

Time Capsule

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Seeking a Return to Photography

It all began with a doubt: about photography, about its ability to address the contemporary, its capacity to contribute to the discourse. So Sharon Ya'ari's first works (1995) broke with the photographic norm by alternating his black-and-white landscapes of Israel with early-twentieth-century found images from Eastern Europe, of Jewish communities in the towns of Pinsk and Turek—showing events such as the opening of schools and hospitals, and emigration to America or Palestine. Using Photoshop, he extracted portraits from the found images, combining faces from the past with landscapes of the present to make new visual realities. Another state, another time emerged, delicately, for he blended past and present, reality and hope, conjuring new presences like a sorcerer's apprentice. p. 216

In the subsequent color works (1999–2002), the multilayered temporality generated by digital collage and montage is fused once again into a single image. In one, scattered groups of people—families perhaps—make their way along a road towards the annual spectacle of iris fields in bloom. They look as if they are going to a funeral, or at least to some family gathering of great import. In another, a cluster of dusty, faded, colored plastic chairs with cut-out backs like lungs to make sitting on plastic in the heat of the summer more bearable offers a cheerful image, until we notice among the brightly-colored clutter that we are actually looking at a funeral chapel. The arrangement of chairs in the simple room echoes a family constellation. In another picture, three young women, dressed almost identically in flared jeans and skimpy, bare-shouldered summer tops, climb through a corrugated metal barrier. One of them is already crouched down, preparing to pass under a metal bar, as though crossing into the darkness of some hidden nocturnal realm beyond the picture. The tangible sense of a relaxed summer stroll contrasts with the uncertainty and gloom of the yawning abyss. In another photograph, a patch of tarmac—deposited and rolled out three or four centimeters thick—stretches along a forest path like a black tongue. Its edges are frayed, as though the supply p. 161 p. 105 p. 101 p. 157

of asphalt had run out. The saying “to speak with forked tongue” comes to mind, yet if we listen carefully, this tongue of tar in the forest seems to speak of the absurdity to be found in small, everyday acts.

In these color photographs, Sharon Ya’ari returns to a simple, observational photography; one that observes directly but cautiously, framing contradictions and layers of overlapping meanings that reveal themselves only gradually. He has remained faithful to this form of photography, while constantly undermining it by questioning the medium and filling it with reflections on the photographic gaze. What is shown and to what purpose? From which position? And how? What does it reveal? What has been achieved and accomplished is called into question—just as is what is in demand and what is fashionable internationally. So abandoning color was only a question of time.

Memory Molds the Present

Israel’s future should be like Europe’s past. That is the understandable if somewhat unrealistic wish of many of its immigrants. Moving forward with a sentiment firmly rooted in the past. The desert should bloom, and the image of childhood, the European view of nature, should be resurrected in Israel. For those who settled here, a “new homeland” was synonymous with the idea of transforming Israel into a land reminiscent of their own background. This approach was also one of the reasons for planting forests in the new land. In his “Lawns” (1997) group of works, Ya’ari documents this idea of reproduction, presenting various grassy places that look as if they have come out of a mail-order catalogue, available with the nod of the head or a click of the mouse: carpets of grass; fields of grass as flower-strewn layers in the battle against wind and sand. Lawns are produced, cut into strips, and replanted elsewhere. We know from the research of Jean Piaget and others that our minds and feelings are formed, directed and shaped within the first two years of life. Wherever we go, we carry within us the fundamental perspectives of childhood. No matter what we encounter in the outside world, we carry inner images within us, and what we see with our eyes, and through photography, is what we want to see, wish to see, have to see. The past becomes the present, the future, even when new situations challenge our ability to support them. Our minds are capable of repressing harsh realities, capable of ignoring them when

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they don't fit our preconceived visions. Yet the future, too, soon becomes the past, if it is too unrealistically constructed.

Inscriptions

Strange objects occasionally inhabit Sharon Ya'ari's photographs. Under a tree, for instance, a table is surrounded by six seats. The table and seats are connected in such a way that makes them look like a cluster of metal-and-concrete fungi. The round seats have a central groove cut across their tops that makes them reminiscent of metal screw heads. The seating unit is not firmly anchored to the ground. It is perched at a slant, like a slowly shifting sand dune. The future of these objects, according to the artist, has long since run out.¹ They are de-functionalized, metamorphosing from useful objects into sculptures, moving *in situ* through time, gradually adapting to their surroundings. Why are they stuck here and no longer used? This is the kind of casual yet insistent enquiry that drives Sharon Ya'ari and his photography. It is there in his image of the tree trunk, ripped from the ground, ravaged by wind and weather, lying in the desert as a reminder of its former energy and strength. These images tell of endeavors, of efforts great and small that ultimately have come to nothing; that eventually proved useless. Now they must succumb to the passage of time.

