

Sharon Ya'ari in Conversation with Vered Maimon

- Vered Maimon How do you take photographs, what kind of camera do you use?
- Sharon Ya'ari I use a wide variety of formats, from a large-format 8x10-inch camera to a 35-mm film camera. I also have a pretty good digital camera, which I sometimes use. But most of my works are photographed with a 4x5-inch camera. For me, this is the optimal size. I love looking at the negative plates, they're beautiful. This is where the image is at its highest point; the details are reasonably condensed, awaiting me with relative confidence until I eventually scan it and decide on the dimensions of the print.
- VM Your continued use of film is also an act of referring to the history of photography. Technology has its own time. Do you think that using film nowadays amounts to taking a stand?
- SY I would like to answer in the affirmative, but I'm not quite sure. The choice of a particular apparatus and a specific material is important to me in order to achieve in the image certain material values and qualities. I don't think this involves taking a stand regarding the object or observation modes; nor is it a nostalgic act. The transition to digital printing has already taken place years ago. I scan the transparencies and print the images digitally on light-sensitive photographic paper (Lambda prints) or with an inkjet printer. Digital photography is limited by the number of pixels in the image—which is remarkable in itself—and this directly affects the quality and size of the print.
- In this context, it's interesting to think about the first photographers who started working outside the studio shortly after the invention of photography. Some of them came to Palestine from Europe in order to take pictures of the Holy Land. Since the size of the print was determined by the size of the camera, some photographers would photograph the same view with different-sized cameras. The images produced by these cameras differed from each other greatly. In this respect, analogue, large-scale photography is much more versatile and flexible. In all other respects, it's a major headache.
- VM Let's talk about your photography in relation to the place where you pursue it. I would like to address your attitude to this place and to the existential possibilities it affords.

SY One must examine the relationship between the place and the meaning of photography from a broad perspective. In fact, it is at the essence of my work. It takes place in the gap between the ubiquity of photography in our life and culture—it is all over the place—and a historical awareness or acknowledgment of the potential importance of photographic documentation. My photographs try to expose private actions and motivations, which are unrelated to art or photography. For instance, questions about local identity, and about the way trivial things become charged with meaning by being present over an extended period of time; laying there, piling up, accumulating, taking form. I like being able to observe something over a long period of time, unselfconsciously admiring the complex circumstances by which it had come into being. The images have a story, usually one related to existence and near-extinction.

I pursue fundamental, existential questions about this place. I have a feeling that these remnants of history in which I am interested are the frayed seams between something whose identity or historical presence is on the verge of being defined and the disintegration thereof. I guess these are the places that attract me. When I take a photograph it's like taking a deep breath and then really looking. Reality is complex and full of contradictions, but this doesn't absolve one of responsibility for the way things are, which to my mind is critical.

VM What do you mean when you speak of responsibility? To ourselves? To the Palestinians?

SY Both. First and foremost, to ourselves and to the Occupation. The ground is being cut from under our feet because basic humanistic values on which I was raised—taking a lesson from history—have been eroded almost completely. They've been replaced with PR. My photography is not about the current state of affairs here, but its complexity is the ground on which my work is produced; it is the filter through which I look. I'm quite sure that in retrospect, such photography may be able to expose not just the surface but deeper aspects of the current situation. It's something one senses, identifying signs of the writing on the wall before it even knows it's there.

I remember the old family photo albums. The black-and-white photographs were of people who had died, and the newer, color photographs were of the living. But already then, the color images had faded, about to dissolve, while the unfamiliar black-and-white

figures seemed permanent, maintaining their gaze and all their details. In quite a few of my photographs a point in time is represented which differs from the time of photography. Thinking about my photography—specifically, the black-and-white photographs of recent years—I believe it eschews clear-cut genre classification.

VM But this is precisely what defines your work—indeterminacy which is not merely genre-related, but has to do with questions of time and place. On the one hand, your work insists on photography's documentary, observational aspect; on the other hand, it addresses the issue you were just speaking about, that is, temporality, familiarity and anonymity. Your photography points to the past by depicting remnants of sorts, but it also points to the future. It transpires in the gap between what had been and what can no longer be. In many of your works, everything is charged with this anxiety, this fragility, which in your photography always has material aspects.

