

# An Elegy for Photography



**I**n 1986, the first Israeli photography biennial took place at the Museum of Art in Ein Harod. Its organizers were among the most prominent photographers active in Israel at the time – people who had studied abroad and who had returned to Israel with a new appreciation of photography as an artistic medium in its own right, with its own history and forefathers. Their motivation for organizing a biennial stemmed from a sense of ongoing frustration with the Israeli art world. Photography had yet to be fully integrated into the local art establishment, and was hardly represented in galleries – thus requiring special exhibition frameworks and special treatment. At the time, only one Israeli gallery – The White Gallery – exhibited photography. A second space, The Photography Gallery, became active for a short time somewhat later. The decision to organize a photography biennial at the Museum of Art in Ein Harod, rather than at one of the museums in the country’s center, had a symbolic resonance meant to underscore local photography’s marginality, its existence on the periphery. The second biennial took place at Ein Harod in 1988, followed by the third and last one in 1991. In retrospect, one may argue that this last biennial marked the beginning of a transition period, during which Israeli photography’s status as a needy, insecure medium gradually gave way to a recognition of its prominence as it came to be widely embraced by art galleries, museums and the press. This article is concerned with the new Israeli photography that emerged and took shape during the 1990s, as photography transformed from being the stepchild of art into a medium garnering much of the art world’s

attention. More specifically, I will focus on the movement’s defining characteristic – that is, its concern with landscapes and with the public sphere. Israeli photographers representative of this genre have made natural and urban landscapes a central preoccupation in their work, and their series of landscapes have come to form the core of Israeli photography over the past decade and a half. The landscapes they capture are all ruined or injured: spaces in which nature, culture and commercialization processes mingle inextricably with one another. In the distant, almost unconscious background of these photographs are the 19th-century images of Palestine taken by European photographers who had come to capture the Holy Land. Their foreground, meanwhile, is more consciously and obviously shaped by two influences: American photography in the style of the New Topographics and the German strain of landscape photography whose protagonists are Bernd and Hilla Becher and their students – Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff and Candida Höfer. From a historical perspective, the point of intersection between these two photographic schools was the exhibition “The New Topographics,” which took place in 1975 at the International Museum of Photography, in Rochester, N.Y. Alongside works by eight American photographers who captured landscapes devoid of romanticism and pathos, curator William Jenkins also presented works by the Bechers – the only Europeans in a widely covered exhibition whose subtitle was “Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape.” The term “New Topographics,” as well as the exhibition’s subtitle, can also be applied to the photographic practices of a crop of Israeli photographers, including Gilad Ophir, Roi Kuper, Igaël Shemtov, Yossi Breger, Sharon Ya’ari, Efrat Shvilli, Ilia Rabinovitz, Amit



Natural and urban landscapes constitute the main focus of Israel’s leading contemporary photographers. Over the past two decades, photographers following in the footsteps of American New Topographics and of the Bechers have discovered the power of series concerned with the local landscape: naked, empty, powerfully illuminated and politically charged. A walk through the rough terrain → RUTI DIREKTOR

#### Images

Sharon Ya’ari / **Darben Grass, Paspalum**  
from “Lawns”, 1997, c-print 108x82 cm each  
Opposite page:

Sharon Ya’ari / **Super Al-Turo, from Lawns**  
From Lawns, 1997, color print, 128x160 cm

Sharon Ya’ari / **Kokoya**

From Lawns, 1999, color print 128x160 cm  
2001



Goren, Miki Kratzman, Osnat Bar-Or, Yanai Toister, Efrat Shalem, Yaakov Israel and others. These photographers all set out to capture an Israeli sphere in the process of being constructed and renovated, of conquering and being conquered – a sphere where the last vestiges of nature seem to disappear. This apparently objective form of black-and-white or color photography attempts to show, document and categorize what lies before the camera's lens. And what lies before the lens is a new Israeli reality – one that is nouveau riche, materialist and aggressive, yet also dilapidated and shoddy. Each one of these photographers has chosen to focus on a different aspect of this existence, or reality, and to linger upon it.

