

EMILY GROSHOLZ

Tree, Lily, Rose, Grape: Object and Thought in the Work of Farhad Ostovani

EVERY PAINTER HAS TO DEAL WITH THE TENSION between the three or four dimensions we inhabit and the two dimensions of the surface to be painted, and the tension between the object as it lives its own life and the object as caught up in the painter's awareness, and represented. Some artists try to minimize the tension. One can paint a scene that is relatively static, in which the objects—somewhat flattened—all stand on the same plane, or, conversely, one can abandon the constraints imposed by paper or canvas and set up three-dimensional objects in an installation space. One can paint confined, posed, medium-sized dry goods in a strictly realist fashion, perhaps copying a photograph, or, conversely, drown the object in waves of painterly gesture or sheets of paint, until it disappears altogether. However, in my experience the most interesting and beautiful paintings maintain, admit, and exploit those tensions, and others besides. This is true of the work of Farhad Ostovani, an Iranian painter living in Paris, whose show entitled "*Mûrier Blanc*" ("White Mulberry Tree") was exhibited in the Galerie Lambert Rouland in Paris from October to the end of December 2006.¹ I will try to explain what I mean by the claim just made in discussing some of the masterworks in that show, as well as other works from earlier years.

In 2002, Ostovani published a book entitled . . . *ainsi qu'il en va d'un cahier de brouillon plein de ratures et d'ajouts* . . . (. . . thus it's a matter of a sketchbook full of erasures and additions . . .) that interleaves fragmentary quotations from the writings of Louis-René des Forêts, a well-known Parisian man of letters who died in 2000, with twenty-four sketches of a certain mulberry tree in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris.² It was a black mulberry. (The species native to North America is the red mulberry; the black and the white mulberry are native to Persia and parts of Asia.) Sometime later, in a conversation with one of the gardeners, Ostovani learned that there was also a white mulberry in the Luxembourg Gardens, and was directed to it. This kind of tree played a

¹ MÛRIER BLANC, by Farhad Ostovani. Text by Alain Madeleine-Perdrillat. Galerie Lambert Rouland. €30.00.

² . . . AINSI QU'IL EN VA D'UN CAHIER DE BROUILLON PLEIN DE RATURES ET D'AJOUTS . . ., by Farhad Ostovani and Louis-René des Forêts. William Blake & Co. €22.00.

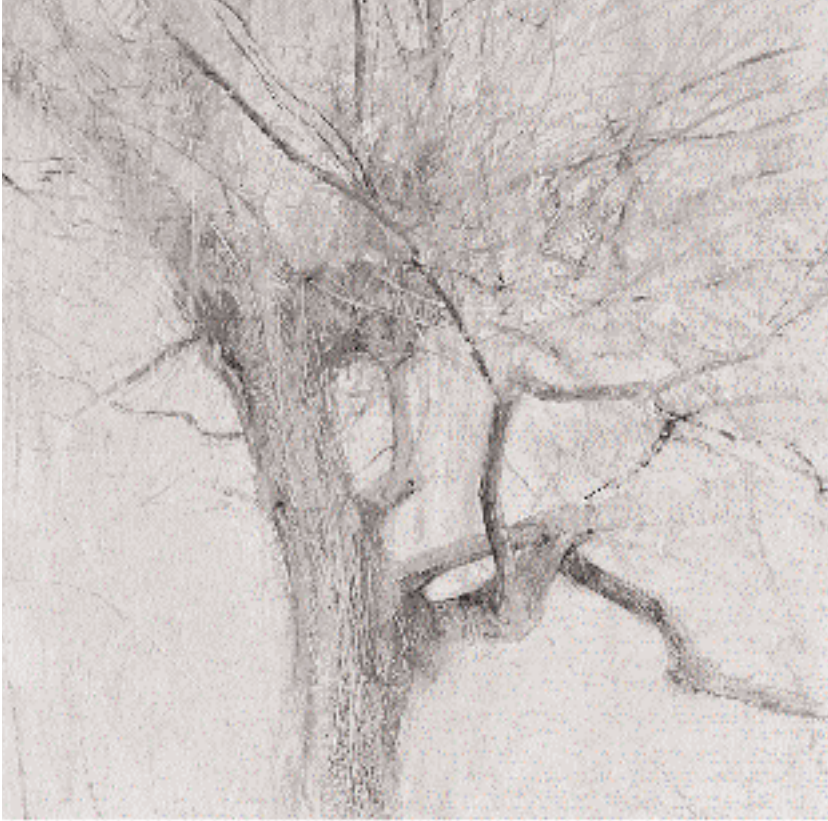
special role in his childhood in Iran, so he decided to begin a series of drawings of the second tree.

