

Between place and identity

Stopping to smell the irises with Sharon Ya'ari

• By TALYA HALKIN

One of my favorite photographs by Israeli artist Sharon Ya'ari depicts a family of four out for a walk on a grassy hillside. They have paused at a crossroads of sorts, formed by the intersection of a dirt trail and a narrow footpath which has been trodden to create a shortcut to the point where they now stand. They have stopped because the older of the two men is on crutches, which impede him from venturing beyond the trail's abrupt end.

Each of the four is looking off in a different direction. The younger man is staring out over the fields and orchards below to the horizon, where cypress and eucalyptus trees and an old house give way to a group of low apartment buildings. The young boy beside him stares at something invisible on the ground. The woman, dressed in a bright red

tracksuit, wears a pair of black sunglasses and a look of disillusionment.

Iris Hill, South West View is currently being exhibited at the International Center of Photography in New York, where Ya'ari is participating in its first international photography triennial. Any perceptive viewer seeing the photo there could recognize that it is not just

the older man's crutches, but the ephemeral nature of the scene as a whole, that pervades the photograph with an atmosphere of physical and emotional vulnerability.

But you would have to be an Israeli viewer to know that this is a Saturday hike, that the season is winter, and that the verdant hillside will not remain green for long. You might not recognize this particular hill, but you could guess (if you knew the title of the photograph) that the young boy is bending over to look at a particular type of iris that blooms briefly at this time of year.

I myself spent the past decade, during which the 37-year-old Ya'ari established himself as one of the most important Israeli artists of his generation, living in New York. In the last two or three years, however, I had ample opportunities to see his work abroad, where he has been developing an impressive international career. In addition to a solo show at London's prestigious Lisson Gallery, Ya'ari had his second solo show in New York last winter. Earlier this summer, he was also

short-listed for the prestigious Arles photography prize in France.

YA'ARI GRADUATED from the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in 1994, when photography was first gaining recognition in Israel as an autonomous art form. He was one of a number of young artists who began photographing the environment, turning to the large format and lush colors pioneered by German photographers such as Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth.

Like almost all of Ya'ari's work in recent years, *Iris Hill* was taken with a 4x5 camera. The film was chemically developed before being digitally processed and printed as a large-scale image of exceptionally high quality, in which every detail is visible.

"I am addicted to photography because of its ability to capture these kinds of details without having to underscore them intentionally," Ya'ari told me when we met in his Jaffa studio several weeks ago. "When a photograph of mine invites you to take it in

'IRIS HILL, South West View,'
(Sharon Ya'ari)



immediately in its entirety, I am disappointed by it."

Ya'ari aims for places that cannot be easily identified or associated with a pre-existing narrative. He is interested in esoteric, sometimes chance human activity that isn't prescribed by the nature of the place, and that often remains unclear.

"Sometimes," he says, "I just let the car take me down a certain route until I recognize a place that has some kind of potential. I might check it out and come back again another time. Half the time I don't even photograph anything."

The harsh white light of Israeli summers makes it almost impossible for photographers to work outside during the day. This is one of the reasons that Ya'ari opted, two summers ago, to spend some time working in Poland, his father's birthplace.

"I first went there with him in 1989," he tells me. "I went again when I tried to think of the place that had the gloomiest light."

"Was the Holocaust present in your childhood?" I ask.

"Yes. It is now, too, in a sense. I don't usually talk about it, because it immediately becomes a banality. It is something I dealt with more directly in my early work, but it still exists in the ominous atmosphere that pervades the different environments I photograph."

"For me," Ya'ari continues, "the connection between Israel and Eastern Europe is psychological rather than historical. It's about a related sense of estrangement. I am attracted to places that give you the sense of entering an insulated world pervaded by its own specific logic – a world that contains elements of threat and potential drama, a kind of disturbance or delay which helps me to charge a trivial situation with the emotional state that I am in at a given moment. In Israel everything is so familiar that it becomes very difficult to feel surprised. In certain ways, Poland reminded me of Israel in the 1970s, before the destructive standardization wrought through the widespread use of prefabricated building elements."

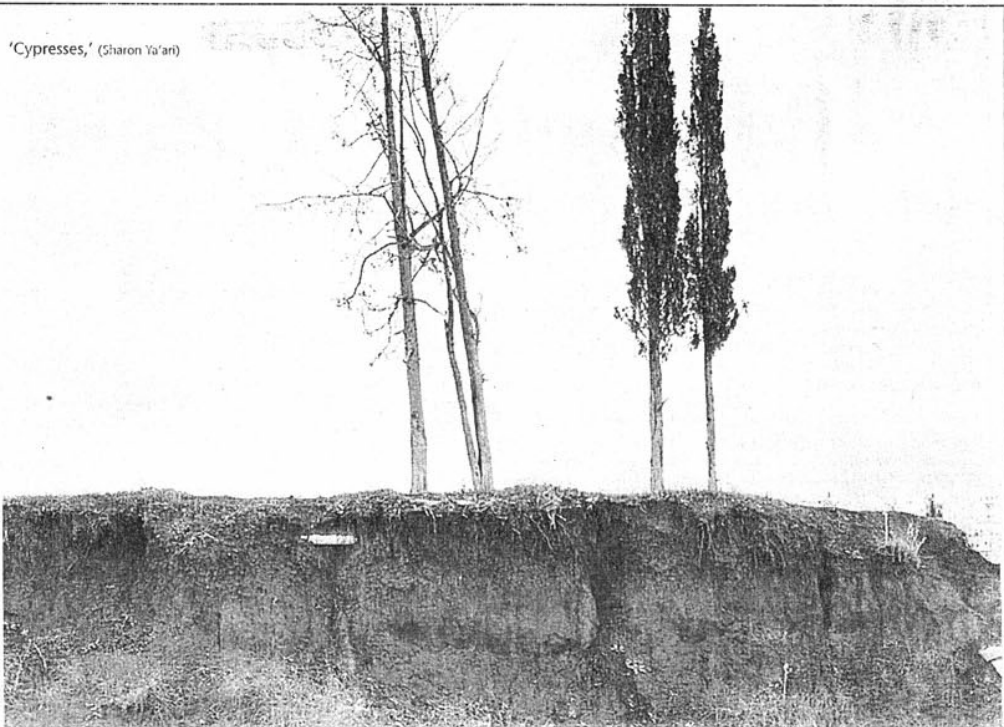
WHEN I had last seen Ya'ari in New York last winter, we spent some time looking at his exhibition, which had just opened at Chelsea's Lombard-Fried gallery. It contained photographs taken in both Poland and Israel, including two pictures of empty military tents.

