

How do you photograph the people and places of Israel without getting caught up in the fighting, the religion and the party politics? **Sharon Ya'ari's** work is characterized by its refusal of photojournalism, high drama and overwrought emotion. His photographs are quiet but not tranquil, stoical but never blank. Ya'ari has an eye for the subtle immanent politics of his visual world. His pictures make us wonder: what happened here?

In Ya'ari's work, one can see traces of Walker Evans's "documentary style", Joel Sternfeld's social landscapes, Thomas Struth's modernist cityscapes and Thomas Ruff's experiments with post-production techniques. Ya'ari uses digital technology to combine multiple negatives, alter his palette and remove overt markers. In fact, by eliminating conspicuous signs of the times, Ya'ari increases the ambiguity of his work and enhances its laden sense of history. Each photograph bears witness to the idea that the future is to be found in the past.

Ya'ari's black-and-white series "500m radius" (2005) is part urban landscape, part architectural photography. In Tel Aviv during the 1930s and '40s, over 4000 Bauhaus buildings were built. Taken close to home in the early morning hours, Ya'ari's intimate back-alley views contrast with official images of the vernacular architecture and shed new light on the idealism of the Bauhaus movement. Although they document neglect, the photographs offer a glimmer of optimism in the sculptural beauty of the debris that litters the forlorn landscape.

History is also a key theme in Ya'ari's colour photography. In *Chairs* (2001), the cheap post-war plastic seats act as ghosts for the people who seem to have just abandoned this uncertain room. The arrangement of chairs is puzzling because it suggests neither the strict hierarchy of a lecture nor the democratic discussions of a meeting. On closer inspection, details such as a heap of prayer shawls or sheets in the corner indicate that the interior could be a makeshift synagogue or funeral home. Here, in the present tense, we encounter the temporary feel of the ancient religion that, over the centuries, has rarely had the dominion to invest in permanent cathedrals. Moreover, the picture suggests the social rather than the spiritual functions of the faith.

Not all of Ya'ari's photographs are taken in Israel. In a photograph entitled *Sebastian* (2003), for example, the Christian name, grey light and lush ivy hints at northern Europe, while the explosion of overexposure and white "dust" threatens to wipe out evidence of the young man portrayed. In fact, the location is a Jewish cemetery in Poland and Sebastian is a local who makes a living through using his detailed knowledge of the graveyards to help Jews find long lost family. He holds a stick of white chalk in his right hand that he uses to trace the worn-out Hebrew lettering on the tombstones. Like many of Ya'ari's photographs, this one tenuously balances a range of contradictions: the real and the imagined, tenderness and brutality, amnesia and remembrance.—Sarah Thornton

