

University for the Creative Arts  
Research Project Portfolios

# Floating World

By Ori Gersht



# Project Details

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Name of Researcher: Professor Ori Gersht

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Name of Output: *Floating World*

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Links: Artist website:  
<https://www.origersht.com/copy-of-fragile-land-2018-4>

UCARO:  
<https://research.uca.ac.uk/3007/>

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Output Type: M - Exhibition (body of photographic artworks exhibited in multiple venues)

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Year and mode of dissemination: SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Ben Brown Fine Art, London, 11 May - 16 June 2016  
**Catalogue:** <https://www.flipsnack.com/benbrownfinearts/origersht-floating-world.html>

Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, 9 July - 10 September 2016

Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, 8 September - 4 November 2016

Brand New Gallery, Milan, 24 January - 9 March 2017

CRG Gallery, New York, 19 April - 21 May 2017 (this exhibition, titled *Sleepless Nights*, included other works by Gersht in addition to the *On Reflection* series)

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Key Words: Reflection, garden, Kyoto, virtual and material reality

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*Floating World 01*



*Floating World 02*

# Synopsis

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*Floating World* commenced with a visit to the Zen temple gardens in and around Kyoto, Japan, in 2015. Professor Ori Gersht photographed the constructed 'nature' contained in the gardens, choosing views where plants and trees were reflected in water. In a complex post-production process he inverted the images and fused them to create a series of 18 photographic prints, each depicting a new space that contains both the virtual and material worlds.

*Floating World* continues Gersht's research interrogating the evolving nature of the camera, which increasingly creates our world rather than only documenting or recording it. It also extends Gersht's longstanding engagement with the representation of flowers, fruit and trees as products of

culture, history and politics. In *Floating World*, the specific focus is on the Japanese tradition of creating gardens that hover between a utopian ideal and an everyday, but ever-changing, reality, resonating with themes that Gersht has previously explored in works focused on his homeland, Israel.

*Floating World* has been exhibited five times in solo shows in galleries in the UK, USA, Italy and Israel. Work from the series was selected for the Royal Academy Summer Show in 2020.

This portfolio of supporting information provides further explanation of Gersht's research methods, processes and insights, and includes works from the series and images of *Floating World* as exhibited.

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*Hanging Garden*

# Context

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*“Kublai Khan had noticed that Marco Polo’s cities resembled one another, as if the passage from one to another involved not a journey but a change of elements. Now, from each city Marco described to him, the Great Kahn’s mind set out on its own, and after dismantling the city piece by piece, he reconstructed it in other ways, substituting components, shifting them, inverting them.”* (Italo Calvino (1972), *Invisible Cities*)

Central to Gersht’s work is an examination of the evolving nature of the camera. Traditionally a device that recorded what was in front of it, it has now become something that creates our world rather than documents it (reconfiguring what is pictured, as did the imagination of Kublai Khan in Calvino’s description). Since the digital revolution the speed of information transmission has compressed both time and space. We can now immediately see images of events as they are happening on the other side of the world, and the technology that makes this possible is now available to millions more people than ever before. This has profound implications for how we see and experience what is outside of us. Nothing remains fixed for long; everything is in flux, prompting the question, where does reality occur? In *Floating World* Gersht provides an alternative to this

image-saturated ‘world in flux’; the photographic prints are fundamentally dependent on something that exists in the physical world, without being straightforward depictions. *Floating World* also extends Gersht’s longstanding engagement with natural forms—and particularly their representation—as loaded with cultural and political meaning, and determined by historical forces. This strand in Gersht’s research includes the ongoing *Fragile Land* series (in which the endangered, native flowers of Israel serve as a vehicle to investigate ideology and the mythological narratives surrounding the concept of homeland) and the 2003-4 work *Ghost Olives*, which depicted the centuries-old olive trees of Galilee.

## Key Texts:

Calvino, I. (1997 [1972]) *Invisible Cities* (London: Vintage)

Hoffman, E. (2009) *Time* (Profile: London)

Rovelli, C. (2016) *Reality Is Not What it Seems* (Allen Lane: London)

Rovelli, C. (2018) *The Order of Time* (London: Penguin)

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# Research Aims and Questions

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Research aims:

To explore the relationship between objects, reflections and their photographic depiction in varied and innovative ways.

To extend the investigation of idealised nature and its representation in culture beyond the frame of western art-historical and photographic traditions, considering the eastern contexts of Buddhist tradition and ideas.

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Research questions:

How can the relationship between the real and ideal worlds of the Zen gardens be explored in photography?

What are the varied approaches that can be used to generate and explore visual uncertainty in manipulated photographic images of the gardens?

