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Tal Niv

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Sharon Ya'ari's "Squills, 2012," from his exhibition "Leap Toward Yourself," currently showing at Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Guest curator: Urs Stahel; accompanying catalog designed by Michael Gordon.

1 What happened in the car in this photograph by Sharon Ya'ari? Where are the people? The front door is open, the light is on – have they left the car for a moment? Are there two people? Are they a couple? The back door is open, too, so maybe someone was sitting in the back. Maybe there are more than two. What we know is that it's autumn and that it's here, actually near Ashkelon (I asked Ya'ari by email). This is Israel, because this is the way it looks. Not an *idée fixe* of plowed furrows, of a "European landscape"; this is Israel that Ya'ari captures, and in the meantime the light in the car tells us something, and the trampled grass that's lying on the path – what is empty says it all. This photograph, which ostensibly has the squills at its center, is now on display as part of an extensive exhibition of Ya'ari's work at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and also in the fine catalog – refined and precise – that accompanies the show. In these images Ya'ari offers something very deep within himself to the viewers, and says something fundamental about the Israeli landscape, and about Israel itself. It is not as beautiful as we say it is. It just is as it is. "Beautifully."

In a surprisingly lucid article, which avoids mirroring itself in theoretical referencing and is based on conversations with Ya'ari, Urs Stahel – the exhibition's curator – writes in the catalog that Ya'ari is fighting for his right "to sow without reaping" (from the chapter "Latency"). Is there a more riveting posture, more in opposition to

the self-delusions, more courageous in the Israel of the Jewish National Fund (which forces the landscape into its image) and more psychically revealing than to insist on not reaping?

2 I will come back to the car's gaping doors, I will relate who I took with me to see the photograph, and I will say that Ya'ari also takes pictures of people, usually from a great distance and with their backs to him, yet still understands them. In the meantime, in the vast halls in which his exhibition is on view, it becomes clear to me that some of the photographs are placed too high, close to the ceiling. Maybe they should have been hung in small spaces to begin with. Because each of the technically perfect, symmetrical, texture-rich, fraught-framed photographs, so aware of their artistry, hurtles the wall concretely, physically, into the world. I stop in front of the shots of the cypresses – something comes to mind. At home, I peruse Ya'ari's photographs of cypresses in the catalog (bare, on a bald hill from 2001 and in a Be'er Sheva neighborhood from the past year) and open another book. Yes, here it is: "Herzl's Cypress," a photograph taken 101 years ago by the Jewish-Austrian photographer Leo Kann, who disappeared without trace in Europe in 1939. This is the cypress supposedly planted by Herzl himself at Motza, outside Jerusalem, and mentioned by the writer Eliezer Smoly in a well-known story. ("Herzl was thrilled. His dreamy eyes gazed

into the far distance and his lips whispered the words of the emperor: The land shall belong to those who plant trees in the wilderness and cast shade upon it.") The tree became a pilgrimage site before being felled by the Turks in 1917. So now I see a photo that exists of a cypress that doesn't. And I find that Ya'ari has something very serious to say about the love-of-the-soil ethos within the story of Zionism: The love of letter turned into a cult of land-grabbing that ignored the actual landscape and, subsequently, the people on it). And in this



Courtesy of Bitya Souzin and Bitmuna – Nadav Mann, from the exhibition "Framed Landscape: A Comment on Local Landscape Photography"

Leo Kann, "Herzl's Cypress" (in Motza), 1912.

photograph, as in the others, he offers honesty that has a precedent, but no competitors. With perfect perspective, supreme precision, at the highest level of execution, the photograph is at one and the same time utterly singular, faithful to a particular style, and also wholly amenable to interpretation, to observation, to other people, refined without requesting or offering instant gratification. This is someone who knows what he's about (wandering about with one particular camera, as he told Stahel), who is able to restrain himself. Who knows how to process his impulses. Who has something to say.

3 It strikes me that I am spending more and more time in the museum lately, like those people who live in airports. I look at the trampled trail under the jagged line of the sabras, at the sharp-tipped squills and their flowering bulbs, at the brush and the thorns, at the earth. I begin to understand that I will never know whether there was a couple in the car. That a non-couple is in my head. Maybe they are outside the car, maybe this is a murder scene, I tell the guest from Germany, a member of the exchange program who, surprisingly, turned out to be Jewish and whom I asked to come with me to the museum the moment he got up to introduce himself when we met previously. His brown eyes are deep and warm. We stand close for a while. I've seen scenes like that, he says, and they don't look like this.