### The Documentation of Discontent

The impressive emergence of a large body of photographic works concerned with the local landscape has been accompanied by a no-less-impressive phenomenon: the almost total disappearance of Israeli landscape painting. This genre occupied a central place in the short history of Israeli art, extending along a continuum that ranged from the direct observation of nature to experiments with abstraction inspired by nature. Painting's fundamental affiliation with nature was so deeply rooted in Israeli art, that expressions of pure abstraction were rare. In retrospect, one may read this painterly adherence to the landscape as an attempt to become familiar with a new and strange land: The local painters of the first half of the 20th century were mostly immigrants whose traumatic encounter with the local landscape and with local light acquired a mythological resonance in the narrative of Israeli art. Painting the surrounding environment was one way of undergoing a process of acclimatization, a sort of self-imposed rite of passage designed to

acquaint oneself with new surroundings. By contrast, the new photographers active from the 1990s onward are all native Israelis familiar with the local landscape, climate and environment. In contrast to the painters of previous generations, the lens they point at their surroundings enables them to undergo a process of estrangement and distancing, to neutralize their emotional responses and to direct a seemingly objective gaze at various visual phenomena. The serial quality inherent to photography allows for a typological, classificatory process of examination, while the repetitive preoccupation with the same objects causes them to be disassembled into individual components. This deconstructive gaze is imbued with an implicit or explicit critical dimension, while the opaque, flat presence of the photographic paper replaces the soft, sensual quality of watercolors and oil paintings. Some of these Israeli photographers became familiar with the New Topographers during their studies in the U.S., and introduced their works to Israeli art students upon their return to Israel. Conversations with photographers reveal that their familiarity with the Bechers' works came later, usually following their acquaintance with the works of their well-known students – Gursky, Ruff, Struth and Höfer. By the mid-1990s, the Bechers' life project was widely known and highly valued, and the term "typology" had become commonplace among photographers. None of the Israeli photographers in question has created a typological series in the strict sense that defines the Bechers' work, and none of their series equals in scope the Bechers' systematic, meticulous, long-term photographic project. At the same time, one may examine the ensemble of projects undertaken by the new Israeli topographers as a typological meta-project that addresses the

local sphere at the turn of a new millennium – and whose unique characteristics include a scattered, impatient quality, the sense of fluttering from one place to another. These series – regardless of their degrees of fragmentation and of their motivating forces – come together to form a restless, discontented documentation of Israel during the 1990s and 2000s. In terms of its defining characteristics, the Israeli project may be located between the Bechers' disciplined, rigid typology and the softer seriality of American photography. Another parallel between the new Israeli photography and the Bechers' photographs concerns the art-world reception of their works. Beyond the tremendous importance of the Bechers' photographic archive of near-extinct industrial structures is their status as an inextricable part of the art world. Their photographs – frontal, black-and-white, repetitive, dry, archival in character and seemingly boring – underscore photography's autonomy. Their seductive quality makes itself evident only gradually, almost surprisingly, and is related to the essential characteristics of the photographic medium: the material quality of the prints, the information embodied in the image, the prominence of grids – or, by contrast, the books that each focus on a single series, a different structural prototype. The more the Bechers focused on photography, the more sweeping was their embrace by the art world. This was undoubtedly bolstered by the conceptual and intellectual aspects of their work, which was compatible with the spirit of the international art world at that time. They seldom participated in photography exhibitions and mostly displayed their works in art exhibitions. The generation of students taught by Bernd Becher at the Düsseldorf Art Academy emerged into the art world's awareness in the early 1990s,

and their successful careers contributed to the Bechers' recognition. A similar process took place in Israel: Local photography during the 1990s first gave expression to a clearly autonomous photographic identity, which simultaneously led to photography's assimilation into the art world.

**There Are No Innocent Landscapes**

The scope of this article cannot do justice to the important and interesting photographic projects concerned with the public sphere and with the local landscape that Israeli artists have undertaken since the early 1990s. I shall thus turn to present a number of projects that exemplify the Bechers' local influence and its synthesis with American topographic photography, resulting in a distinctly Israeli type of photography. Gilad Ophir's suburb project is one of the most exemplary series in this context. Ophir studied photography in New York and returned to Israel in 1988. Already during his school vacations in Israel, he began photographing the streets of Tel Aviv, paying special attention to the accelerated construction processes that were then taking place in the country. It was only in 1991, however, that one of the series he is most identified with – and which became one of that decade's groundbreaking series of Israeli photographs – assumed its final form: These works were concerned with new suburban building, largely along Israel's coastline (in Rishon Letzion, Or Akiva and Givat Olga), as well as in the towns of Shoham and Tivon. The Bechers photographed industrial structures in order to document a vanishing culture of construction. Their photographic project was based on a sense of Calvinistic severity and total devotion; they sought to preserve the structures by photographing them, and the concept of memory occupies

