

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.

Time Capsule

Urs Stahel

Seeking a Return to Photography

It all began with a doubt: about photography, about its ability to address the contemporary, its capacity to contribute to the discourse. So Sharon Ya'ari's first works (1995) broke with the photographic norm by alternating his black-and-white landscapes of Israel with early-twentieth-century found images from Eastern Europe, of Jewish communities in the towns of Pinsk and Turek—showing events such as the opening of schools and hospitals, and emigration to America or Palestine. Using Photoshop, he extracted portraits from the found images, combining faces from the past with landscapes of the present to make new visual realities. Another state, another time emerged, delicately, for he blended past and present, reality and hope, conjuring new presences like a sorcerer's apprentice. p. 216

In the subsequent color works (1999–2002), the multilayered temporality generated by digital collage and montage is fused once again into a single image. In one, scattered groups of people—families perhaps—make their way along a road towards the annual spectacle of iris fields in bloom. They look as if they are going to a funeral, or at least to some family gathering of great import. In another, a cluster of dusty, faded, colored plastic chairs with cut-out backs like lungs to make sitting on plastic in the heat of the summer more bearable offers a cheerful image, until we notice among the brightly-colored clutter that we are actually looking at a funeral chapel. The arrangement of chairs in the simple room echoes a family constellation. In another picture, three young women, dressed almost identically in flared jeans and skimpy, bare-shouldered summer tops, climb through a corrugated metal barrier. One of them is already crouched down, preparing to pass under a metal bar, as though crossing into the darkness of some hidden nocturnal realm beyond the picture. The tangible sense of a relaxed summer stroll contrasts with the uncertainty and gloom of the yawning abyss. In another photograph, a patch of tarmac—deposited and rolled out three or four centimeters thick—stretches along a forest path like a black tongue. Its edges are frayed, as though the supply p. 161 p. 105 p. 101 p. 157

of asphalt had run out. The saying “to speak with forked tongue” comes to mind, yet if we listen carefully, this tongue of tar in the forest seems to speak of the absurdity to be found in small, everyday acts.

In these color photographs, Sharon Ya’ari returns to a simple, observational photography; one that observes directly but cautiously, framing contradictions and layers of overlapping meanings that reveal themselves only gradually. He has remained faithful to this form of photography, while constantly undermining it by questioning the medium and filling it with reflections on the photographic gaze. What is shown and to what purpose? From which position? And how? What does it reveal? What has been achieved and accomplished is called into question—just as is what is in demand and what is fashionable internationally. So abandoning color was only a question of time.

Memory Molds the Present

Israel’s future should be like Europe’s past. That is the understandable if somewhat unrealistic wish of many of its immigrants. Moving forward with a sentiment firmly rooted in the past. The desert should bloom, and the image of childhood, the European view of nature, should be resurrected in Israel. For those who settled here, a “new homeland” was synonymous with the idea of transforming Israel into a land reminiscent of their own background. This approach was also one of the reasons for planting forests in the new land. In his “Lawns” (1997) group of works, Ya’ari documents this idea of reproduction, presenting various grassy places that look as if they have come out of a mail-order catalogue, available with the nod of the head or a click of the mouse: carpets of grass; fields of grass as flower-strewn layers in the battle against wind and sand. Lawns are produced, cut into strips, and replanted elsewhere. We know from the research of Jean Piaget and others that our minds and feelings are formed, directed and shaped within the first two years of life. Wherever we go, we carry within us the fundamental perspectives of childhood. No matter what we encounter in the outside world, we carry inner images within us, and what we see with our eyes, and through photography, is what we want to see, wish to see, have to see. The past becomes the present, the future, even when new situations challenge our ability to support them. Our minds are capable of repressing harsh realities, capable of ignoring them when

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they don't fit our preconceived visions. Yet the future, too, soon becomes the past, if it is too unrealistically constructed.

Inscriptions

Strange objects occasionally inhabit Sharon Ya'ari's photographs. Under a tree, for instance, a table is surrounded by six seats. The table and seats are connected in such a way that makes them look like a cluster of metal-and-concrete fungi. The round seats have a central groove cut across their tops that makes them reminiscent of metal screw heads. The seating unit is not firmly anchored to the ground. It is perched at a slant, like a slowly shifting sand dune. The future of these objects, according to the artist, has long since run out.¹ They are de-functionalized, metamorphosing from useful objects into sculptures, moving *in situ* through time, gradually adapting to their surroundings. Why are they stuck here and no longer used? This is the kind of casual yet insistent enquiry that drives Sharon Ya'ari and his photography. It is there in his image of the tree trunk, ripped from the ground, ravaged by wind and weather, lying in the desert as a reminder of its former energy and strength. These images tell of endeavors, of efforts great and small that ultimately have come to nothing; that eventually proved useless. Now they must succumb to the passage of time.