SY Photography is usually conceived as a medium that involves constant decision taking, but my way of work avoids any resolutions or categorical decisions. The photographic gaze regards with ambivalence and skepticism whatever may be perceived as an absolute. Rather than know or decide, we may choose to look attentively; this allows the motivations, the internal contradictions and circumstances that have helped shape whatever we're looking at, to rise to the surface. What I choose to photograph, as well as a great deal of my subsequent dialogue with the images, hinges on the capacity of the image to absorb some kind of awareness or temporal dimension which may sharpen its tragic potential or allow it expression.

VM You often photograph at the meeting points between desert environments and human habitation.

SY I have a biographical preference for the desert. But in addition, the green landscape in other areas in Israel is always relative, always in comparison to the more saturated green of other times and places. In the desert, things are exposed. Therefore, every action that takes place there, however small, seems more significant. For example, the chain of action exposed in the diptych *Public Garden, Neighborhood D, Beersheba* (2012). The way the vegetation was pruned, this mechanical trim, is the sort of standardization which is the equivalent of a necessary minimum. I find this default manner and its day-to-day application poignant. It is something which I understand quite

well, I identify it and feel very comfortable facing it. The way I photograph is comparable to the manner by which these hedges were shorn. There's a moment there, when the man decides to get on the bike. His action and mine are analogous. A decision is taken, and this decision results in an image. My photographic act draws a connection between what precedes an act in the world and what follows it. The photographs depict the remainders of some past action. By doing so they indicate both a state of affairs which preceded this action and the passage of time in its wake. And the passage of time adds nothing to the objects photographed, it only detracts from them.

Other works I've made over the years tackle states of absence, lack, removal. I look at an object and fill the frame with it, creating a space around it, endowing it with meaning. Sometimes, after a while—moments or years—the object disappears. The frame is emptied and fills up with a void. A vacuum forms. I actually went to that public garden because at its center there's a cellular antenna whose design is a bogus attempt to beautify or disguise it. I went there on a winter day, intending to photograph the antenna. But as I was walking around it, something else came into being: the light, the man walking by with his bike, the shorn hedges, the surrounding desert, and this a-temporal atmosphere of the public garden.

VM Something in your photographs indicates that, from the very beginning, there has been something bogus about these desert towns. You keep photographing all these places that probably never had a chance of becoming actual "places." I'm thinking of the photograph of four people, who look like immigrants from Russia, crossing the lane in the desert town of Sderot with their plastic bags (*Sderot [page 4]*, 1999). There's a feeling of disconnectedness there, just as the "original" inhabitants of Sderot were disconnected. The lane itself is improvised.

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SY I'm not sure I agree about this disconnectedness. In well-regulated, well-kept places the individual has no room for shortcuts. The four people in Sderot are taking their everyday path, which is a shortcut. Walking has shaped the landscape, forming steps by which to climb out of the hollow in the land. They are evidence of private routines which affect a public place. Identifying this daily, repetitive action which affects the environment is touching. It's the opposite of disconnectedness.

VM I'm not referring to disconnectedness as a moral notion, but as an existential one. That is, you always photographs places that want

to be other than they are. If everything is so organic, why must it always disguise itself as something else? Your photographic empathy turns them into different places. But you don't approach it from a perspective of ideological manipulation, through a lie or artificiality. Your attitude is one of drawing nearer. You try to get closer.

- SY Yes, it's an attentive mode. I pay attention to motivations, to the personal circumstances of an object or subject, which have brought them there. For example, in *Safe Room, Beersheba Zoo, Spring* (2013), what we see is a segment of a large, concrete sewer pipe flanked on both sides by concrete barricades. Zoo visitors, families and staff walk around between the cages, and if the need arises—that is, should missiles fall there—this is supposed to serve as a safe place for them. But beyond all the connotations of the linguistic term “safe room” there is the object itself, standing there, whose form, a minimalist sculptural cliché made of concrete, is almost ironic with regards to Modernism. To me, this is a poignant gap. There I am at the zoo, standing in front of this thing whose dimensions are of human proportions, with a Xeroxed page of instructions which is still hanging there when I return a few months later... To my eye, it is a beautiful, impossible structure. Time will only improve it. It will never be moved from that spot. It's already functioning as an archaeological relic—of itself, and of the clichés I identify in it. p. 37
- VM But that's exactly the issue: It may look like a minimalist sculpture, it may look like Brutalist military architecture, but the essential point is that it does not produce a sense of safeness. Many of the structures you photograph are meant to provide protection but in fact emit a sense of anxiety and instability. Interestingly enough, in your more recent series your photography has turned more reflexive, emptier, as opposed to the early color series, in which groups of people appeared in spectacular environments. One senses that you have come to avoid human presence; that something in the relationship between place and actions or place and people has changed over the years.
- SY If an image may be said to be an independent entity, its preferable mode of realization would be through actual human presence. In the early color photographs, the people in the landscape were the reason I took the picture. They were the excuse. I would search for situations which consisted of seemingly meaningless activity. I had very clear rules: I would not photograph battle sites, memorial sites, firing ranges, or identifiable places. But whenever I'm facing something, some object, I seem to assimilate into it and come to

