

# ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS

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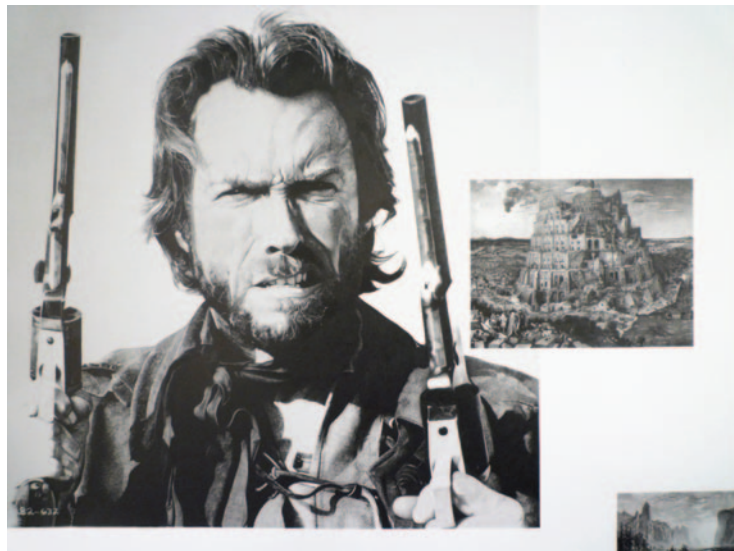
DESIRE  
AND ITS INTIMATE  
POLITICS: ZOE BELOFF

BLINDNESS  
AND FUTURE PEDAGOGY:  
NICHOLAS LOBO

EVIL  
REPRESENTED:  
THE NAZI FETISH

GEOCRITIQUE  
AFTER ACTIVISM:  
BRIAN HOLMES





**DALYA LUTTWAK**  
HARRISONBURG, VA

Over the last three or four decades, numerous artists and critics have addressed the relationship between presence and absence in their work. For example, thirty years ago critic Douglas Crimp linked this conceptually supple pairing to photography, effectively decentering “aura” and underlining plurality. More recently, artist Rachel Whiteread has developed an impressive oeuvre through the visual play and metaphorical power of presence and absence, smartly asserting their ambiguity and trade. Presence and absence reappear in seven new large-scale steel sculptures by Israeli-American sculptor Dalya Luttwak, where the structures and metaphorical applications of plant roots and the paradox of their transposable power as signifiers for presence and absence are held relatively stable [Sawhill Gallery, James Madison University; February 15–April 2, 2010]. Here, the root structures—which are typically absent or out of sight—become the wholly visible subject of the work. By contrast, the parts that are usually visible—that is, above ground—are left out. While Luttwak’s sculptural depictions of roots may vaguely elicit the above-ground forms they sustain, they remain a presence—the presence in the exhibition. This visual assertion holds the absent partner in a kind of conceptual and visual limbo rather than ostensibly out of reach, that is, in a deferral of the complementary tensions.

Luttwak’s sculptures are modeled after actual roots, which she removes from the earth. This installation reflects her interest in abstracting the forms, through both an increase of scale and by replacing organic coloration with the bold value contrasts of glossy black and white paint—a decision based on site-specific considerations, specifically the semi-industrial environment suggested by Sawhill Gallery’s black metallic ceiling and cool concrete floor. This conscious stylization also asserts the physical presence of the unseen, as well as the need to examine it. The individual sculptures are spindly conglomerates of welded steel rods of varying circumferences and lengths. Some are suspended,

barely touching or trailing along the floor, while others are attached to gallery walls. All are creaturely, as their exaggerated scale and the plurality of their interacting gestures endow them with a science fiction-like otherness.

The work’s physical and formal attributes unleash both obvious allusions and more complex plays of meaning. Grammatically, as objects that represent plant roots, the sculptures exist as nouns. But “root” is also a verb, and this usage reveals another doubling function for Luttwak’s art. “Root” can mean “to establish” or “to become firmly fixed” while it also signifies “to eradicate” or “remove entirely.” In this context, references to family and home can simultaneously hold a sense of permanence and tradition while suggesting uprooting and suppression. Accordingly, the sculptures can seem sturdy or tenuous, enduring or temporary.

This allusion to social structures necessarily includes issues of individual identity, which comprise and affect the unconscious and memory—perhaps the ultimate unseen or marginal spaces. The work serves this function for the artist as well, as she has discussed its metaphorical relation to her family’s experiences and the challenges of emigrating to Israel from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia at the beginning of World War II.

In this sense, Luttwak’s “roots” grow and function deeply, the rhizomatic configurations of some of the sculptures signifying complexities of individual and social being. As striking metaphors, they penetrate the viewer’s gaze, taking root and probing within the subterranean spaces of existential conditions.

—Paul Ryan

**EMILIE HALPERN + ERIC ZIMMERMAN**  
HOUSTON

Depending on your perspective, the relationship between science and art can seem quite fraught. For some, science conjures up images of precision and utility while art is the realm of free expression, dreams, and formless abandon. For others, they are two parallel paths that allow us to understand the surrounding world, collecting data and interpreting it by holding it up to our worldview. In today’s stratified and professionalized world, there is a tendency to separate the two but we forget that both practices test our understanding of the world and point us in an unknown direction to a territory that is rife with wonder.

*Cosmos*, an exhibition of new work by Emilie Halpern and Eric Zimmerman, dives deep into the territory of this comparison and comes up into a poetic and sublime realm [Art Palace Gallery; May 8–June 26, 2010]. The exhibition abounds with references to art, music, astrophysics, geology, film, entomology, and space travel. The collaborative piece *You Are Here (Endlessly)*, 2010, marks the intersection between these two artists’ very related bodies of work. On a circular gold space blanket, two tape decks play Halpern and Zimmerman reading a passage from Carl Sagan’s *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*. In the chapter, “You Are Here,” Sagan describes Earth as a pale blue dot as seen by NASA’s Voyager. For Sagan, this act of representation allows us to see the relative insignificance of humanity in relation to space’s vast void and the absurdity of our divisions over centuries of warfare. For Halpern and Zimmerman this is a call for collaboration.

Sagan’s discussion of space exploration and its implications for social pronouncements is just one of many ways in which this show uses the cosmos as metaphor. In Zimmerman’s drawing *There I Was (Nothing Is the Rule, Something The Exception) Production Still of Clint Eastwood as The Outlaw Josey Wales. / There I Was / Pieter Brueghel, Tower of Babel, 1538. Albert Bierstadt, Yosemite, 1868 / Starscape (Dispersion)*, 2010, an image of Eastwood snarling with two .44 Smith and Wesson handguns raises the specter of violence against

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Dalya Luttwak, *Onion-Vegetable (Allium cepa)*, 2009–10, painted steel, 127 x 39 x 44.5 inches [courtesy of the artist; photo: Gary Freeburg]; Eric Zimmerman, detail of *There I Was (Nothing is the Rule, Something the Exception) Production Still of Clint Eastwood as the Outlaw Josey Wales. / There I Was / Pieter Brueghel, Tower of Babel, 1538. Albert Bierstadt, Yosemite, 1868 / Starscape (Dispersion)*, 2010, graphite on paper, 50 x 65 inches [courtesy of the artist and Art Palace, Houston]