

Nelly Agassi: *Down Where the Little Fishes Grow*

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Asylums are the stuff of nightmares. As an idea they suffer greatly from the stigma long attached to mental illness. The mental hospital as an institution immediately conjures the specter of confinement, misery, and brutality; images of authoritarian Nurse Ratched's subjecting patients to invasive and unwanted treatments designed to subdue unruly patients committed against their will, not for disease but for testing the boundaries of social propriety. The writings of Michel Foucault, the eminent French structuralist who famously decried the asylum and the very idea of insanity as mechanisms of oppression and control of difference in *Madness and Civilization* (1961), typify the misgivings and sinister motivations generally ascribed to such spaces. However, this has not always been the case. At the turn of the nineteenth century, lunatic asylums, as they were commonly known, were considered foundational civic institutions. Across the United States, in nearly every state, government monies supported the construction of enormous asylums considered to be crucial pillars of enlightened society.

Thomas Story Kirkbride (American, B. 1809-1883) was an ardent advocate of the American asylum boom. He was among a group of reformers who sought to bring the lunatic asylum in line with the values of Enlightenment by applying scientific practices to the treatment of mental illness. After years of serving as the superintendent and chief physician of the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane in Philadelphia and traveling extensively to visit its European counterparts, Kirkbride published *On the Construction, Organization, and General Arrangements of Hospitals for the Insane* (1854). In it, he presented what would come to be known as the Kirkbride Plan - a blueprint for the ideal asylum. The Kirkbride asylum was gargantuan, located in the country, highly segregated by sex, illness, and social class. Kirkbride's ideal institution combined physical and psychological treatments administered in carefully organized, meticulously designed spaces. In addition to traditional programs, patients in such asylums were able to attend lectures, physical education courses, and other assorted corporeal and intellectual stimuli. Bearing remarkable resemblances to European hotels, they were what the eminent sociologist Erving Goffman deemed total institutions; places apart, in which, individuals were removed from the rhythms and concerns of normal life, placed under rigorous systems of control that governed every aspect of their existence. A concept Goffman elaborated in *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1961) the result of a decade of research at a Kirkbride asylum, Saint Elizabeth's the Government Hospital for the Insane, in Washington D.C.

Kirkbride's use of architecture as a therapeutic medium is the departing point for Nelly Agassi's new series of drawings. For Kirkbride, the architecture of the asylum was an integral component of the "moral treatment" available to those who sought or were forced to undergo its therapies. The institutions built following his blueprint were lavishly appointed, beautifully landscaped - some of them by the likes of Frederick Law Olmstead (American, B. 1822 - 1903) and Calvert Vaux (American, B. London 1824 -1895) who would eventually translate their experience creating gardens for mental hospitals into the designs for some of America's most spectacular public parks - architectural gems, and marvels of modern engineering. In their grandeur, they became sources of civic pride, featured on postcards, and touted as tourist attractions. Using Kirkbride's original layout as inspiration, Agassi produces her own architectural plans employing the tools (rulers and design templates) and concerns (space and control) of architectural drawings. As an assemblage the images become a sort of architectural Rorschach test alternately resembling masks, faces, and even the female reproductive system. Starkly and precisely rendered, the elusive and allusive aspects of the drawings echo the slippery reality of the institutions to which they pay homage. The highly regimented and tightly controlled working method pays homage to the rigor of Kirkbride's architectural and therapeutic concerns while interrogating the juxtaposition of expansive vistas and mandated confinement, luxury and abjection as they existed in the mental and emotional lives of patients in these turn of the century hospitals.

With these drawings, Agassi engages the asylum as place. Capitulation, for Goffman, was the defining feature of the "total institution." In an asylum, the submission of autonomy, self-control, and identity - a withdrawal with the promise of an eventual return to health - indicated an acknowledgment of illness. This last item may seem obvious; however, the individuals in asylums for the mentally ill may not, necessarily, have been disturbed. Commitment to a hospital for the insane rarely occurred with the consent of the patient and, historically, individuals sent to such establishments were not necessarily ill but often considered degenerate or deviant in some way. Despite the very conscious and deliberate appeals to the humanity of its residents, the Kirkbride asylum remained a site of detention in which the truly "disturbed" patients were kept in basement cells under conditions similar to those of zoo animals. It is these contrasts, the murkiness of the total institution, and its status as a liminal space, which Agassi explores. Indeed, the Kirkbride asylum was a space that in its claustrophobic openness defined time and space for its patients. It is this condition that Agassi seeks to reflect; namely, the ambiguity of a life governed by a regime of irreconcilable oppositions. She achieves this state by elaborating irrational and impossible spaces in drawings that are meditations on health, confinement, and the architecture of the institution in its historical and aesthetic dimensions.