The configuration of branches on a mulberry is irregular and complicated: larger branches grow out from the bole at all angles, changing direction as they grow, and smaller twigs grow alongside them in forked wands. A mulberry tree thus sits squarely and stubbornly in three-dimensional space. Wölfflin noted that Michelangelo often chose stances for his monumental painted nudes that are chiral, spiraling down from arm to torso to legs, and so must be read as embedded in—as existing in—three dimensions. It was his conscious rejection of the planar compositions of the human body that Italy had inherited from Byzantium. Ostovani makes similar choices in drawing his mulberry trees. His trees present themselves in winter, leafless; he rarely draws the whole tree but rather concentrates on a nodal point where many branches protrude, ascending like the steps of a spiral staircase, and the trunk itself twists upward into a spiral. At these junctures, the growth of the tree also creates surfaces of “negative curvature,” where one meridian curves upwards and another, perpendicular to it, curves downwards, like a saddle, or a human throat and shoulder.

Given that choice of subject, the usual laws of perspective are not much use in establishing the sense of three dimensionality. The spatial extendedness of the complex heart of the tree develops from within, as the tree grows by itself, not from its external relations to other things, like pillars in the background diminishing regularly with distance. All the painter has to work with, really, is the depiction of a spiral as a spiral, of a saddle-curve, of crowded relations of before-behind and side-by-side, of diminished or augmented shadow, and of a tree as, recognizably, *that tree*. All these depictions strain against the canvas, against the paper. Thus in #22 in the exhibition, reproduced here, *Mûrier Blanc* (30 cm x 30 cm, 2006, watercolor, pencil and pastel on paper), the trunk spirals up: the lowest branch thrusts sideways but then turns towards the viewer; the next branch grows behind it, and the next behind the bole, backwards; the next great branch, almost as thick as the trunk itself, grows backwards as well, at a point where the trunk divides and curves sideways in the opposing direction.

The objects live their own lives: I have in fact been to visit the black mulberry in the Luxembourg Gardens, and recognized it right away despite a rather vague description of its whereabouts. A number of the landscapes in this exhibition were invented from memory, but Ostovani went to the Luxembourg Gardens to draw his mulberry trees and even photographed them, before he worked up those images at home. In the book with quotations from Louis-René des Forêts’s *Ostinato, fragments inédits*, the first and last images are reproduced directly from a sketchbook, with the ledger lines still showing. The artist’s hand asserts itself, however, without denying its own verisimilitude. I will try to explain how this could be, as concretely as possible, in the case of *Mûrier Blanc*, #22.

But first I digress. Writing about the chemical table of elements recently, I came to understand an obvious fact in a new light: the hori-



Mûrier Blanc, 2006. Watercolor, pencil and pastel, 11¾ x 11¾ in. (30 x 30 cm).

zontal order of the elements means something quite different from the vertical order. The horizontal order has more to do with the physical composition of the elements: the addition of one more proton/electron correlates with a sideways move on the table. The vertical order has more to do with how the elements are conceptualized (for example, one column contains all the “noble gases”) and so, historically, has been a greater topic of debate. This insight led me to think that in other kinds of depictions, some aspects of the representation may do the work of denoting, of expressing the reality of the object, and other aspects may do the work of expressing the awareness of the one who represents, the work of investigating the object, of re-creation, of thought; and these aspects may be juxtaposed or superimposed. Of course, I’m talking about a polarization here that is always incomplete: mind and hand undertake the task of being objective, and leave their trace on it, and awareness requires an object in order to express itself. All the same, the exercise of segregating elements this way, I reflected, might reveal something useful.

