

Hunting West¹

Rami Maymon, Shay Zilberman

March 5 – May 22

Shay Zilberman (left room)

The book of Genesis tells the story of forty days and nights in which a microcosm tossed back and forth in the belly of Noah's Ark, between "the fountains of the great deep and the open windows of heaven." At the end of these forty days, the chosen, protected universe ended on top of Mount Ararat.² There, Noah opened the Ark's window for the first time, "and sent forth a raven, which went forth to and from, until the waters were dried up from off the earth." Like a messenger unable to complete his mission, the raven kept flying in circles around the ark. Was it banished or did the hatch open to let it back in after flying over the primordial chaos? By then, "Noah already sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground. But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth, he put forth his hand, and pulled her in unto him into the ark". The dove went back and forth, covering a great distance until finally she delivered the news: an olive leaf. And the raven?

As the man flung open the shutter to the tapping wind, he discovered the Raven, "a grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird³." Dark and stately, as old as time, the ebony Raven in Edgar Allen Poe's poem flew through the window and into the room, where he "perched upon a bust of Pallas just above the chamber door — Perched, and sat, and nothing more." The Raven stood motionless on top of wisdom, art, and justice. The man tries to plead with the fowl: "Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore! ... Leave my loneliness unbroken! — quit the bust above my door!" But the raven does not move, and to each question responds: Nevermore. Yearning to reunite with his dead love, the man looks for words of wisdom from the Raven, trying to decipher the prophecy of his croak: Nevermore. And so, the raven stands on the threshold, as a guardian that comes between the souls of the living and the dead, stopping the man's journey to oblivion.

The door opens to reveal a raven, white as a dove. Materialized in porcelain, she stands in the gallery like the negative of her black feathers. According to Ovid, the "Raven had once been a bird of silvery-white plumage, so that he rivalled the spotless doves, nor yielded to the geese which one day were to save the Capitol with their watchful cries, nor to the river-loving swan." But his tongue was his undoing. The bird's habit to speak ill led to a divine punishment and changed its form. "Thy plumage, talking raven, though white before, had been suddenly changed to black⁴." In a renewed metamorphosis Shay Zilberman restores the raven's white color. He casts her in her former glory, bringing to mind the Tang Dynasty tradition of pottery tomb figures in human or animal shape, placed

1. The exhibition's title was inspired by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's poem On the Sea.

2. Itzhak Benyamini, "The Flood" in Abraham's Laughter: Interpretation of Genesis as Critical Theology (Tel Aviv: Resling Publishing, 2011), pp. 59–72 (in Hebrew).

3. Edgar Allan Poe, The Raven, 1845, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48860/the-raven>.

4. Ovid, Metamorphoses vol. I, with an English trans. by Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916), pp. 97–105..

as tomb guardians who protect and accompany the dead on his journey. In an ongoing transformation from good to bad and back to good — as a mythical symbol of hell and evil, the harbinger of death or a sacred bird, goddess of war and wisdom — the raven is enveloped by contrasting meanings drawn from legends and mythologies of different cultures.

When they sailed out to conquer new lands, seas, and trade routes in the 16th century, Portuguese ships carried valuable porcelains from China to Europe. They led the migration of porcelain to the West. Originating in early Chinese dynasties, porcelain was woven and integrated into local European ceramic traditions. The pages of a British textbook about porcelain vases techniques from the second half of the 20th century are spread across the wall of the gallery. Like a master cartographer, Zilberman liberates the heart of the porcelain vases, leaving outlines and outer borders and reconstructing topographical layers. Using collage technique, he empties or covers the walls of the porcelain vases from Eastern and Western countries, ancient and later periods. The inside of the vase, a two-dimensional photograph, gains a second life as three-dimensional and multilayered, swathed in shrouds from new worlds: textures and shapes drawn from ambiguous photographs, taken out of books and catalogues from the artist's collection. The vases, as receptacles, as chests that hold the entire world, as urns in the dead's journey to eternity — just like the raven, in different shapes and colors. From the flight of the bird across the pages of the book, a black and white surface, a new window opens to reveal a depth of field in its multitude of colors.

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