

# CARVALHO PARK

## ***After the Flood: Yulia Iosilzon's Subversions of Scripture***

Full exhibition essay by Rebecca Birrell, PhD.

The story does not indicate how it began, whether the weather turned perceptibly in the temperature or taste of the air, whether light rain misted the land, marking out what it would soon annihilate. The details are spare yet brutal, familiar to many. God punishes the corrupt and the lawless, who are judged to be the entire human population save for a righteous few, through a flood which engulfs civilisation. Noah, his wife and sons are spared, along with a pair of each animal with which to repopulate the earth in the time after. The disobedient majority are drowned and forgotten about; they are collateral on the way to a better world.

Traditionally artists visualised the most sensational images from scripture, elaborating on God's terse commands and dire pronouncements. In Jan Breughel the Elder's *The Entry of the Animals into Noah's Ark* (1613), the quota of creatures is gathered in a remarkable act of visual classification under a blazing sunshine that makes the coming destruction feel impossible. In this instance, the scene's morbid conclusion remains in its subtext, but most artists chose to confront the flood itself. Natural catastrophe, intensified by the extreme possibilities of divine power, is bound to produce visually arresting pictures, even without the diversity of humans, animals and emotional states that the biblical flood demands. Perhaps this is why the flood has proven such a popular theme amongst artists, a tradition which Yulia Iosilzon's cycle of paintings centred around Old Testament stories, including the events of Genesis 6-9, playfully quotes and subverts.

Underneath the shimmering surface of Iosilzon's paintings lie an entire genealogy of flood fantasies. Iosilzon's paintings think through a variety of Renaissance precedents, sifting through images, compositions, techniques, colour palettes and narrative devices to arrive at a fresh means of representing the divine. In his frescoes of the flood for the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo imagines an ambiguous middle section to the story's structure in which the rains have temporarily ceased, the distressed and displaced have made it to shore, their remorse acting upon each one of them powerfully and distinctly, the ark looming in the background. By contrast, Paolo Uccello (1397-1475) condenses the story into a single image representative of its entire temporal span: its preparatory stages, in which labourers work to coat the ark in pitch, is pressed against Noah finding solid ground some months later.

Iosilzon places herself within a tradition in which artists have challenged the sequencing and duration of an event known for carving up the world into a dramatic before and after. In Iosilzon's paintings there is no clear sense of where we are situated within the story. There are none of the markers artists have relied upon to determine beginnings and endings. No ark is glimpsed moving ominously out of sight, with precarious structures built by the damned to provide poignant contrast. The placid expressions of her figures give nothing away. In Iosilzon's visionary reimagining of the tale, the rigid narrative arc from crisis to resolution and sin to salvation is shattered, a form of imaginative exegesis which in turn refuses the punitive moral strictures that separate the deserving good from the masses of the unredeemable.

Immersed in watery environments, in possession of hybrid anatomies which mix delicately featured human faces and sinewy animal bodies, Iosilzon recasts the fate of those cast off by God and left to die. The flood does not overwhelm and obliterate the living, as in scripture; instead it kindles fresh forms of life into

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being. In losilzon's paintings, water envelops the world, but functions as an alchemical substance in which men and women's bodies metamorphose, become other to themselves, are newly bound to birds, insects, horses, fish and each other. losilzon applies to her anthropoid creatures an array of transformations suggestive of heightened sensation. Limbs thicken or lengthen, and acquire fur, muscle and a greater freedom of movement, while the bones underneath become weightless. These are bodies made to feel, float, embrace, dance, enjoy themselves. The perished are resurrected, springing out of the wreckage catalysed by their new physical forms and abilities.

losilzon's scenes are flecked with dashes, dots and crescents evocative of geological ruin, rubble, glimmering fragments, the detritus of a world blown apart. They might equally be marine flora and fauna dredged up by the deluge, scraps of sponge, anemone and seaweed. Yet to see these specks of colour as evidence only of destruction would be to misunderstand losilzon's focus. Look at these discs again, and note their quivering aliveness. For these globular forms also bring to mind microorganisms, the very beginnings of life on earth. Scattered over the surface of her canvases, this assortment of shapes is as evocative of microbes as they are seeds, and they are harbingers of a radical renewal outside of the narrow judgements of the sacred.

In a myth known for its binary thinking, its brutal and unyielding transmission of devastation, hopelessness and shame, losilzon imagines an alternative. Their exact narrative content remains ambiguous, but of the several open-ended possibilities contained within these paintings, all embody a courageous hopefulness, a refusal of cruelty. Perhaps the ark has come and gone, the powerful rains passed, and what is left is an unexpectedly rich post-apocalyptic landscape, new life visibly rippling through each of the earth's remaining inhabitants. In imagining another future for those deemed worthless, allowing them to flourish and adapt against the odds, losilzon transforms a fable about obedience and sin into a series of questions about a possible utopia. If the world were to be lost tomorrow, what would we urgently preserve, and what would be willingly given over to oblivion? In losilzon's world, humans are made to recognise their enmeshment with animals and plants, a co-existence so deep and fundamental it is experienced as an intermingling of body parts – a crustacean tale, an equine leg – and ways of being. God has Noah start again with the same raw materials, the old divisions and hierarchies, without any recognition that these were the conditions in which the evils the flood sought to eliminate flourished. In her interspecies fantasies, losilzon dares to do otherwise, retaining all the earth's lifeforms but banishing the anthropocentric order in which only the few are afforded rights and dignity. Heaven's Chambers, whatever idyll such a space represents, might not be unrecognisable from the earth as reimagined in this manner, amongst the living and the flawed, all of them newly caring and compassionate, aware of their responsibilities to each other.

