



Isobel Wohl

Nothing in Isolation:

The Art of Abraham Kritzman

Abraham is talking about the ones in glass cases, stuck fast to ivory card by a pin through the thorax, labelled with Latin name, sex, latitude and longitude of collection, date, name of collector. Before the lid was closed, impassive hands spread fragile bright wings flat and wide to show with perfect clarity every colour, dot, and stripe. It's easy to tell a stone-cold viceroys from a dead monarch, especially if you're armed with foreknowledge of their differences: size, presence or absence of thick black line on the hind wings. Later, online, I'll read that there's a slight give to the body when the pin enters, that if you do it enough you get used to the feeling.

It's November 2022, and I'm talking on Zoom with my friend, the artist Abraham Kritzman. I already know that whatever text I write about his show *A Hand Beneath The Hills* at Danielle Arnaud Gallery will have to respond to the flux and multiplicity that characterise his practice.

I don't want my work to be pinned down like a butterfly, Abraham tells me, because once you pin it down it's not a butterfly anymore. Once you pin it down it's something else.



Between the Flowing Hills, left-hand image. Over the mottled cliff green knolls droop, and from their grass blue flowers grow toward a fiery sky. Underneath, a yawning horizon of yellow spans the frame until a blue outcropping occludes it, craggy as rock candy. Far away, backlit by the gold sky, an ash-grey shelter doubles and inverts itself in a gold ocean, then butts up against—bleeds into?—a fiery ground. Surface slides over surface, and place folds into place.

Two fat grey lines burrow across the image like earthworms, charting part of the outline of a portal or pool. Over the yellow sky, long soft marks of darker grey hover like the trails of falling meteors, or smoke rising. Two bolts of green jut forward between them. Inky threads play over the lower half of the painting: rivulets, ripples, veins. Above, the same marks recur as grey blinks in the yellow sky. Earlier, I thought they were birds in flight.



In Abraham's work, processes and images divide like cells, taking the original dynamism in different directions. *Between the Flowing Hills* is a diptych, like all of the paintings in this exhibition.

But these images are not shown in their pairs, as would be conventional. The two parts are shown near one another, but not side by side. Walking through the exhibition, you encounter the first image in each set as if it might be an individual, sufficient unto itself. When you come across the second image, Abraham tells me, he hopes it feels like meeting someone for the second time: *I know you!*

Many of Abraham's sculptures and prints are also dual. In the series *Ashomon*, there are two distinct forms of intervention into the dark ceramic objects: the artist scoops out broad shallow areas, and also makes carefree doodles that inscribe trees, clouds, hands, and other images with a fine-tipped tool. To create some of his woodcuts, Abraham inks the plates and sets them on top of paper but, rather than printing traditionally, presses on their backs in gestures almost like drawing. The image that results is both halved and doubled: the impression of the relief carving in the wood plate is only visible as the impression of blind touch and weight. Nothing is in isolation.



At first I thought: I won't just write *about* Abraham's twins, doubles, and foils; I'll *recreate* them in the form of my text. I imagined paragraph-long stories in split pairs like Abraham's diptychs. An organic process of free association gave rise to lists of words that reminded me of the artworks: *tower, ash, desert, river, relic, veil, fen, garden*, and more, as well as markers of time like *whereupon, thereupon, after which, by which time, still*. I began to incorporate the words into pieces of flash fiction that responded to Abraham's artworks.

But how would I know for sure if my stories reflected my friend's art? I wanted to be certain, so I began to come up with strict rules: the stories in each pair would share the exact same sentence structures, for example. Or each pair would be united by the use of the same Janus word, which is a word that means its own opposite. One story would use *fast* to mean *speedy*, while its twin would use the same word to mean *tightly held*.

Rigidity plagued me. I had fallen into a process that was totally contrary to the ethos of Abraham's art, which I love. I'd thought I was being playful, but I had been trying to unify doubling, to centralise organic proliferation, to stick change in place, to freeze flux. I wanted to make sure to catch the work and show it clearly, but my writing was becoming something else. I spent more time with Abraham's art.