A plurality of times, of many "presents," is inscribed on these weather-beaten everyday sculptures like tattoos, their origins and actual purpose overlaid by different uses and events. There they stand, abandoned, forlorn, and rather shabby. Even the towering ANZAC monument to the heavy losses sustained by the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps in the First World War looks dreary and a little melancholy with a tattered military camouflage net draped over its viewing platform like some vast chainmail shirt. A gravestone neglected, a death forgotten. A mammoth of recent history. For the most part unspectacular, unnoticed, visible only to the alert observer. Small shifts and changes over the course of time. Sharon Ya'ari visits them again and again through the years, watching the gradual collapse of a tree until its massive limbs eventually completely bury the picnic table placed beneath it.

¹ All remarks by Sharon Ya'ari are from conversations with the author during the spring of 2013.

500 Meter Radius

In the meantime, Ya'ari has returned to black and white photography. Going against the mainstream, against the convention for perfectly enlarged and mounted or heavily framed color works that spread like an epidemic through the closing decade of the twentieth century, he has taken a different tack, seeking his own path. He reacts with seismic sensitivity to certain situations. Almost since its beginnings, photography has been dominated by distance. Photographers would travel to promised lands, to Africa, or to Indochina, bringing back their treasures like precious gems and presenting them to audiences at home. The photographs were a source of evidence and of excitement, playing on a sense of the exotic, of acceptable, enjoyable otherness, in a game of visual power.

Ya'ari's series "500 Meter Radius" (2006) breaks with this tradition: it focuses on what is closest—the immediate surroundings of home. The photographic gaze drifts around backyards and lingers on neighboring façades. Nothing is perfectly manicured. The objects and materials seem to languish where they are—still functional or just set aside and basically forgotten. Wandering round nooks and crannies, past doors and sleepy windows, through courtyards and forlorn front gardens, Ya'ari is not in search of some "decisive moment" when he sets out in the early hours on paths within a restricted radius. He has with him his first-born son, who always wakes up at five in the morning. The dual negation of space and time, of temporally and spatially unique places, results in a series of remarkably casual, quotidian images in which the mythic architecture of Bauhaus Tel Aviv gives way to a new wave of gentrification, which is rolling in to cleanse and prepare the buildings for the lifestyle of the new decade. This is a photographic approach with accreditation, as it were, given that nobody, anywhere, especially in a city so wrought with tension and even fear, lingers with impunity in such places during the small hours without good reason; it is something that requires keen insight and a disarming smile.

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Images in Motion

There is a similar everyday feel to the video loops (2005–2013), 0.6- to 60-second films that portray banal, everyday movements, gestures, situations. These small films are composed of 5, 9, 25 or 115 still photographs set in motion. They dwell on a single place, viewed from a single angle, with only the shutter clicking several

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times to capture scenes that appear in sequence like repetitious little dramatic narratives; morphologies of the quotidian. The 5-frame loop, for example, shows a man endlessly walking behind a concrete wall. He seems to be treading on the spot; ever going forward, ever in motion, yet making no progress. He stays where he is. A woman continuously fails to pick up her heavy shopping bags from the street and walk on. A large, near-empty parking lot becomes the scene of cars arriving, departing and passing by. They sweep in, park and leave again. At times, they get in each other's way. In another frame, bushes rustle silently, their thick vegetation concealing whatever is going on in the background; a roadside telephone call seems to go on forever; a family gets into a car and drives away. These brief moments are transformed by the endless looping into scenes that become absurd to the point of slapstick, casually referencing the banality and senselessness of life. There is no judgment, no overt moral. It is as it is. Things happen. Brief glimpses, fleeting efforts, without purpose. Life congeals into a sculpture of itself. It goes on, just enough to get a little further.

Hope for Long Distance Photography

Ya'ari's photography photographs; his photography images forms and forms images, yet never fails to address the act of taking pictures, at the same time never failing to address and image the actual act of photographing. Photography in itself; photography in his land. Just as Israel is constantly grappling with the question of how to form and develop a nation under the given circumstances, how to generate a sense of cohesion that is not determined only by fear, so Sharon Ya'ari's work is informed by questions about how to photograph what can be represented, where to find images that do not fall into the contextual trap of absolutes—yes/no, here/there, this/that—like grasping a fruit without bruising it, photographing a country without making it appear either heavenly or diabolical.

This is photography that does not fit a pattern or strain to be deliberately inconspicuous or non-conformist—either in terms of the history of photography or the history of this country. It does not, and yet Israel (in spite of everything) is perceived as a homeland, as a birthplace, as a realm of discovery, exploration, immersion, loss, pleasure, and fear. The backyard images of “500 Meter Radius” exude this same self-evident attitude that is a remarkable form of normality in a land that struggles daily to be normal.

