 1915, שמן על קרטון, 80.6x99.7, מוזיאון מומה, ניו יורק

uses floating in a similar way – her figures are not firmly rooted in space but are cut loose. They lack a clearly defined context or background which lends them a timeless quality. Their ambiguous stories are valid anywhere, anytime. In their combination of cruelty and poetic beauty, passion and despair, Helbitz Cohen's figures are significantly more troubled than Chagall's. Eros and Thanatos, love and death unite within a single, inseparable figure. Helbitz Cohen says that: "I want to make a small but significant change in viewers' observations and understandings. Get them interested, get close and turn their head around. I want to make them doubt what they hold as true, real, acceptable. I want my paintings to be inoperable, I want the spectator to object. I would like the painting to generate an unpleasant but at the same time desirable thought process that will make the viewers want to possess this distortion."⁷ To behold Helbitz Cohen's work is to behold a world rich in contradictions, strong and subtle emotions, and intricate thoughts seen through a distorting mirror. Beyond the horror, disgust and pain lies a world of delicate beauty.

Beatrice von Bormann is curator of modern art at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and co-editor-in-chief of the peer reviewed online magazine *Stedelijk Studies*

⁷ See: Ruthi Ofek, "Working within the Gap," this publication, p. 39.