In this *Mûrier Blanc*, the artist’s close attention to the conformation of

the tree, convincingly articulated because of his skill as a draftsman, establishes its independent existence in space. The tree's complex shape, first laid in watercolor and then refined in pencil, testifies to Ostovani's visits to the Luxembourg Gardens and long moments spent in the presence of the tree; but a closer look at the surface of the work, evident even in the catalogue reproduction, reveals a network of incised lines that are not at all realistic. On the trunk, while it suggests the vertical scoring of mulberry bark, it is too erratic and agitated to be naturalistic: it is the record of the artist's gesture. Higher up, it enters into the twigs drawn in watercolor and pencil on the major branches, where once again it goes against the grain: the scorings move at odd angles to the direction of the branches. Either they undercut the impression of spatiality, revealing the paper underneath as well as the trace of the artist's hand; or they play sideways, not exactly like more twigs but rather like places where twigs might have been if the tree were moved by wind. Then they make the tree temporal and dynamic, but the temporality and agitation belong to memory, to mind. Incisions also score the space that surrounds the tree, a veil of pastel: there, along with some pencil lines and (harder to see in the reproduction) erasures, they are pure gesture.

The incising also brings out a subtle kind of spatial counterpoint between the implied planes of the image and the material planes of paper or canvas, layers of incised paint and (in other works) the applied layers of collage. Because of Ostovani's choice of object and the way he draws in watercolor and pencil, the tree presents itself as stubbornly three dimensional, struggling to disentangle itself from the pictorial plane. But the plane of the paper is as physical as the tree, and so it is not entirely planar after all. The incising adds a faint three dimensionality to the image which is of course more evident in the original than in a catalogue reproduction: tiny, fugitive canyons on the uplands of the watercolor with its veils of pastel. And the two kinds of spatiality, like two different melodic lines, play with and against each other. Aspects of the image that attest most strongly to the intervention of mind and hand (the gestures of pencil lines, erasures, and incisions freed from the constraint of objective representation) also remind us that the reality of the tree is conveyed by an image, and that the image itself is thoroughly material.

Because of this counterpoint, the picture hovers between icon and symbol. As the representation by a gifted draftsman of *that* white mulberry in the Luxembourg Gardens, it is iconic; as the record of the artist's state of mind (or soul and body) and his acts of composition, it is symbolic. It hovers as well between the linear and the painterly (to borrow Wölfflin's terms) and does full justice to both, though Wölfflin argues that the two demands (for beautiful and significant line or for variegated and kinetic surface) are incompatible and can hardly be honored together. Ostovani disproves him with a moving and composed counterpoint worthy of Bach. Because he employs a variety of media in

the same picture, and adds and erases in a visible way, he has thoroughly refined the possibilities of superposition. Because he works in series, the other studies of the white mulberry in the exposition and catalogue further develop and deepen the theme: in some, the mulberry trunk stands quiet, barely articulated; in others, the tree almost (but never entirely) dissolves in a windstorm of gesture.

Ostovani's series are not only refractions of an insistent or beloved thing, but also expressions of the artist's development in relation to that thing. By the time the series is completed, months or years have passed, and he has become an older and altered person. To explore this dimension of his work, I'll touch on his use of shadow in one series devoted to a group of lilies, then to a series that responds to Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, and then I'll return to the exhibition, which included collages of grape clusters that refer to an earlier series as well as to the *Goldberg Variations*.

In a small, square book entitled *Lilium, lilium*, Ostovani assembled about fifty studies of three lilies as they fade from February to May, in a sketchbook whose pages are dated.³ At first glance, one notices the image on each page of a single flower and the beautiful lines the artist discovered in it as it drooped and withered. But the carefully executed lily is white, and the paper of the sketchbook is white; a third element is needed to set off one from the other. On the second page of the notebook, *February 18*, precisely delineated contours and delicate shading help to define the stem, the lowered flower, and a couple of leaves, but behind it Ostovani adds a dark, rectangular backdrop drawn in thicker, heavier pencil, deep black surrounding the flower that thins to a greyer black at the edges, where the grain of the paper shows through and the agitated trace of the artist's hand is more apparent. The lily stands out against it like a ghost, or a pale actor in a spotlight, engulfed by the depths of the stage and black velvet curtains.

