

# A Fruitful Take on the Frailty of Human Life

By MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN  
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The trio of short, slow-motion video works by Ori Gersht on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden are like splatter films, with everything but the splatter left lying on the cutting room floor. There's little in the way of exposition, buildup or character development here. Only shocking climax. (Parental advisory: Although the works are unrated, they contain mayhem by gunfire, explosion and saw.)

## Black Box: Ori Gersht

Through April 12 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue at Seventh Street SW (Metro: L'Enfant Plaza).

Contact: 202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-633-5285).  
[www.hirshhorn.si.edu](http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu)

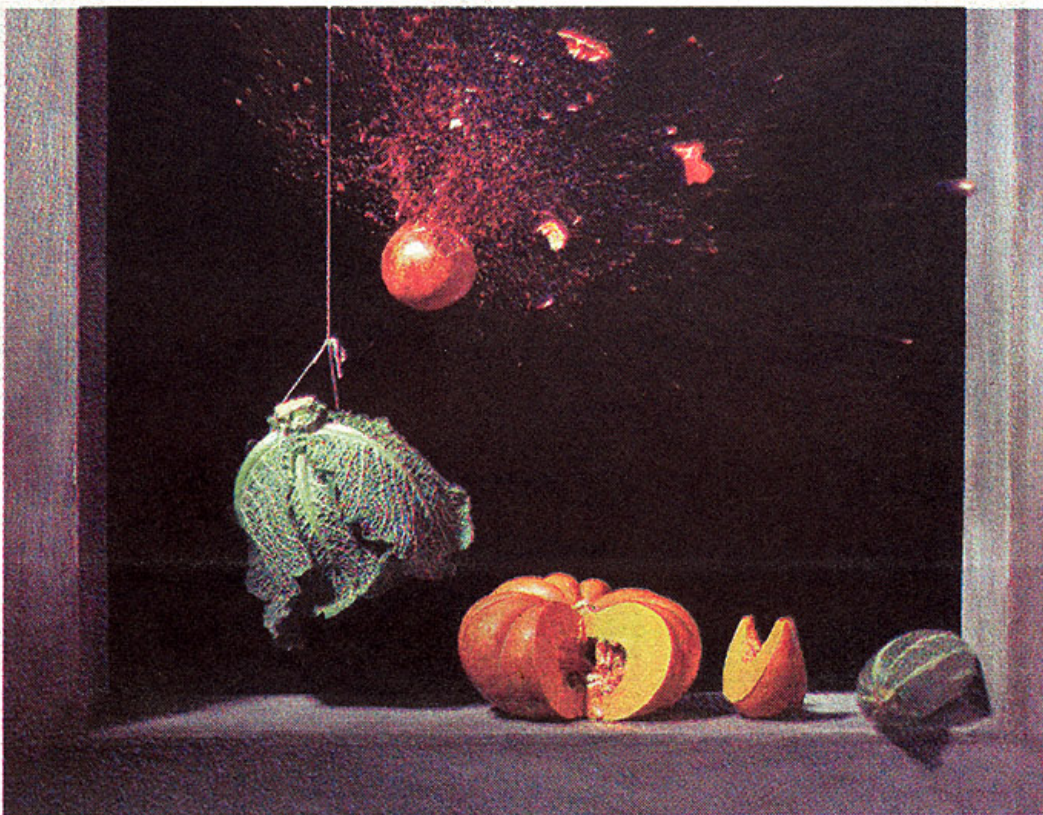
Hours: Open daily 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.  
Admission: Free.

Program: The artist will talk about his work  
Feb. 17 at 7 p.m. Free.

I should mention one other thing. They star, in no particular order, a pomegranate, a vase of flowers and trees.

"Pomegranate" looks benign enough at first. Almost like a painted still life. Red and ripe, the fruit of the title hangs from a string, next to a head of cabbage. Below them sits a melon, along with other produce.

All of a sudden, *bang!* A bullet tears across the frame, ripping the pomegranate



nearly in two in an arterial spray of crimson juice, seeds and flesh. Like a pendulum — or a convict on the gallows — its broken body swings slowly in one direction, then the other, blown by the violence of the impact. A minute or so later, it's all over. Fade

to black.

Similarly, "Big Bang II" features an innocent-looking vase of flowers. There's the sound of a siren from an off-camera emergency vehicle, and then *boom!* The vase blows up before your eyes, in a floral evoca-



PHOTOS BY ORI GERSHT

Ori Gersht's slow-motion videos use the destruction of a vase of flowers, above, a pomegranate, left, and a stand of trees to illustrate human mortality. "Black Box" is on display at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden through April 12.

tion of a suicide bomber. It will come as little surprise to learn that the 41-year-old artist was born in Tel Aviv and is no stranger to the kind of violence his art evokes.

Heavy stuff.

Gersht's "The Forest" is less violent but just as disturbing. As the artist's camera pans an idyllic stand of tall trees, first one then another of the woodland giants is felled by an unseen woodsman, each one toppling to the ground with a flailing of helpless limbs and a final, shuddering thud familiar to fans of football's instant replay. There's no warning for when the peaceful green scene will be interrupted next, save for an ominous quickening of shadows and a sudden rustling of leaves. It happens again and again.

The Hirshhorn's press materials describe Gersht's art thus: "The artist's work encourages viewers to reflect on the power of natural beauty and how it is affected by human intervention." So there's a subtext about the destruction of the rain forest?

With all due respect, that's horse muck.

Gersht's work here is all about human mortality and the frequently all-too-random, though inevitable, way that the grim reaper strikes us down. Those traditional still lifes evoked by "Pomegranate" and "Big Bang II"? They're known collectively as *vanitas* paintings, in which fruit and flowers in their prime are symbolic of the ultimate impermanence of our own lives.

That pomegranate, that bouquet of flowers, those trees? They're you and me, baby.

## The Story Behind the Work

In a podcast interview (available at [www.hirshhorn.si.edu](http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu)), Ori Gersht speaks of how his videos, along with the large-scale photographs for which he is perhaps best known, lie somewhere between documentation of "objective historical events" (such as a tree falling in the woods) and "subjective interpretation" of those events. "The Forest" is a perfect example of that double meaning.

Filmed near the Ukrainian town of Kosov in the woods of Moskalova, the work was inspired by the World War II experience of Gersht's father-in-law, Gideon Engler. As a child, Engler and other members of his family hid from the Nazis for two years in that very forest, after watching thousands of his fellow Jews from Kosov herded into mass graves there and shot.

— Michael O'Sullivan



A still from Ori Gersht's slow-motion short video "The Forest," from his "Black Box" exhibit.