terms with its shortcomings, with the streak of compromises that had made it what it is. Therefore, the phenomenon of time, for whose accumulation my photography is meant to serve as a support, cannot be disrupted by aspects related to the coincidental presence of people. Their encounter with the act of photography represents something which is germane to the moment. And what I search for are things that would be relevant both to what is yet to happen and to what has already occurred. However, there are peak moments. For example, in *Shadows, B'nei Or Street, Beersheba* (2012) the shadow of the trees creates every day, for several moments, a landscape on the wall of an empty apartment whose construction was never finished. This zenith is reached repeatedly, on a daily basis. p. 25

VM So, what has come to replace human figures in your work is an attempt to observe objects from a point of view which exceeds the human?

SY I regard photography as a kind of sampling from a particular historical sequence. Just as one could potentially recreate an extinct animal from a preserved DNA sample, the exhibition offers an opportunity to lay out the material, cultural and personal code which manifests the potential of this place, and recreate its tragic historical aspect. The things portrayed are beautiful. They are beautiful because they show balance; they've endured, they know something, they've been polished by dust. Things repeat themselves in various forms, but the repetition isn't endless. That is why I like abandoned or unexplored archaeological sites. I used to visit archaeological sites where there had been preliminary attempts at research and possibly even reconstruction, which were abandoned for lack of money, irrelevance, or other reasons. To a certain extent, this is what the place we live in is like. I'm fascinated with reconstruction attempts which themselves turn into archaeology. A reconstructed place realized to the fullest extent is empty, is boring.

VM Michel Foucault regards archaeology as a mode of knowledge which is contrary to history; knowledge which has a critical function. While history studies the canon, the victor, archaeology always looks elsewhere, to things that leave room for gaps, ambiguity and ruptures.

SY But the archaeology of the establishment always confirms a certain historical narrative; therefore it's tendentious, often ideological. I'm interested in remains as manifestations of a personal, practical touch. Not as something that may validate or refute a particular

epos or myth, but as having to do with a more fundamental level of perception or imagination.

VM It seems like you are very interested in diverse mechanisms, such as mechanisms of preservation, of sprucing up, of protection.

SY Yes, I'm attentive to the way by which certain mechanisms make themselves noted while also trying to obscure themselves. I believe this is particularly evident in the photograph of David Ben-Gurion's shed on Kibbutz Sde Boker (2012). Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, lived in a shed on a kibbutz in the desert for twenty years, from 1953 to his death in 1973. The preservation of his shed is essentially a photographic act. Mechanisms—be they of preservation, protection, or environmental development and planning—may all be deconstructed. I'm familiar with them, and understand the disruption they can cause. They provide some of my raw materials. My own act of preservation is individual, while they have a broader political agenda, which they try to impose on me. And within this overall framework, here is also a manipulative act that has a poetic, personal aspect: These are the adhesive bandages Ben-Gurion used for his feet, this is his house, these are the books he read. The Ben-Gurions slept in single beds, in separate rooms. By David Ben-Gurion's bedside there are books, and in Paula's room there are pictures. Her sunglasses are on her nightstand. The bedcovers on both beds are the same, but his have faded through washing. And of course, they are both dead. Their presence is filled with their absence. And while the mechanism is transparent and crude, the place still functions as an offer of alternative values. Just like photography.