an important place in their photographic and conceptual strategy. Ophir, by contrast, photographed neighborhoods under construction, or just prior to their population by new residents. He captured something that had still not entered the realm of memory, for there was no one to remember it as of yet and nothing to preserve. He set his camera down across from structures that had just been built, before they were filled with life. He was, in fact, laying down the basis for an archaeology that had yet to come into existence. Ophir took his photographs with a 6x6 camera, in a large, square format. He would work on Saturday afternoons and, in contrast to the Bechers, intentionally chose to work in what he refers to as "mean, cruel, remorseless light." Like the Bechers, he centered each frame upon a single structure. The photographs, which were consistently devoid of human presence, were all black-and-white. Efrat Shvilli's suburb project, photographed from 1992–1993, is in many ways similar to Ophir's project, but distinct from it in other ways. Shvilli photographed new settlements in the Jerusalem area, on both sides of the Green Line. Her black-and-white works, like Ophir's photographs, are also devoid of people and focus on architecture and its connection to the surrounding environment. In contrast to Ophir's works, however, Shvilli's prints are small; the neutrality of their frontal, direct and seemingly impersonal gaze repeatedly comes up against the politically charged names of the places they capture: Mizpe Yericho, Ma'ale Adumim, Pisgat Ze'ev, Modi'in. Some of these places are settlements outside of the Green Line, while others are within the Green Line or rest along it – that is, they are attached to what is meant to be the border, according to political consensus. In either case, these communities are situated at the heart of the Israeli political conflict.

Images

Yossi Breger / Shuk Bezalel

1999

Yossi Breger / Marmorek

1999

Yossi Breger / Hadassah - Hakalir

1999

The empty buildings, whose windows are often closed, are planted on barren hillsides, and resemble Lego houses that have been dropped there from nowhere. The camera forces us to linger on the structures' details: the small stone houses, with tiled roofs, arched doorways, small aluminum-frame windows; or other, larger, flat-roofed buildings reminiscent of fortresses, whose windows resemble shooting slits. The photographs contain a medley of architectural styles, whose functional value is far from obvious but whose politicization speaks volumes.

Like Ophir, Shvilli made a decision to photograph towns under construction – before they became populated, surrounded by vegetation and filled with life. At the point when Shvilli set up her camera, there was nothing but empty space punctured by houses and, at times, the initial outline of streets. When she photographed Modi'in, for example, following its completion, the streets were desolate and abandoned, the windows shuttered; a lone, covered car sat parked on the street, while the streetlamps resembled props on a stage set. Ophir and Shvilli's photographs offered an unprecedented experience of "newness" that had nothing to do with Israeli art's previously pioneering ethos and its ideal of a primeval, optimistic world. The "new" they captured was related to the worlds of real estate and politics; it was gazed upon with an analytic, doubtful and merciless gaze. On one hand, their excursions into the new Israeli suburbia somewhat resembled the strategy undertaken by the photographer Timothy O'Sullivan, who traveled to the American West in the late 19th century as part of a scientific mission that included a painter, a cartographer and a photographer. Yet Ophir and Shvilli's photographs are infused with none of the romanticism or mysticism characteristic of

O'Sullivan's images, none of the sublimity present in Walker Evans' work. Instead, Ophir and Shvilli's works are characterized more by the inquisitive, doubtful stance typical of German photography, and the political implications inherent in their chosen subjects. More than ever before, they revealed the Israeli landscape to be charged with complicated and clashing layers of meaning. Even formerly uncultivated expanses of land, along the coast and certainly around Jerusalem, were shown to carry an ideological charge. Innocent landscapes do not exist, and photography was the perfect medium to prove it.

#### **A Parked Car and a Carpet of Grass**

Yossi Breger's photographs of Tel Aviv from the mid-1990s captured a city with its own distinct history, archaeology and layers of memory. He would wake up early on Saturday mornings, and go out into the empty streets before the "mean," "cruel" light, to use Ophir's words, attained its full harshness – that is, when it was as closest as possible to European light. Nevertheless, Tel Aviv mornings are still far removed from the kind of mornings on which the Bechers chose to work – overcast mornings when no cloud or ray of sunlight marred the objectivity of the background, so that the exterior seems to be transformed into an indoor studio. Breger photographed Hakalir Street, the intersection of Marmorek and Ibn Gvirol Streets, a falafel stand at the Bezalel market and more. Cars are seen parked along empty streets, while the basic forms of the buildings that line them are a product of the International architectural style that originated in Germany. The houses photographed by Breger are not among Tel Aviv's iconic Bauhaus buildings, but are rather more modest incarnations of them. Yet in Breger's photographs of the empty city streets, each

element seems to assert its basic, underlying form: The houses appear momentarily as they might have been imagined by their designers, while the roads, sidewalks and parked cars appear as roads, sidewalks and parked cars in the archetypal sense of these terms; taken together, they represent some basic organizing principle shaping an existential urban system. Breger's photographs – not only those of streets, and not only those taken in Israel – bespeak a desire to capture the essence of things. Streetlamps, sidewalks, building entrances – all allude to some underlying matrix, which is greater than the individual cases of which it is composed.

