

Interview

MICHAL ROVNER, INTO THE NIGHT

BY HALEY WEISS
PHOTOGRAPHY CHRISTIAN HÖGSTEDT
PUBLISHED 09/27/16

In her home country of Israel, Michal Rovner lives on a farm haunted by the howl of jackals. While she has created stirring works about histories and loss, frequently picturing the mass migration of unidentifiable humans (moving in an unknown direction, or gathered for cultural examination in a petri dish), the jackals have remained present—their signature call carrying through her windows at night.

Over the past year, she joined them; in a field near her home, she spent hours photographing and filming the wild canines before stripping them bare in images: shadowy silhouettes, glowing eyes, an eerie shifting of paws and turning of sharp heads. The resulting series, "Night"—which is currently on view at Pace Gallery's 25th Street location in New York—was intended as a departure from her more social works, but of course her societal concerns seeped through. "I wanted to interact with the night. I wanted to interact with my fears," Rovner tells us. "But then the work has its own will."

In photographs, videos, and an installation, the jackals often appear with alert expressions. Their palpable discomfort and slight movements portend an uncertain, negative outcome for us all. Their surroundings are unintelligible, with an air of the post-apocalyptic. They're disconcerting in their silence (save the installation's audio), and an anxious reminder of the precipices—political, environmental, etcetera—upon which our world seems to stand. It's as though they sense something we don't yet want to acknowledge; seers and metaphors found by Rovner in "the depths of the shadows."

We walked through "Night" with Rovner while she was in New York, and suggested that perhaps there's more clarity in the dark than in the day. She agreed. "A lot of what you see in the day is superficial and a lot of it is details," she says. "The first thing I do in my work, after I record something or collect it, is I erase the details. I always try to get underneath the details, underneath the story, underneath the outside layer, to maybe pull out the real thing—the real deal."

MICHAL ROVNER: All of the exhibitions I had before I went into this subject—I'm maybe associated with "the artist who has these little people walking," sometimes they are like bacteria in petri dishes, sometimes they are covering whole walls, they are faceless, they're sort of universal. But in a way you know they are always real people, it's never animation—I always start with reality, in anything I do, everything I do, I always start from something real. It could've been easier, but I go and film 50 people in Israel, 50 people in Russia, and 50 people in Romania, in Paris, because I really like to get some particles of something real. The last show that I had at Pace London, and what I was showing for the last year, was very, very strongly connected to what I felt was going on in the world. I called it "Panorama;" panorama is the first word for landscape in Greek. It was about [how today] we see everything, we get to see everything, everything is shown to you whether you want it or not, but all of the time you only see fragments of reality. The big picture we really don't see; it's kind of hard to make it up. But one thing that for sure you have to be aware of is this huge shift in the world going on; this gigantic amount, we're talking about 60 million people displaced.

I did bring part of that into this exhibition, but when I started the work for this show, I suddenly felt that on one side, you're very concerned about what's going on the world—there's really a feeling that something is shifting like tectonic plates moving underneath you—and there's also a great agony and disappointment, because you see the degree of violence, you just watch it all the time. I have CNN highlights on my iPad, and I would say about 70 percent of the time, when I lift the cover off of it, it starts with CNN: "At least na-na-na people da-da-da." So for some reason, I actually didn't want to use people. I did a project a couple of years ago, since the last show I had here, in memory of the million and a half children that were murdered in the Shoah, in the Holocaust. I spent months there, maybe half a year almost, in Auschwitz, drawing little drawings. All the time, every night, I would come up and the same question was, "How did it happen? How could it have happened that another train and another train..." And you know, now, people could've said, "We didn't know, we don't know," and I don't want to compare it because it's another magnitude—it's another vocabulary of action—but we see everything, we see what's going on in Syria, we see what's going on with the refugees. What can you do about it? And we have to do something.

Out of all of this, I decided that it's kind of a night period for me. I decided to go to the night, myself, and started to go out to the fields, where I would encounter things that I cannot see very well, that I cannot detect very well, and to put myself in a position where I'm going to be suspected as a being entering a territory of other beings, and I'm also going to suspect them. I have to be very alert, and they are going to be very alert—this kind of position I felt was very much what is going on in the world for me. ... I carry some kind of consideration and weight and observations about what is going on in the world, but I don't go to execute it. I don't say, "I'm going to do a show that will deal with the situation of the world." It's weaved into whatever I do if it's art. It's there, somewhere.

HALEY WEISS: I think those layers will always be there if you're wrestling internally with those issues, right? It's interesting too, with wildlife as your subject—I think about the wolf in the American West, and how they've been killed or protected over the years, and there's this question of whose land is it really, which is another layer to that discussion of migration.

