

## **How to Camouflage Destruction: Sharon Ya'ari, Photographs, Sommer Gallery, Tel Aviv**

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It is amazing to see how Poland seeps into Israel in Sharon Ya'ari's exhibition of photographs. Israeli youth in the Polish light and landscape as an illustration of the fraught connection between Polishness and Israeliness – even its oriental sectors, which have unwittingly been “ashkenazified”. Deeper down, Ya'ari hides the seeds of destruction. The way in which the three “Polish photographs” are hung – one in each of the gallery's three rooms, surrounded by the “Israeli photographs” – causes the viewer to first identify them, then compare and contrast them with the others. This process creates a narrative structure, a shared destruction, even though each photograph stands alone, taking refuge in its own enigma.

Ya'ari's photographs also contain a subliminal theatricality – in the way the frame is chosen, in the way the photograph is taken, and in the artist's subsequent intervention in the process. Ya'ari sometimes leaves a theatrical distance between viewer and subject in his photographs; he erects curtains, consciously using selective focus as if it were chiaroscuro. Theatricality is also noticeable in the computerized duplication of figures in the photographs – a narrative intervention that is difficult to identify but which seeds routine scenes with dreaminess and mystery. But then Ya'ari treats the people in his photographs with anti-theatricality, acting like a dedicated voyeur, although there is nothing exceptional about the scenes (perhaps this is a cinematic-documentary act). He is closer now than ever to the people he photographs, but does not engage with them. Rather, he steals a calculated glance at them.

I have not yet mentioned the intense beauty of these photographs, the quotidian dance of life and death coiled in them: in the respirator that rests on a wooden surface, like an organism that has ceased to breathe. In the *Zoo*, seen through the tangled branches of a bare tree and a family of sullen adults from East Jerusalem (?) who accompany a lone child; one of the adults appears twice, first looking at the animals and then

looking at himself looking at the animals – a minimalistic and enigmatic intervention. The *Polish Tent* is a canvas thickened like part of a fat, menacing worm crawling in some northern forest; a tree trunk blocks it from the viewer; its round windows conceal some secret, like a murder scene whose horror is hinted at in the photograph, or in the viewer's imagination. It is worth comparing it to the *Tent* that hangs in the farthest room, an IDF tent barely standing in a pine and eucalyptus grove; again, there is a lone trunk sentry; this abandoned tent seems to allude to a crumbling national homeland.

*Cypresses*, the photograph that carried news of the exhibition far afield, contains all of the beauty and dolor of this place, which is devouring itself and its past. A hillock of red clay chewed by a bulldozer under a grayish sky (which judiciously modulates the photograph's melancholy), green grass like a balm in the clefts of wounded flesh, a white pipe exposed like a corroding artery; on the hillock's horizon stand the thinning cypresses with their lopped-off roots; in the distance, the bleached roofs of the tenements seem like the froth of a wave used to build the cities that nibble at the landscape. In *Three Women – Old Fair Grounds*, these are not women but teenage girls seen from the back, wearing the latest fashion, slipping into a darkness (intensified on the computer by Ya'ari) that is the antithesis of the stark light of an Israeli day. Next to them in *Dobrozin* is a group of bright, relaxed Israeli boys and girls, sharing secrets behind a crumbling wall of burnt bricks, beyond which lies a bare patch in a forest (a hint of the Holocaust); this illusion of tranquility defuses the ideology of the youth trips to Poland (the black fuel of our existence). In *Near Dobrozin*, Ya'ari seems to slink alongside the battered Polish truck so as to trap in his lens the golden-haired girls whispering and hiding by its front. Then the *Chairs* bring the viewer back to the stiff-necked heart of this place: a herd of plastic chairs of all makes and colors, arranged and arrayed in a funeral hall somewhere in Israel; this is a striking and fitting comment on the pitilessness and alienation of Jewish-Israeli death rituals.

Simultaneous to this exhibition, Sharon Ya'ari has a solo exhibition in Madrid. During the coming year, he will have a solo exhibition at Lisson – one of the most important galleries in London – whose cooperation with the Sommer Gallery has

produced a fine book of Ya'ari's recent photographs, thereby enabling one of the most interesting and resonant voices in Israeli art to be heard across the ocean.