

## While Meditating on War

### Text by Ronit Eden

Penelope, wife of Odysseus, awaits his return for over twenty years. The first ten years are those of the Trojan War; the next ten are the long journey back to Ithaca. Throughout the two parts of Homer's epic, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Penelope does not express her feelings in her own voice.

The poet depicts only the people around her and their thoughts about her predicament and how she should conduct herself. Some of them share in her grief, others criticize her, but nearly ever, do we hear her own words.

From a current point of view, upon fresh critical reading of the original text, one can appreciate Penelope's pivotal role in the plot and in its development. Nevertheless, her daily suffering is barely expressed first hand.

Centuries later, Roman poet Ovid penned a collection of letters from mythological figures mistreated or abandoned by their loved ones. One of these was a letter in Penelope's name to her beloved Odysseus, describing her trials. Penelope thus acquired a voice and a presence. If it hadn't been for Ovid and other writers, that voice would not have been heard.

When I received the images in preparation for the show, I noticed a common motif in many of the works: absence. Where war has taken place, signs and traces remain, whereas people, structures, even objects no longer exist. Many of the works in the exhibition signify that which is missing or lacking, the voice of the absent, offering clues or symbols that generate a composition, thereby taking a stand, possibly even protecting us from the horror.

The most shocking moments in Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* are the moments of silence. There are no words left to describe the horror, and no answers to the questions. Silence, like absence, best describes that which is no longer.

In Greek and Roman mythology, as in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, war was depicted as heroic and noble; a golden opportunity for adventure for men, which would make them mythological heroes. Ovid, on his part, speaks for those hurt by war, any war.

Observing the diverse works on view, one realizes that regardless of geography and language, they all refer to occurrences in the outside world that prod artists to look inside themselves and create art.

The reality of war produces visual material of which any attempt to return to that reality or to reproduce it, is a-priori doomed to failure.

The works in the current exhibition indicate various ways to construe the events of war; to gather the signs and evidence to produce a work of art and, like Ovid, give voice and presence to that which no longer exists. Reality and fiction blend; as in the case of Penelope's aforesaid letters, the artists recount a story anew, creating a visual sequence which shows how central violence still is today.

In her video *Grain*, Belit, one of the participating artists, wonders whether the transition from images of violence to violence of images is an abomination. American historian Dominick LaCapra's book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, which discusses the trauma of a people, may offer a possible answer. Trauma, he says, cannot be described in words or represented via images. Still, it has to be processed so as to allow for healing, providing society an opportunity to come to terms with its past traumas. Only by acknowledging trauma and confronting it is it possible to overcome, if only partially, dire past experiences and constitute a more just society at present and in the future.