In contrast to these series, which focused on architecture and on recently built towns or ones under construction, Sharon Ya'ari's series of grass carpets (1996–1997) centers upon the natural expanses on the margins of built-up areas. This is a quintessential example of a series that focuses on the surface, while allowing for a penetrating cultural, social and political analysis. For a period of about two years, Ya'ari used a large studio camera to produce approximately 40 photographs of grass carpet fields, which were planted in order to be uprooted and sold. These photographs contain several layers of meaning: the expanses of green grass allude to the "taming of the wilderness" that underscores the Zionist ethos; to the reincarnation of this ethos as a bourgeois dream; and to the mass-production of lawns as the fulfillment of a desire for an "instant" European landscape. The incompatibility of grass lawns with the Mediterranean climate enhances their role in the Israeli fantasy of "making the desert bloom," and exhibits a denial of the local landscape's characteristics. Ya'ari's photographs were taken during a period when the production of grass carpets – a futile form of engineered nature – had

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become a lucrative kibbutz-based industry. The grass carpets, moreover, do not cover up for the aridity of the surrounding landscape, and the visibility of drip irrigation systems points to the artificiality of the lush green expanses. In the distance, one notices the presence of apartment blocks. The understanding that these “carpets” were planted in order to be rolled up and transplanted elsewhere points to their status as a cultural commodity. Their ephemeral presence is revealed to serve a purely decorative strategy, while simultaneously alluding to the scar they will leave behind once they are uprooted. Moreover, as mentioned above, the effort involved in growing grass in an inappropriate climate reflects an ongoing subterranean longing for a borrowed landscape ideal. The red-roofed houses photographed by Ophir and Shvilli similarly disclose a deep Israeli yearning for a European “elsewhere,” alongside the adaptation of local, Middle-Eastern motifs. These aspects all transform Ya’ari’s large color prints of grass carpets into rich and culturally layered visual texts, which conflate the subject of the photograph with the manner in which it is photographed. The subject invites a serial gaze: Multiple images of grass carpets, with each one similar to and distinct from the one that preceded it and each one composed of layers of meaning. Every frame contains within it a trail of information. At the same time, these photographs are also imbued with Romantic characteristics, which may have been influenced by American landscape painting – such as a horizon line that extends across the entire frame, leading the gaze out into distant, wide-open expanses. In the context of Israeli photography in the mid-1990s, the size of the prints was also significant – and was likely influenced by Gursky’s panoramic images. Their large format invites one to savor the smallest details, while

facing them is akin to facing the landscape itself. In Ya’ari’s photographs of grass carpets, the violent fusion between nature and culture is echoed by the presence of a technological power, which recalls the sublimity of Gursky’s works. The Israeli sublime as captured by Ya’ari poignantly communicates the injury dealt to nature, and the violence of the encounter between nature and industry. Two additional works by Ya’ari reveal the influence of the Bechers’ photographic approach and at the same time typify the Israeli short-temperedness: The photographic duo that has already acquired an almost canonical status – an Israeli military tent (2000) and a Polish military tent (2001), both of which are pitched in wooded areas. This touching pair of empty tents may be viewed as an allusion to a larger series. They may also be interpreted – like the grass carpets – as containing the potential for a multilayered reading, in this case one concerning the landscapes of Israel and Poland. Like almost every other wooded terrain in Israel, this thicket was planted by man and is related to the ideology of settling the land; the Polish forest, meanwhile, is inevitably associated with the World War II and with partisan hiding places, while also representing the kind of prototypical dark forest absent from the Israeli landscape.