A plurality of times, of many "presents," is inscribed on these weather-beaten everyday sculptures like tattoos, their origins and actual purpose overlaid by different uses and events. There they stand, abandoned, forlorn, and rather shabby. Even the towering ANZAC monument to the heavy losses sustained by the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps in the First World War looks dreary and a little melancholy with a tattered military camouflage net draped over its viewing platform like some vast chainmail shirt. A gravestone neglected, a death forgotten. A mammoth of recent history. For the most part unspectacular, unnoticed, visible only to the alert observer. Small shifts and changes over the course of time. Sharon Ya'ari visits them again and again through the years, watching the gradual collapse of a tree until its massive limbs eventually completely bury the picnic table placed beneath it.

¹ All remarks by Sharon Ya'ari are from conversations with the author during the spring of 2013.

500 Meter Radius

In the meantime, Ya'ari has returned to black and white photography. Going against the mainstream, against the convention for perfectly enlarged and mounted or heavily framed color works that spread like an epidemic through the closing decade of the twentieth century, he has taken a different tack, seeking his own path. He reacts with seismic sensitivity to certain situations. Almost since its beginnings, photography has been dominated by distance. Photographers would travel to promised lands, to Africa, or to Indochina, bringing back their treasures like precious gems and presenting them to audiences at home. The photographs were a source of evidence and of excitement, playing on a sense of the exotic, of acceptable, enjoyable otherness, in a game of visual power.

Ya'ari's series "500 Meter Radius" (2006) breaks with this tradition: it focuses on what is closest—the immediate surroundings of home. The photographic gaze drifts around backyards and lingers on neighboring façades. Nothing is perfectly manicured. The objects and materials seem to languish where they are—still functional or just set aside and basically forgotten. Wandering round nooks and crannies, past doors and sleepy windows, through courtyards and forlorn front gardens, Ya'ari is not in search of some "decisive moment" when he sets out in the early hours on paths within a restricted radius. He has with him his first-born son, who always wakes up at five in the morning. The dual negation of space and time, of temporally and spatially unique places, results in a series of remarkably casual, quotidian images in which the mythic architecture of Bauhaus Tel Aviv gives way to a new wave of gentrification, which is rolling in to cleanse and prepare the buildings for the lifestyle of the new decade. This is a photographic approach with accreditation, as it were, given that nobody, anywhere, especially in a city so wrought with tension and even fear, lingers with impunity in such places during the small hours without good reason; it is something that requires keen insight and a disarming smile.

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Images in Motion

There is a similar everyday feel to the video loops (2005–2013), 0.6- to 60-second films that portray banal, everyday movements, gestures, situations. These small films are composed of 5, 9, 25 or 115 still photographs set in motion. They dwell on a single place, viewed from a single angle, with only the shutter clicking several

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times to capture scenes that appear in sequence like repetitious little dramatic narratives; morphologies of the quotidian. The 5-frame loop, for example, shows a man endlessly walking behind a concrete wall. He seems to be treading on the spot; ever going forward, ever in motion, yet making no progress. He stays where he is. A woman continuously fails to pick up her heavy shopping bags from the street and walk on. A large, near-empty parking lot becomes the scene of cars arriving, departing and passing by. They sweep in, park and leave again. At times, they get in each other's way. In another frame, bushes rustle silently, their thick vegetation concealing whatever is going on in the background; a roadside telephone call seems to go on forever; a family gets into a car and drives away. These brief moments are transformed by the endless looping into scenes that become absurd to the point of slapstick, casually referencing the banality and senselessness of life. There is no judgment, no overt moral. It is as it is. Things happen. Brief glimpses, fleeting efforts, without purpose. Life congeals into a sculpture of itself. It goes on, just enough to get a little further.

Hope for Long Distance Photography

Ya'ari's photography photographs; his photography images forms and forms images, yet never fails to address the act of taking pictures, at the same time never failing to address and image the actual act of photographing. Photography in itself; photography in his land. Just as Israel is constantly grappling with the question of how to form and develop a nation under the given circumstances, how to generate a sense of cohesion that is not determined only by fear, so Sharon Ya'ari's work is informed by questions about how to photograph what can be represented, where to find images that do not fall into the contextual trap of absolutes—yes/no, here/there, this/that—like grasping a fruit without bruising it, photographing a country without making it appear either heavenly or diabolical.