losilzon's works not only complicate the story's temporal and ethical framework, but also refresh its emotional register. Fear dominates the history of the flood's representation. In Nicolas Poussin's *Winter (the Deluge)* (1664), a chain of outstretched arms articulate terror, gestures of struggle and prayer, as too does the mass of darkness hanging over the figures like soil waiting to be shovelled into a grave. Other artists presented even more haunting visions of the flood. J.M.Turner's *The Deluge* (1805) draws panic and senselessness out of a maelstrom of water, darkness and flesh in much the same way as Francis Danby's *Deluge* (1837), in which limbs are glimpsed flailing from the froth of crashing waves. The Old Testament provides no details of those lost, an erasure these artists were beginning to push against in paintings which – if only obliquely – questioned the justness of God's actions. losilzon takes these experiments in empathy much further. Representing their fear may render the dead more real, but it also elicits an uneasy gratification: relief at being spared an equivalent punishment intermingled with an ugly pleasure at the misfortune of an anonymous, contemptible mass. losilzon eliminates these emotions and their bad ethics

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entirely. Outside of the established narrative, losilzon creates pockets of stilled time in which the histrionics of mass death and redemption are set aside in favour of contemplation, intimacy and joy. Drenched in sunlight, their figures robust, radiant and in motion, losilzon's paintings are visions of happiness which bear no relation to the unrelenting bleakness of their art historical source material.

These adjustments in mood are grounds for hope: change need not be extreme or traumatic, based in retribution and eventual reprieve, in order to be meaningful. What if the world remade felt like a sudden surge of colour in the atmosphere, a rush of serotonin in the blood, a permission to play? losilzon's works talk across time to several traditions, but none is more lucid and fertile than her engagement with the recent history of Jewish art. Helen Frankenthaler's sumptuous, sensual soak-stain paintings are as relevant to losilzon's work as Mark Rothko's severe, meditative zones of colour. There is an acknowledgement of the levity and vitality of the folkloric that chimes with Marc Chagall. Even the biblical flood possesses a lineage of distinctly Jewish reimaginings. With its severed heads and water the colour of blood, Philip Guston's *Deluge II* (1975) is more explicitly addressed to scripture than R. B. Kitaj's *If Not, Not* (1975), which depicts a decimated landscape with fragments of people and their possessions stranded in stagnant water, but both use biblical allusion to reflect on the brutalities of their century. Haunting these works is the violence enacted against the Jewish community in Nazi occupied Europe, the millions singled out for total annihilation, chief targets amongst several other persecuted groups who challenged the Aryan race ideal. In the decades after the holocaust many Jewish artists responded with scenes galvanised by anger, in a mode of collective mourning. The merciful stance losilzon adopts in her reclamation of scripture, her defiance of the flood's murderous intent, her focus on survival and renewal, could be understood as another way of handling this impossible emotional legacy. In losilzon's works, another life is imagined for the dead, a reparative gesture which exceeds the bounds of the centuries-old story, and towards events that unfolded in living memory. For all their energy and verve, these paintings possess an elegiac undercurrent.

Yet the abiding feeling in losilzon's paintings is joy. Bolstered by a constellation of artist ancestors, losilzon formulates her own Jewish folkloric universe in which the remorseless and rule-bound ideology of the Old Testament is broken open in the pursuit of pleasure. Through the cultivation of a set of recurring motifs, losilzon lays the foundations of this new world. Shofar horns, sounded in Jewish religious ceremonies to stir emotion – often, as in its use in Rosh Hashanah, as a portent of joy and hope – appear as headpieces or wigs, as though to ensure these creatures were never without the instruments with which to celebrate life. White tights summon Renaissance princes in early Italian painting as much as the socks worn by Hasidic communities, who are invoked too through curled hair which resembles payos, the sidelocks of observant Jewish men.

All around these figures rise trees, multivalent symbols in Jewish culture which constitute one of the central metaphors in the Torah and the mystical tradition of the Kabbalah, their status warranting their own holiday: Tu B'Shvat, the new year for trees. losilzon's watery environments cite the sea which Moses parted to bring the Jewish people to their promised land as well as the ocean which many European Jews crossed during the mass immigration of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, references which bristle with the ambivalence of forced exile and new freedoms. Lobsters and frogs constitute playful allusions to Jewish dietary laws which forbid eating shellfish and amphibians. Closer to exotic flowers, lobster tails sprout out of the air with extraordinary patterns and shades, recasting the prohibition against their consumption as an issue not of obedience, but of beauty and autonomy. Not eating an orchid is a given, so why not protect these miraculous organisms? Many of losilzon's repertoire of symbols refer to Judaism's laws, ceremonies and conventions, but any suggestion of servility or severity is expelled from paintings devoted to the joyful, humorous, communal aspects of its cultural and religious life. Stood in losilzon's

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studio on one of the first bright days of the year, these currents of memory and experience swirled between us and the radiant portals of her paintings. I felt as though I might respond to the address of these realms, whose references and history are my own as well as Iosilzon's, slip free of this world, taking a deep breath as I entered the water, and begin again.

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