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# Research Methods and Process

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In November 2015 Gersht visited Japan and photographed the Zen gardens of Kyoto. Created to reflect the essence of nature, not its actual appearance, and as aids to meditation, these gardens are self-contained worlds within the wider world. They are both real and metaphysical places. For Gersht they not only represent an alternative to our image-saturated world of ever-changing representations, but they are also symbolic of a physical and spiritual displacement that resonates with his own history. They are places that contain both ideal and reality.

Gersht chose particular places to photograph where natural forms are reflected in water. During the post-production process, in an attempt to perfectly integrate the reflection with the reflected objects—the virtual with the material—Gersht used a variety of techniques to manipulate his photographs. In some the images are inverted and then fused to create new spaces that hover between material and virtual realities, as well as ambiguity over what is ‘up’ and what is ‘down’. In others they are layered to create visual uncertainty. They are unavoidably representative of the physical world they depict, but, because of the melting together of tangible reality and its reflection, they are not literal depictions, and the viewer encounters a different visual challenge in each image, presented with the absence of the object of representation. The photograph becomes the thing that exists, an image of the folding of space and time.

The title *Floating World* refers to Japanese art and culture of the Edo period and its famous woodblock prints, but also alludes to the Buddhist idea of the ‘sorrowful world’, the endless cycle of birth, life, suffering, death and rebirth, and a parable concerning the wind on the water. When a gentle

wind disturbs the still surface of the water in a pool the reflections on it are broken into shimmering patterns. The world seen reflected on the surface becomes a fractured image. The viewer becomes lost in the complexities of the reflection and it is only when the wind drops and the pool becomes still again that it is possible to discern what lies beneath the surface of the water. By interleaving space and time in his *Floating World* photographs, Gersht exaggerates the disturbed appearance of reality’s surface, just as the wind does the surface of the water, provoking a questioning of the nature of the photographic images and its relation to reality.

## Key Texts:

Clancy, J. (2015) *Kyoto Gardens: Masterworks of the Japanese Gardener’s Art* (North Clarendon: Tuttle)

Dougill, J. (2006) *Kyoto: A Cultural and Literary History* (Oxford: Signal)

Herrigel, E. (1948) *Seven Zen in the Art of Archery* (New York: Pantheon)

Ishiguro, K. (1986) *An Artist of the Floating World* (London: Faber and Faber)

Lindqvist, S. (2012) *The Myth of Wu Tao-tzu* (Cambridge: Granta)

Shikibu, M., *The Tale of Genji*, Tyler, R. trans (2001) (New York: Penguin)

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*Floating World, Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, July - September 2016*

# Research Contribution and Recognition

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Research insights and  
contribution:

Gersht's ongoing investigation of the cultural representation of natural forms is extended in *Floating World* in a new context. The work also continues his investigation into techniques to explore the folding together of space and time in the photographic image, taking this investigation in a new direction; as the *Financial Times* notes, *Floating World*, in contrast to Gersht's works that seek to capture the momentary at high speed, instead 'slows down landscape . . . fluttering blossom is arrested to the point of abstraction into almost pure pink monochrome, while watery reflections are digitally manipulated to create illusions of space, depth, time standing still.' ('Critic's Choice', *Financial Times*, 7/8 May 2016)

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Reviews:

'The Ten Best Photo Shows and Events', *Time Out*, London, 17 - 23 May 2016

'Critics' Choice', *Financial Times Weekend*, 7-8 May, 2016

Tom Seymour, 'Ori Gersht's Floating World', *British Journal of Photography*, 15 March 2016 (<https://www.1854.photography/2016/03/ori-gershts-floating-world/>)

Lou Proud, 'Ori Gersht: Floating World', *Photomonitor*, May 2016 (<https://www.kohngallery.com/news/2016/5/11/ori-gersht-photomonitor>):

*'The images are complex and layered with no end or beginning. In contrast to some of the previous series, they come from a noted physical place of peace rather than violence. Oddly, however, many of the resulting works have a more visual 'violent' fusion of content – multi layered with a hatched surface which appears like a painting.'*

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# Research Contribution and Recognition

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Reviews:

Jessica Klingelfuss, 'Ori Gersht reflects on Kyoto's Zen Gardens and their Secret Floating World', *Wallpaper*, 17 May 2016

David Pagel, 'Photographer Ori Gersht's Floating World at Kohn Gallery casts a spell', *Los Angeles Times*, 1 September 2016 (<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-ori-gersht-kohn-gallery-review-20160831-snap-story.html>):

*'Ori Gersht uses a digital camera, off-the-shelf software and a high-end printer to make photographs that make you wonder what you are looking at. It's a slippery enterprise. When it works, the uncertainty is sublime.'*

Cecilia Latiolais, 'Ori Gersht at Kohn Gallery', *Flaunt Magazine*, 1 July 2016

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