This is photography that does not fit a pattern or strain to be deliberately inconspicuous or non-conformist—either in terms of the history of photography or the history of this country. It does not, and yet Israel (in spite of everything) is perceived as a homeland, as a birthplace, as a realm of discovery, exploration, immersion, loss, pleasure, and fear. The backyard images of “500 Meter Radius” exude this same self-evident attitude that is a remarkable form of normality in a land that struggles daily to be normal.

The “Hope for Long Distance Photography” (2006),² on the other hand, is bound to chafe from the start. These black-and-white images of seemingly random subjects suggest the dispassionate eye of the surveillance camera. The photographer and the act of taking a photograph can be inconspicuous. He can remain in the background and scan the world with a zoom lens in much the same way as an ornithologist studies birds. Yet his photographs can quickly destroy that good impression—they can be seen as intruders, as aggressive. They twist perceptions and, with them, the world itself, when they invade with their 500-mm or 1000-mm lenses (discussions between photographers can sometimes sound like bikers boasting about their engine capacity) cutting through to the far distance, and placing into the midst of life a rectangle that soaks up the surroundings like a blotter pressing everything into a two-dimensional space. This “blotter” can absorb and distort what is seen, so that streets rise up in a dynamic sweep and objects appear closer. Yet we cannot feel the warmth of their closeness because, at the same time, things disintegrate before us—things that are so fragile and brittle they crumble at the slightest touch and are strewn on the wind. This is photography that massages reality, reshaping it and seemingly embracing it closely. Yet at the same time, it pushes that reality away. All it can give us is a semblance of closeness.

Photography from a safe and risk-free distance might prompt suspicions of voyeurism, at least when its gaze is directed right into the living room. Yet here the camera reveals so very little that is spectacular, it might provoke an impression that the subject is hoping for distance on a temporary basis, for a deferral of time in which reality is not constantly, insistently imposing itself. Is there a sigh of relief, at least for a few moments, because reality has paused and taken a step back? *Hope for long Distance Photography*, hope for enough time.

Rashi Street

Rashi Street, Tel Aviv (2008) brings Sharon Ya’ari back to reality. Like a detective, he follows a hunch that something is brewing, that something illegal may be in the works on Rashi Street in Tel Aviv.

² The series was presented in an eponymous exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, 2006.

Within just two hours, a three-storey building has been demolished, generating an impenetrable screen of dust and debris. Clouds of dust fill the narrow street in the center of Tel Aviv, obscuring the view. Ya'ari photographs the act of destruction with different types of film material, playing with the parallels of dust and grain—the dust in the street, the grain of the film, and the graininess of the enlarged photograph on paper. This act of destruction develops its own aesthetic without actually revealing what has happened here. Was there an explosion? Why do we immediately think of a terrorist attack? A sense of uncertainty, a feeling that anything might happen at any time, permeates the triptych composed of three *Rashi Street* works and the additional *Rashi Street*. Sharon Ya'ari is torn from his state of absent presence and present absence, and is confronted by what is in any case a powerful, destructive act.

This frame-filling evolution of a motif that wells up until it laps at the very edges of the image to the point of overflowing can also be found in some of his photographs of thickets and bushes, such as those taken during and after a flood. The space closes in, fills up, pushes toward the surface and occupies the entire rectangle. The view is distorted, breathing becomes constrained; these images seem to build up before us like a wall. The visual encounter becomes tangible, physical, confrontational. In *Marble (Neptune Hall)* (2006) a dark, almost black wall of pale-veined marble is viewed almost face-on, set at only a slight angle. It blocks the gaze. It reads like a Jackson Pollock drip painting or a view of the earth from outer space. The slab of marble, divided into three, seems to have been rather clumsily restored in a couple of places. It is almost as though Ya'ari's "Long Distance" photographs and this marble image have sought to converge meaningfully here, yet a thin water pipe running right across the top of the picture lends it a sense of place and specificity, demystifying it.

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Altered State (The Act of Photographing)

Talking to Sharon Ya'ari one gets an inkling of how much photography is both heaven and hell for him. Just as a writer might sit pen in hand, or in front of a computer, only able to work in a certain place, on a specific seat or cushion among familiar sounds and smells which provide the physical and mental stimulation to get the creative juices flowing, so Ya'ari sets out with his photographic equipment, which often includes his cumbersome 4x5-inch camera,

to wander the land and follow the trails. Going through the motions of setting out, being on the road, seems to put him in a kind of altered state. Making his way alone, just him and his camera, lost in thought, along paths strewn with the stumbling-stones of history, of daily life, of convention, which he passes by, overlooks, revisits, sometimes repeatedly—this is where he is alert, focused and concentrated. Mind and body are openly receptive, taking note of things, perceiving and experiencing them. Ya'ari describes this as a very intimate moment. It is a state he seeks and savors, and one that wrenches him out of the banality of everyday life. It is a state he wants never to cease, and which he only ends reluctantly, with the click of the shutter. The act of photographing lifts him out of the state of limbo, bringing him back down, so that sometimes he even turns away in boredom from what he has just seen. This is when he suddenly becomes aware of the cumbersome weight of the camera. The feeling is gone; over. A new sense of tension has to build up again in another place. The subsequent work on the image is correspondingly complex: it involves dragging the pre-conscious into the conscious, understanding his own actions and recreating their sensory and sensual basis. Out of the abjectness of coming down from such a high of tension, he has to regain his sense of joy in the image and grasp its language, but this time, consciously, approaching his own self from outside.