The “Hope for Long Distance Photography” (2006),² on the other hand, is bound to chafe from the start. These black-and-white images of seemingly random subjects suggest the dispassionate eye of the surveillance camera. The photographer and the act of taking a photograph can be inconspicuous. He can remain in the background and scan the world with a zoom lens in much the same way as an ornithologist studies birds. Yet his photographs can quickly destroy that good impression—they can be seen as intruders, as aggressive. They twist perceptions and, with them, the world itself, when they invade with their 500-mm or 1000-mm lenses (discussions between photographers can sometimes sound like bikers boasting about their engine capacity) cutting through to the far distance, and placing into the midst of life a rectangle that soaks up the surroundings like a blotter pressing everything into a two-dimensional space. This “blotter” can absorb and distort what is seen, so that streets rise up in a dynamic sweep and objects appear closer. Yet we cannot feel the warmth of their closeness because, at the same time, things disintegrate before us—things that are so fragile and brittle they crumble at the slightest touch and are strewn on the wind. This is photography that massages reality, reshaping it and seemingly embracing it closely. Yet at the same time, it pushes that reality away. All it can give us is a semblance of closeness.

Photography from a safe and risk-free distance might prompt suspicions of voyeurism, at least when its gaze is directed right into the living room. Yet here the camera reveals so very little that is spectacular, it might provoke an impression that the subject is hoping for distance on a temporary basis, for a deferral of time in which reality is not constantly, insistently imposing itself. Is there a sigh of relief, at least for a few moments, because reality has paused and taken a step back? *Hope for long Distance Photography*, hope for enough time.

Rashi Street

Rashi Street, Tel Aviv (2008) brings Sharon Ya’ari back to reality. Like a detective, he follows a hunch that something is brewing, that something illegal may be in the works on Rashi Street in Tel Aviv.

² The series was presented in an eponymous exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, 2006.

Within just two hours, a three-storey building has been demolished, generating an impenetrable screen of dust and debris. Clouds of dust fill the narrow street in the center of Tel Aviv, obscuring the view. Ya'ari photographs the act of destruction with different types of film material, playing with the parallels of dust and grain—the dust in the street, the grain of the film, and the graininess of the enlarged photograph on paper. This act of destruction develops its own aesthetic without actually revealing what has happened here. Was there an explosion? Why do we immediately think of a terrorist attack? A sense of uncertainty, a feeling that anything might happen at any time, permeates the triptych composed of three *Rashi Street* works and the additional *Rashi Street*. Sharon Ya'ari is torn from his state of absent presence and present absence, and is confronted by what is in any case a powerful, destructive act.

This frame-filling evolution of a motif that wells up until it laps at the very edges of the image to the point of overflowing can also be found in some of his photographs of thickets and bushes, such as those taken during and after a flood. The space closes in, fills up, pushes toward the surface and occupies the entire rectangle. The view is distorted, breathing becomes constrained; these images seem to build up before us like a wall. The visual encounter becomes tangible, physical, confrontational. In *Marble (Neptune Hall)* (2006) a dark, almost black wall of pale-veined marble is viewed almost face-on, set at only a slight angle. It blocks the gaze. It reads like a Jackson Pollock drip painting or a view of the earth from outer space. The slab of marble, divided into three, seems to have been rather clumsily restored in a couple of places. It is almost as though Ya'ari's "Long Distance" photographs and this marble image have sought to converge meaningfully here, yet a thin water pipe running right across the top of the picture lends it a sense of place and specificity, demystifying it.

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Altered State (The Act of Photographing)

Talking to Sharon Ya'ari one gets an inkling of how much photography is both heaven and hell for him. Just as a writer might sit pen in hand, or in front of a computer, only able to work in a certain place, on a specific seat or cushion among familiar sounds and smells which provide the physical and mental stimulation to get the creative juices flowing, so Ya'ari sets out with his photographic equipment, which often includes his cumbersome 4x5-inch camera,

to wander the land and follow the trails. Going through the motions of setting out, being on the road, seems to put him in a kind of altered state. Making his way alone, just him and his camera, lost in thought, along paths strewn with the stumbling-stones of history, of daily life, of convention, which he passes by, overlooks, revisits, sometimes repeatedly—this is where he is alert, focused and concentrated. Mind and body are openly receptive, taking note of things, perceiving and experiencing them. Ya'ari describes this as a very intimate moment. It is a state he seeks and savors, and one that wrenches him out of the banality of everyday life. It is a state he wants never to cease, and which he only ends reluctantly, with the click of the shutter. The act of photographing lifts him out of the state of limbo, bringing him back down, so that sometimes he even turns away in boredom from what he has just seen. This is when he suddenly becomes aware of the cumbersome weight of the camera. The feeling is gone; over. A new sense of tension has to build up again in another place. The subsequent work on the image is correspondingly complex: it involves dragging the pre-conscious into the conscious, understanding his own actions and recreating their sensory and sensual basis. Out of the abjectness of coming down from such a high of tension, he has to regain his sense of joy in the image and grasp its language, but this time, consciously, approaching his own self from outside.