ROVNER: Totally—you know, we have it very, very near to us. The night is there, we're trying to ignore the night, the night was always there as children. We're always trying to avoid being in the darkness, not knowing, and also encountering animals. There's something about them not wanting to be seen; they go out at night, they hide, they don't want to be shown. It's very interesting genetically that they have to hide from us actually. Between themselves, they smell each other, but there is this thing of hiding, of suspicion. Then you come like surveillance, with some cameras in the dark—sometimes it's very much like a detective, you're coming to detect something about them, and they are watching you. This moment, where we you sit for days and days and days in the dark, you don't know if the hill is a hill or a mountain, and this sound, is it just a bird or is it a snake? You don't know what will come and suddenly the bushes move. Maybe you're afraid. I'm okay—that's why I'm there—I don't want to be too afraid, but a little bit. Also, it's Israel, so I said, "Maybe there's a terrorist. I'm so near to the border, maybe it's some Palestinians. I like them in the morning when they come and we talk but in the evening, who knows, maybe they don't know that I'm nice." Then there's this jackal out there; you see the light, you just see the shiny eyes—you look at them and they look at you. This kind of encounter, it's very strong, it's actually very prehistoric. It's a very strong encounter of the other, of what is the other, whether it's something that threatens you or you threaten them? What you said is beautiful, about the question of territory.

For me, there's something about the scale and the decision, after all these years, after all of these faceless people, to have portraits, but the portraits are [of animals]. It's also like an ancient wisdom, looking into their eyes, because they're always goddesses and gods, like the god Anubis. He's the one who's accompanying the souls to the next life, and he's the one who decides if they will be able to cross or not. They are also the ones that are guarding the graves, and they are the ones who communicate between the dead and the alive. There's something about night and day, and life and

death, but they are also mentioned a lot of times in the bible, showing up in places of desolation, or after destruction, or after the humans left the place, suddenly they would show up...

WEISS: Maybe not in art but in life, the night is often framed as when things go to sleep, or it's black and white, there's light and then there's darkness. But it's sort of a world unto itself, which is what you're pointing out.

ROVNER: Yes, it's a world. It's almost like a parallel world that I felt. I live on a farm in Israel, but even if you go out to New Jersey... I go back to [the idea] that we are avoiding all of these unknowns, we're avoiding the night—most of us—we're avoiding the encounters, but we're also afraid to deal with something unknown, unseen. ... There's this progress, incredible progress of technology, everything is figured out, everything is known, everything is systematic and under control, communication is going on, but still there is such a great portion of life that we have utterly no control over. It's completely chaotic. Something could happen overnight.

WEISS: Spending so much solitary time at night, looking so closely—I guess not solitary because you're with the wildlife—how did that make you view the day differently?

ROVNER: I feel different as a person. I feel I was somewhere. I'm very partial to go back. For me, it acted like a magnet; it's something that you... [pauses] It was very hard for me to get away, especially when I started to hear—you stand in the field and you suddenly hear, you know how jackals sound? [howls] Suddenly you hear it all around you and it's very powerful. It's other powers, it's very mystical, and it's very interesting. You also develop senses of hearing and looking which are very different. After a while, I realized that I see better. First, you don't see anything. I think the daylight becomes very harsh, a very ordinary life. It's the life that you see, and the life that you don't see, I would say. Knowing that this night exists also, I start to look differently even at the field where I live. I know it when I sometimes walk out in the night; it's an entire other universe there, there's another world out there, and it has very strong powers. And it's there all the time, even when you are not looking. It made me be more aware of it.

WEISS: How much time did you spend recording?

ROVNER: Hours and hours of months and months, and I went a few times a week. I usually go to bed early to read. I read and I always say that I'm not a "bohemian artist;" I need to read for one or two hours in the evening, and the quiet, so I don't hang out a lot. But now I was hanging out and it was until very, very late. But I really discovered the tension of them looking at us, and me looking at them, and how after if I was sitting for a long time, they'd think, "Okay, she's not moving. She comes every day." They look like a seismograph; they're so sensitive. That's what animals do all of the time; they watch out, they watch out, and I saw, "This is us now." Us, the world, we are watching out.

It's not *National Geographic*. I didn't go out to investigate the wildlife at night, I didn't go out to make a documentary or capture jackals.

WEISS: Did you come out of making this work feeling any better about the situation the world is in and these events that are happening? Or feeling any differently?

ROVNER: No. I think that the world is in a very serious decline—very, very serious. We are getting used to levels of violence, we are getting used to seeing these horrific things going on all the time. [pauses] I think it's tough. It's rough.

We are very concerned all the time with figuring out new technologies and advances in science, but really [while] our future is dependent on science and progress, it's not less dependent on the way we treat each other. There is something there, in the base of all of that. You look at them, the animals in the wild, and they stay the same. They have their rules which I cannot decipher, and there's

something very strong about that, it's also unknown and for me unpredictable. But they stay there; they're very stable. We're progressing on a lot of fronts, but on the aspect of your responsibility—just the very basics of how we treat each other—before we learn mathematics and computers and science in school, and languages and all of this, the basis of it: What is it to be a human? What responsibility do you have? You can feel that something terrible is going on in another place in the world, and it's the other, it's not *you*. It's always *there*, it's *them*. But this *them* is also you.

"NIGHT" IS ON VIEW AT PACE GALLERY'S 25TH STREET LOCATION IN NEW YORK THROUGH OCTOBER 22, 2016.