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VM Your work takes an interesting position within the debate between pictorial and conceptual photography raised by Jeff Wall and Michael Fried. On the one hand, you are interested in the generic, in a local, material syntax of sorts. This is evident in recurring elements such as concrete barriers, fences, buildings, plants. On the other hand, your work is not typological, it isn't serial in the conventional sense, and it contains pictorial elements. It even tackles, to some extent, Romantic conventions of nineteenth-century landscape representation. It seems to me that what you're showing is that photography has its own syntax. And this syntax doesn't have to derive, as in Wall's pictures, from a non-photographic tradition (which he insists on, whether it's cinematic tradition or a painting by Édouard Manet). Furthermore, you're not interested in staging or in control. That is, what you're interested in is a certain type of exposure, which makes

use of photography's ability to function as a document of something over which one doesn't have complete control.

- SY Yes, I consider my inability to plan or to be more active a shortcoming. I was surprised when my photography was characterized as informed by patient waiting. Considering my habitual use of a large camera, my photography is relatively quick, it consumes itself. This propels me to return to the same place after a while. Often, this return is disappointing and I can't figure out what I saw there before. I work around the subject, changing positions and perspectives and hoping for the unexpected. But even as I'm first positioning the camera, my initial gaze is already calculating an image which "sits" right within the frame, which is composed just so. These are possibly vestiges of a pictorial tradition. The composition of the frame is necessary, it is at the essence of the picture and, at the end of the day, it allows the image to function as a model. However, I am also interested in randomness. Over the years I have made a series of works in which I try to recreate errors that occurred in the process of photography.
- VM Sometimes you exhibit them. Like the portrait of *Sebastian, Wroclaw, Poland* (2002) with the layer of dust and light exposure, p. 63 and in the current exhibition the work with the black stains (*Bridge with Flowers, Route 42*, 2013) and the doubled mosaic image (*Mosaic [double exposure at 90-degree turn]*, 2013). But this, too, turns into a kind of pictorialism. p. 65 p. 66
- SY I recreate and reconstruct a state of disruption, a mishap in the process, a break in the routine: the camera moving or falling, double exposures, mistakes in the development process, a cloud of dust landing on the film. The expectation of disruption and disappointment, like dust, is a dominant element in our daily lives here. In the background, there is also a fantasy of a snapshot, as opposed to a stationary, composing gaze. The resulting image is cool. I have no interest in associating the disruption with a specific moment in the history of photography or art. It is a disruption which avoids trendy nostalgia, as in Instagram's aestheticist filter.
- VM But what is the meaning of observing local environments, which are part of a particular historical reality? What is the meaning of photographing such environments from a viewpoint which already encompasses pictorial values? Where does the gaze, which has its own history, connect with these places? You immerse yourself in observation, you dedicate yourself to this place, and you do so

through a gaze which has been formed by years of photography. So what is it that actually happens in this encounter? It seems like a very complex encounter, fraught with tensions.

SY This is an accurate description. I'm not sure I can analyze this encounter or take it apart. The time of the encounter with my subjects is essential to me. I've already described this moment as an empty one. It's a quiet, loaded, concentrated moment. That's the moment when things compose themselves into some kind of beauty, or a very private logic. It is photography as an intimate act, a refuge; an act of limited scope, which is the only option; a counter-reaction to the grandiose. I don't act randomly, I'm not capricious, but I do hope that elements which are out of my control would intervene and surprise me.

VM I would like to ask you something of a personal nature, because I've noticed a change in the way you photograph. I remember the family pictures that used to hang in your studio, and our talks about your past. I think your work has changed since you've become a father. It suddenly started looking at what is to come, not what has been. Nowadays, I think your gaze is directed at the future, at what will remain after you're gone, or what will remain in general; the world in which your children will live. To my mind, the paradigmatic photograph in this respect, which I love, is of the mother and daughter gazing out of the picture in *Mother and Daughter* (2000). At some point in your life, this photograph was important to you. It's also related, as you told me, to our growing older and asking questions.

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SY I like the way you put it. It has to do with the way I see the development and accumulation of my artistic production. It's only recognizable in retrospect, I don't recall ever deciding or thinking about it cogently. I identify it, for instance, even in the territorial aspect of my work. I photograph in Israel, closer and closer to home. I photograph in the area which is at the heart of this country's material existence, an area which is supposedly not contested. I don't have the privilege of deciding not to examine things, not to observe them. I feel the need to report on things here by focusing not only on current events, but on things that have matured, things that have seen a thing or two in this world and have endured.

VM Hearing you say this, and looking at your photographs, it feels as if you're saying, "This is what we'll be leaving our children..."

SY As I've said, this is my archaeological layer.