Ya'ari falls into a kind of daydream, somewhere between rapture and self-absorption. It is a state of both flight and arrival. He seems to move within a real, physical landscape at the same time as moving within a psychological, emotional and sensual one. Rather like Hamish Fulton, albeit ultimately in search of himself, of his own existence, he walks here, in this land. Motion is the driving force behind this fiercely sensitive alertness and aimless drifting; an awareness that even observation alone can change what is found.

Latency

Reluctant as Sharon Ya'ari might be to click the shutter, because in doing so he is fixing something for all time, because fleeting thoughts and perceptions are fused definitively with an object in a chemical process of precipitation, he also composes his images in a way that gives them a feeling of latency, so they remain suspended in a pre-linguistic state of anticipation. Signs form, meanings take shape, the latent potential of a situation emerges—but never excessively,

never going too far in the direction of the non-ambiguous. Ya'ari wants to keep the images open. He doesn't release them if their meaning is too obvious, too specific, and he chooses not to publish them for a definitive one-dimensional use. Instead, his photographs are meant to be like open fields in which we stroll around freely. By entering into them we trigger a tension between what is shown and what is sought. An image that presents an unambiguous statement, according to Ya'ari, is no longer an image. It is a message and, as such, could just as easily be conveyed by writing. In Israel, where everything has a political dimension, Ya'ari takes an approach reminiscent of Don Quixote, committed to all the lost and forgotten nuances, upholding the right not to be decisive, to sow seeds without necessarily reaping the harvest. He visibly strives to create a "soft" art in the climate of a harsh political reality. Things begin to speak, combining with other signs and events to form a network, only to falter, suspended in limbo. Remarkable as they are, they make no statement, say nothing clearly, but rather hint and give pause for thought. They are images that provide far more questions than answers. It is left to the viewers to consider the issues and explore their own internal responses. Ya'ari follows the traces of deeply hidden veins that show only fleetingly on the surface.

Time Capsule

"All of these images are looks at situations involving slow, inevitable decay," suggests Ya'ari, who uses the phrase "tired objects" when speaking of erosion, decay, loss of function. He speaks of "rewinding the future," and, as it rewinds, of it eroding before our eyes. In his images, he describes a melancholy state in which the tension between the ideal and the real nevertheless has to be endured. While everything decays and time, wind and floods sweep away what has been and what might have been, we have to keep our heads. Decay is inscribed in all objects, just as change is inscribed upon the face of life itself. Ya'ari uses the image of a "disappointing river" (which is the Hebrew expression for seasonal stream bed) as a metaphor for thwarted expectations.

In Ya'ari's most recent pictures it seems as though we are witnessing a gradual transformation of space and time—not just in one direction and not only forward. Many of these photographs, made between 2009 and 2012, are dual images in which he pursues a kind of archaeology of being, an exploration of both space and time.

Erosion discloses ancient layers, uncovers times gone by. History reveals itself. On the other hand, histories brand themselves onto the landscape, forming it and shaping it into successive layers. We are reminded of the butterfly whose single wing-beat can change the course of the entire world. What is, what might be, what should be, what is not: everything is inscribed upon the landscape, the objects, the furnishings of society. Ya'ari glides through time as if in a space capsule; in light, in shadow, in darkness; in color and in black and white. With the blink of an eye, the tree that was here one moment is gone the next. Three young women stand by the roadside, all looking in the same direction, apparently observing something, relaxed yet alert. A mother and daughter gaze into the distance, the mother's hand raised pensively to her face. Women, men and dogs roam the fields, just waiting and looking. A bus shelter, photographed from front and back, is meant to provide refuge, yet it more strongly symbolizes waiting. A light goes on and, for a fleeting moment, we recognize something. Then the light goes off and it disappears. It is in these small acts and gestures, which Ya'ari photographs with carefully orchestrated slowed or accelerated timing, that possibility and impossibility become manifest. There is the "shimmer of possibility," to quote the extensive series of photographs by Paul Graham with which Ya'ari's works have much in common. It is the possibility of small gestures and small movements, of imperceptible little efforts, a glimpse of the potential that lies in the uncovering of a layer, in the shining of a light, or in the moment when a person sets out to do something.

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Family (2012) shows a family sitting on a large bench set on a wooden platform in an open field. It is a recreation area, a park marked by the provisional and the decaying. They sit, as if stranded on a wooden raft, set upon the narrative constructs of history and all its stories, upon the geophysical structures of droughts and floods. The family seems suspended in and buoyed up by this complex evolution. They gaze outwards, introspectively. Being there.

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