"The Israeli tent is taut on one side but collapsing on the other – like some kind of wounded elephant," Ya'ari pointed out to me. "The Polish one is also crippled, but in a different way, like a submarine stranded on the bottom of the ocean. Both bespeak the same degree of alienation and pain. The military connection is peripheral to the image. It's simply a platform to build upon."

Like many of Ya'ari's photographs, the two tents bespeak a preoccupation with home and homelessness, with a search for shelter and its denial. They radiate a subtle anxiety about survival that has to do more with a formal and material sense of imbalance and impermanence than with a thematic connection to army and war.

Israeli art critics have written about the way Ya'ari pioneered the use of the camera as an agent of cultural research to comment on Israeli leisure practices and family ritu-

'Cypresses,' (Sharon Ya'ari)



als. They have pointed out how, in photographs like *Iris Hill*, his camera reveals the illusion of a pastoral landscape to be a circumscribed pocket of nature that is slowly but visibly being consumed by the encroachment of the built environment.

In one of our recent conversations in his studio, Ya'ari pointed to *Cypresses*, a photograph in which a low plateau of other earth has been sliced open in preparation for a building project, exposing an underground pipe. A pair of trees crowning the eroding mound are already desiccated, while another pair still struggles to survive.

"Critics have referred to these cypresses again and again," says Ya'ari. "They have called them cemetery trees – a metaphor for a violently self-consuming environment. I feel uncomfortable with this kind of interpretation of my work, which only deals with its most superficial register. The photographs are potentially critical, but I am more concerned with how they comment on photography itself. What interests me about this particular photograph is the tension between the trees that are already dead and those that are going to die. I thought there was something poetic about the exposed pipe, which lies there like an artery. I am interested in how visual elements accumulate into a kind of unintended beauty, without being too poetic or too obvious. For me, making photographs is about constantly reining in the image, making sure it is opaque enough for me to allow it to exist. When it allows itself to break free, it threatens my intentions. Photographs like that don't end up being printed."

"I am looking for a borderline state that is both in me and in the work, just before

everything falls apart."

I had first met Ya'ari through Vered Maimon, one of the first Israeli curators and critics to exhibit and write about his work.

"In Sharon's more recent photographs," she told me, "there is a shift to more subtle observations about the relationships between people and their environment, which extends beyond their local context. In focusing on how the sense of insecurity in his works is related to a concrete Israeli reality, people often neglect the way his work has to do with globalization and migration, with the question of what is the relationship between people and places in an age that is hostile to all specificity."

I THOUGHT of these remarks when Ya'ari and I last met to talk about his work. We were studying a photograph he had taken on a promenade outside Ashdod that captures a group of people facing away from the camera, solitary and immobile in dark winter clothes. Their foreignness is immediately palpable, albeit in a way that is difficult to define. It has something to do with the posture and body language of the five men, with the cut and material of their jackets, with the texture of the awkwardly fitting sweater worn by the woman on the left. Your gaze tries to meet the single, bird-like eye of the only other woman in the photograph, but is inevitably caught in the tangle of bare branches in the foreground.

You might notice, at this point, that the photographer has manipulated the picture, and that the two men in leather jackets are the same man viewed from different angles. Beyond them extends yet another threshold – a metal fence anchored in a low sandstone wall. The forlorn stretch of earth

sloping up and away from it contains a small zoo, occupied by a lone ostrich.

When I told Ya'ari several weeks ago that I wanted to interview him for an article, I asked if he would take me with him on one of his road trips.

"Okay," he said, "but there's really nothing to see."

Several days later, in the course of one of our conversations, I discovered that he had gone to Beersheba without me.

"I didn't know where I was going," he told me apologetically. "I had something to do in Ashdod, but I changed my mind and continued south."

There were one or two other times when he called me and I was unavailable, or out of town, but I felt he was probably as relieved as I was disappointed. I can't explain exactly why I wanted to drive with him to one of those places that would remain meaningless, or invisible to me, unless he circumscribed it with his lens. Maybe I was hoping that he would feel less guarded, since his difficulty in talking

about himself is as great as his ease in talking about his work. Maybe it was because I was deeply moved by his ability to distill the fragile relationship between place and identity with such sensitivity and precision, rendering landscape at once achingly familiar and uncannily strange.



שרון יארי