Whereupon you went into the desert. When you came back you told me you'd built towers of ash and stone, then left them out for the rain, which would not come. You'd been on your knees the whole time, you said: digging, stacking rocks, drawing plans for your city with a finger in the dust. You had no idea I was there the whole time, already in your city before the wind shattered slidingly across the plain and took the touch of your finger away. But being on your knees was just like being on mine, so it all worked out.



Abraham's paintings capture the moment when the world opens into something strange and unexpected. Overlapping circles make a crescent moon. Soft marks of yellow and peach make a bird that, eyeless, looks at me with such self-possession I think it might speak. Tall grasses are flames. A featureless wolf rests his misshapen head on the white lattice of a picnic table. In many of the paintings, greys and earth tones occur in the foreground, building forms with an intentional, friendly unevenness that leaves visible a bright ground underneath: the burgeoning, neon-tinged pale yellow or orange of a sunrise or sunset.

Showing and hiding are symbiotic in Abraham's art. He called a past show *Smoking* because he was interested in events that naturally conceal themselves. Smoke veils whatever creates it—a fire, a blazing meadow, friends in a smoke-filled room. It hides things because that is its nature, not because of any intent to obfuscate. Abraham's works are complex, but the work builds on itself organically, expressing the layered nature of lived experience.

Take, for instance, his three-part work *Our Jumo to the Desert*, inspired by a trip he took with his partner Matan. First, Abraham engraved marks on an aluminium plate. Then, rather than printing the image, he rubbed white oil paint over the metal surface and into the grooves. Later, he painted more white on top: thick lines like branches, dots like berries, shapes that might refer to birds in flight. There is the Abraham who went on the trip and the one who remembered it later; the Abraham who engraved, and the one who smeared white into the metal furrows, and the one who added another layer of images. The artwork encompasses all of these moments, all of these selves.



Our Jumo to the Desert, left panel of triptych, 2021
engraving and oil on aluminium, each panel 60 x 80 cm

If you spoke Greek then we would have had no problem, at least not until the shelf got knocked out of place and all the bones dropped onto the floor. Someone had to pick up the rocks that were once a hand. See these carpal bones, the ones that used to compose a wrist? One's shaped like a boat, another like a head, another like a boot, another like a crescent moon. There's a rounded cube, a slanted pyramid, and two different wedge forms. None of the bones have flat facets, but that's why they make such accurate dice.



I look at dead butterflies for sale on eBay, where a rare female *Delias narses* will cost you \$990, or \$44.11 for 24 months with PayPal Credit, plus \$25 shipping (no returns). Condition: used. *A-quality with three repairs and one repaired antenna*, the seller assures me.

Once you pin it down it's something else, Abraham said. He was right.

You can have a B-quality butterfly specimen, but there's no such thing as a B-quality butterfly.



Time is a pomegranate cut in half, made up of chambers bordered by pith that tears under eager fingers, its fruit tangy, glowing like rubies or rats' eyes, full of seeds of time. Time is an alien's heart, unfamiliar, abounding with never-ending atria, generating new ventricles with each beat. Time sits on top of time like burst bubbles of soap on the surface of a child's bath, a rainbow sliding into view when you cock your head to pick up the bobbing tugboat. Time ventures out at night, like a moth, and can't resist fire.



An insect's adult form, the one it takes after it emerges from the pupa or chrysalis, is called the *imago*, from the Latin word for image. Midway through a search for entomological definitions, I come across the following on Wikipedia: *The imago is the only stage during which the insect... has functional wings.*

Functional wings. In Abraham Kritzman's work, the thing pinned to the board, the object that is no longer a butterfly, is not the image either. The image is the creature in flight.

Isobel Wohl is a Brooklyn-based writer. A native New Yorker, she spent seven years in London, where she received her MA and PhD from the Royal College of Art.

Wohl's first novel, *Cold New Climate*, was published by Weatherglass Books in April 2021. She is also the author of a short story collection, *Winter Strangers* (MA BIBLIOTHÈQUE, 2019). Her essays have appeared in *The Irish Times*, *Literary Hub*, and *Astra Magazine* (online), among other publications. She is currently working on her second novel. She is also a visual artist.



Terrace Tree 064, 2022 ceramic 35 x 35 cm

Cover: *Between the Flowing Hills* 2020
oil on board each panel 40 x 30cm

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