#### A Requiem for Other Times

Igael Shemtov’s case is somewhat different in this context, and I discuss it here in order to present the evolution of typological thought in Israeli photography. Shemtov studied photography in the Pratt Institute in New York in the early 1980s and was familiar with the New Topographers. As early as 1981, their works inspired him to take close to 400 photographs of the Neve Amal neighborhood in Herzliya. The photographs were taken in black-and-white and developed as contact

prints, but were never printed or exhibited, until recently, when shown in a large one-man exhibition at the Open Museum of Photography in Tel Hai (May 2009). The neighborhood was then an isolated one, and Shemtov would arrive, usually at noon time, and photograph methodically, left and right – yards, paths, fences, piles of scrap in building entrances, clothes-lines and the housing projects themselves. Over the following years, he continued photographing landscapes. The series I would like to examine at some length, however, are not related to architecture – but rather to what is contained within the houses. These still-life series, photographed with a large camera, seem to realize the same kind of fantasy pursued by the Bechers when they photographed water towers or refrigeration towers or gas tanks in the most objective manner possible – that is, the fantasy of photographing the objects in a studio. In the mid-1990s, Shemtov photographed towels. The center of every frame featured a folded towel topped by a bar of soap, and it was difficult to decide what perspective to examine them from; the photograph could seemingly be turned around and looked at from any direction. During that period, he also photographed the front and back of tiny baby shirts, as well as used kitchen towels – diptychs featuring one towel with its front to the camera alongside one with its back to the camera. In recent years, he has also photographed a series of handkerchiefs; some of these are women’s handkerchiefs (smaller, embroidered with floral patterns), while some are men’s (larger, checkered or patterned with grids). The handkerchiefs were taken from the home of his deceased parents, and were part of his repository of family memories. They contained the traces of passing time (stains, rips, ironing marks), and were related to his

earlier photographs of textiles – restrained images organized around a single item at the center of the frame. They created an ongoing requiem to other times and to people who are no more, and who only existed outside the frame. Shemtov gave the checkered men’s handkerchiefs titles such as “Vanishing composition 1, 2 or 3”, while calling the photographs of the women’s handkerchiefs “Flushed “Pale Composition (blushed) 1, 2” etc. In this manner, he implanted a story within a form, or extricated a form from a story; he created a personification of the objects, and at the same time erased it by numbering the titles. Although the serial format of these images generally downplayed the emotional resonance of the photographed objects, their repetition – one handkerchief after another – simultaneously amplified the related emotions. In the context of these still-life series, which constitute an archive of various kinds of textiles photographed in a studio, one may detect the influence of Karl Blossfeldt – a precursor of the Bechers in the genealogy of German typological photography. In the early 20th century, Blossfeldt constructed a vast archive of flower photographs, which were taken in the studio in an astoundingly meticulous and methodical manner. As a specialist in creating plaster casts of sculptures, his motivation was to capture the wealth of natural forms. August Sander, who began working somewhat later, photographed landscapes, yet his central project was the documentation of German society during the first decades of the 20th century. The Bechers constitute the third stage of the German typological project. They did all they could to detach the structures they photographed from their surroundings – a concern that seems opposed to their documentary motivation. It is sometimes difficult to appreciate the actual size

of the photographed objects, to identify the season or time of day; the use of black-and-white film further contributes to neutralizing the reality they capture and to the erasure of details. In this sense, Shemtov’s textile project, with its bath towels, handkerchiefs and dishtowels, contains allusions to both Blossfeldt and the Bechers; Shemtov captures his objects in a studio setting, where the absence of a background deprives us of the ability to ascertain their size. At the same time, former lives and human stories pervade his work. The Bechers’ comprehensive project constituted a sort of ongoing elegy for modernity whose tone is that of a requiem. The Israeli photographic project evolving at the dawn of the third millennium is composed of numerous bodies of work and is similarly elegiac in tone. From different perspectives, and with a changing degree of criticality, it constitutes an elegy for Israel and for the Israeliness of the Zionist era: for built-up and wide-open landscapes, for the political character of space, for the country’s commercialization. Serial photography is the perfect genre for this kind of funerary project. Take, for instance, Ya’ari’s recent black-and-white photographs, which cast a gray, mournful gaze at backyards in Tel Aviv. The series “Jerusalem Boulevard” (2009) is not typological in the strict sense of the term: It is characterized by changing perspectives, by varying distances between the camera and the object before it and by different types of objects being photographed. However, the series’ overall atmosphere is melancholic, and that sadness permeates both the subject of the photograph and the work itself – since in less than two decades, Israeli photography has experienced its own apogee as well as the crisis of the medium. But that is already the subject for another discussion. —



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#### Images

Sharon Ya’ari / Tent

2002, color print 158x128 cm

Sharon Ya’ari / Polish Tent

2002, color print 158x128 cm