Here the elements that express the flower's objectivity on the one hand, and on the other the play of mind, heart and hand, are not so much superimposed as juxtaposed: the image pays homage to the lily, while the shadow seems to express the mind of the artist as he responds to it. As always, however, this opposition between thing depicted and the artist's awareness of and response to it must not be overstated. The shadow is also the emblem of natural dissolution, which has a mind of its own. And the image of the lily is incomplete: those parts of it that lie within the shadow are fully articulated, but the lanceolate leaves that lie beyond are gestural, merely sketched, as if the artist were reminding us that this is *his* depiction, after all. Given the way the image of the lily becomes schematic when the lines fall outside the shadow, it almost seems as if the lily's objective reality depended on the surround of the artist's shadowy awareness, as if the reality and the awareness were locked in an embrace.

³ LILIUM, LILIUM, by *Farhad Ostovani*. Prefaces by *Jean Starobinski* and *Jean-Paul Michel*, trans. by *Stephen Romer*. William Blake & Co. €33.25.

So when the reader goes through the pages of this notebook, she must track not only the development of the images of lilies, but also of shadows, and how Ostovani leads the flowers and shadows to interact. In the picture labeled *Dimanche, février 20*, for example, the lily has collapsed: the oxbow curve of the stem is so sharp that the lily, hanging down, almost touches it, and the three dependent leaves echo that curve. Here, however, the upper portion of the leaves falls within the shadow (rectangular, and squared off on three sides though rather ragged along the bottom), where they are shaded in and three dimensional like the lily itself. But superimposed on this part of the picture (the lower right-hand corner), Ostovani has added further shadowing as a loose, close zigzag that cuts across and over, uniting both shadow and leaf; the leaves don't emerge from the shadow but are woven into it. And since the crosshatched contour-shadow on the left side of the lily runs parallel to those zigzags, the lily is a bit implicated in the shadow as well.

In the first twenty or so pictures, the shadow is approximately rectangular, and that shapeliness makes it seem formal, discursive, Apollonian; it is a framing device (even though it is also the wing of night) and thus tends to distinguish itself from the image of the lily. And while the flower is carefully drafted, so that its "realistic" delicate outline and shading emphasize its three dimensionality (and independent life), the shadow is emphatically an articulated layer of thick pencil, the record of Ostovani's hand covering the paper. In the later studies of March and April, however, the shadow loses its geometrical definition and often seems to shrink towards the flower until it creates a ramshackle box or medallion of blunted black lines, each one the articulated trace of a passing hand. The shadow becomes more and more constructed, and the flower more and more linear and chaotic as it fades and falls. In the end, the shadow is as picturesque as the flower, and seems more and more independent of the artist and invasive of the flower, while the flower, a thicket of lines, seems more and more constituted by the shadow and dependent on mind. In the image dated *May 1*, the blossom has slipped away entirely, into memory, into nothingness; all that is left is a stem and leaves drawn in outline, and the highly constructed shadows passing among them.

In other works, whose reproductions must be sought in other catalogues, Ostovani moves towards collage. One of these series, elaborated over a period of many years, is entitled *Goldberg Variations*. It is often said of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* that while each variation is the development of a theme, the composer seems just as—if not more—interested in the formal constructions and harmonic progressions that develop it, so that the theme itself fades without ever becoming invisible. It becomes a trace, a reference to a melody if no longer strictly a melody. Ostovani's "Goldberg Variations" begin as ink and watercolor studies on paper of a horizontally placed stem with rose leaves (but no roses). The image is thus drawn mostly in calligraphic black and gray, sometimes with an occasional, superimposed touch of terra cotta color pencil, an accent that warms up the somber ink. The horizontal line of the stem and the



From *Lilium, lilium: 18 fév. 2000* and *1 mai*. Pencil on paper, 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (18.2 x 15.5 cm).

dark, beautifully placed leaves remind one of notes on a staff; even without that association, the visual pattern they set up on the paper insists on being read, linearly and dynamically, as a rhythm.

