

Clashing Myths in the Twilight Zone

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Greek mythology tells the story of Phaëton, who boasted being the son of Phoebus, the Sun God.¹ Goaded by one of his friends to prove this, Phaëton approached his father who, having agreed to do anything to prove his paternity, was obliged to let Phaëton ride the sun chariot. The inexperienced Phaëton lost control of the horses' reins and caused the earth at times to burn and at others to freeze, as he veered closer to and away from it with the chariot, until Zeus, king of the gods, was compelled to hurl his lightning at the chariot and halt it. Phaëton was thrown out and plunged to his death in the River Eridanus. The arrogance of the son of a god, who wanted to prove his independence and his skill in his father's art, believing his divine affinity would protect him, cost him his life.

Unlike Icarus, whose frivolity caused the wax of his artificial wings to melt as he soared to the sun and sank into his death at sea, Phaëton feigned to rule a kingdom that was not his own, despite his predictable failure.

In the painting **Self Portrait Falling from the Sky**, 2008, a naked male figure is seen descending from the heights of the pale blue sky onto the dry earth of the Kishon River, which flows through Kfar Yehoshua, in which Elie Shamir was born and where returned to live. This figure, identified from the title with the painter, hangs between heaven and earth, as if having travelled on the roof of the world, trying to rule it with a high hand, is now about to crash onto the fortified reality of the Jezre'el Valley.

Shamir, third generation of Kfar Yehoshua settlers, is dropped from the sublime world of spiritual creation onto the world of corporeal labor, but his crash is delayed and he remains suspended between the two, as if his fate is hanging in the balance and he evades it through the act of painting. The space opened before the viewer in pale hues is a surrealist twilight zone of a mythical fantasy emerging from the valley's earth and crashing back into it like a boomerang that has sobered up on its way.

In his 1980s paintings, Shamir's figures emerge from the hard, ascetic earth, dropping their heads downwards, with an extinguished gaze, under sealed horizon skies. They are tied to the land of their origin through fate, earth permeates them and buries them alive. With time, the figures have lost their rawness and become distilled into identifiable, specific details that gaze directly at the viewer.² Now the artist turns his face back to the earth, but from two views — an upper perspective view, and a panoramic view, from within and without

the painting. Involved and disengaged, sinking and delayed. He surrenders to the valleys' outstretched arms, to its wrinkled furrows, concealing troubles and Sisyphean dedication, restrained and accepting.

Yet, alongside the danger, there also seems to be elation. The artist hovers without a parachute, without a safety net, yet is not castrated by the fear of experience. The valley's earth had served, then, as a springboard to the unknown, beyond the boundaries of the known and the near, above the familiar territories of home.

1. See for example Ovid, *Metamorphoses II*, translated by David Raeburn, Penguin Classics, London, 2004.

2. See also "A Conversation between Elie Shamir and Galia Uli", *Elie Shamir, Kfar Yehoshua, Jezre'el Valley, A Selection of Works: 1980-1997*, catalogue of the exhibition, curator: Esty Reshet, The Art Gallery, Library and Memorial Center, Kiryat Tivon, 1998.