Eventually, Ostovani begins to juxtapose and superimpose these images by means of collage on canvas. In *Goldberg Variations, No. 10*, he sets up a bass/base line of stems and leaves on the bottom half of a long (11⁷/₈ x 59 inches) canvas, but the stems are arrayed in diagonals on their individual squares and they are quite thorny, with many touches of red.⁴ Three brief sets of leaves on the upper half of the canvas punctuate the linear array. Over this, Ostovani has set a number of plain squares of Nepal paper applied to the under-composite-image here and there; their sides diverge from the vertical by a very slight angle, but that divergence is emphasized by four slightly tilted red lines that echo the edges. Some of the squares of Nepal paper interrupt a stem with leaves by a squared-off white shadow, through which it barely shows, establishing a secondary visual rhythm. While not so apparent in the catalogue reproduction, Ostovani's collage calls attention to the three dimensionality of the material of the representation just as strongly as his incisions do elsewhere. The stem and leaves do homage to the objectivity of the roseless rose as silhouettes and as signs, in the manner of Chinese painting whose source is calligraphy, so here the objective aspect of the work is planar. The layering of paper on canvas is the testimony of mind, of the work's constructedness, and it is three dimensional.

Ostovani also works by juxtaposition. In another collage on canvas, *Study for Aria and Goldberg Variations, 1998*, two squares are juxtaposed in a large two-panel display (80 x 160 cm); each square contains sixteen smaller square elements, across which the stems and leaves flow in roughly four tiers.⁵ On the left-hand panel, the leaves are filled in by dark or lightly sparing ink, or—rarely—left in outline. Sometimes the thin white borders between the small squares interrupt the roses, but sometimes the roses violate the borders, growing right through them. The outcome of the conflict between the formality of mind and the luxuriance of the object is thus indeterminate. On the right-hand panel, the squares are so darkly shadowed by layers of ink, that only the lattice of the sixteen squares and suggestions of the leaves (in some squares they fuse with the shadow) remain. *Aria + Variations* and *Goldberg Variations* are written in that beautiful earth-red pencil across the bottom of both panels.

For many years, Ostovani has painted studies of grape clusters and olive trees, emblems of his lost Iranian childhood, like his mulberry trees, one of his mountains, and the enclosed landscape of *Aliof's Garden*. Some of them were included in the exhibition at the Galerie

⁴ GRAPE AND OLIVE TREE, by *Farhad Ostovani*. Texts by *Yves Bonnefoy, Françoise Jaunin, and Dominique Radrizzani*. Louis Stern Fine Arts, Los Angeles/Galerie Lambert Rouland, Paris. €30.00. Plate 38.

⁵ OSTOVANI: Paintings, Drawings and Illustrated Books, by *Farhad Ostovani*. Texts by *Ed de Heer, Bob van den Boogert, Bernard Blatter, Jean Starobinski, and Yves Bonnefoy*. Rembrandt House. €29.50. Pages 116–117.

Lambert Rouland, though they are not in the catalogue. Grapes, like the heart of a mulberry tree, live in three dimensions because of their roundness; and their translucent colors have always attracted painters. Ostovani's watercolors of grape clusters make the color, translucence and roundness of the grapes so vivid that one expects to smell and taste them, like the grapes of Zeuxis; but he always chooses clusters with a prominent, beautifully curved stem (and sparse or missing grapes), so that the painterly treatment of the grapes' surfaces is balanced by his linear attention to the stem, which unifies the whole arrangement. In these pictures from an earlier exhibition, the stem is the element of mind; in other pictures, the grapes are made thoughtful by shadow and incision.⁶

In the back room of the Galerie Lambert Rouland during the recent exhibition, there were three studies of grapes *en collage*. Some of the elements of the collage were small lithographs of dark grapes on fine Nepal paper, reversed before they were applied so as to become shadows of the original image, as well as of the grapes described above them in pastel, watercolor and pencil. A more monumental work on canvas from 2001 (251.5 x 37 cm), *Étude pour Variation en ut de Mozart*, resembles the long collage for the "Goldberg Variations" discussed above, except that the elements are grapes and their composition is more curvilinear and centrally placed on the canvas. The grapes are rounder and more palpable than the calligraphic leaves, so as if in counterpoise, mind over object, the applied squares of half-transparent Nepal paper are more numerous and call attention to themselves more sharply as elements of the composition: the rhythm is established as much by the snowfall of square-papers as by the grapes and stems. And along the bottom, in the same warm red pencil, run the musical titles of the work and the name of Mozart, and then, much smaller and in black, Ostovani's signature.

⁶ *Grape and Olive Tree*, op. cit.