Ya'ari falls into a kind of daydream, somewhere between rapture and self-absorption. It is a state of both flight and arrival. He seems to move within a real, physical landscape at the same time as moving within a psychological, emotional and sensual one. Rather like Hamish Fulton, albeit ultimately in search of himself, of his own existence, he walks here, in this land. Motion is the driving force behind this fiercely sensitive alertness and aimless drifting; an awareness that even observation alone can change what is found.

Latency

Reluctant as Sharon Ya'ari might be to click the shutter, because in doing so he is fixing something for all time, because fleeting thoughts and perceptions are fused definitively with an object in a chemical process of precipitation, he also composes his images in a way that gives them a feeling of latency, so they remain suspended in a pre-linguistic state of anticipation. Signs form, meanings take shape, the latent potential of a situation emerges—but never excessively,

never going too far in the direction of the non-ambiguous. Ya'ari wants to keep the images open. He doesn't release them if their meaning is too obvious, too specific, and he chooses not to publish them for a definitive one-dimensional use. Instead, his photographs are meant to be like open fields in which we stroll around freely. By entering into them we trigger a tension between what is shown and what is sought. An image that presents an unambiguous statement, according to Ya'ari, is no longer an image. It is a message and, as such, could just as easily be conveyed by writing. In Israel, where everything has a political dimension, Ya'ari takes an approach reminiscent of Don Quixote, committed to all the lost and forgotten nuances, upholding the right not to be decisive, to sow seeds without necessarily reaping the harvest. He visibly strives to create a "soft" art in the climate of a harsh political reality. Things begin to speak, combining with other signs and events to form a network, only to falter, suspended in limbo. Remarkable as they are, they make no statement, say nothing clearly, but rather hint and give pause for thought. They are images that provide far more questions than answers. It is left to the viewers to consider the issues and explore their own internal responses. Ya'ari follows the traces of deeply hidden veins that show only fleetingly on the surface.

Time Capsule

"All of these images are looks at situations involving slow, inevitable decay," suggests Ya'ari, who uses the phrase "tired objects" when speaking of erosion, decay, loss of function. He speaks of "rewinding the future," and, as it rewinds, of it eroding before our eyes. In his images, he describes a melancholy state in which the tension between the ideal and the real nevertheless has to be endured. While everything decays and time, wind and floods sweep away what has been and what might have been, we have to keep our heads. Decay is inscribed in all objects, just as change is inscribed upon the face of life itself. Ya'ari uses the image of a "disappointing river" (which is the Hebrew expression for seasonal stream bed) as a metaphor for thwarted expectations.

In Ya'ari's most recent pictures it seems as though we are witnessing a gradual transformation of space and time—not just in one direction and not only forward. Many of these photographs, made between 2009 and 2012, are dual images in which he pursues a kind of archaeology of being, an exploration of both space and time.

Erosion discloses ancient layers, uncovers times gone by. History reveals itself. On the other hand, histories brand themselves onto the landscape, forming it and shaping it into successive layers. We are reminded of the butterfly whose single wing-beat can change the course of the entire world. What is, what might be, what should be, what is not: everything is inscribed upon the landscape, the objects, the furnishings of society. Ya'ari glides through time as if in a space capsule; in light, in shadow, in darkness; in color and in black and white. With the blink of an eye, the tree that was here one moment is gone the next. Three young women stand by the roadside, all looking in the same direction, apparently observing something, relaxed yet alert. A mother and daughter gaze into the distance, the mother's hand raised pensively to her face. Women, men and dogs roam the fields, just waiting and looking. A bus shelter, photographed from front and back, is meant to provide refuge, yet it more strongly symbolizes waiting. A light goes on and, for a fleeting moment, we recognize something. Then the light goes off and it disappears. It is in these small acts and gestures, which Ya'ari photographs with carefully orchestrated slowed or accelerated timing, that possibility and impossibility become manifest. There is the "shimmer of possibility," to quote the extensive series of photographs by Paul Graham with which Ya'ari's works have much in common. It is the possibility of small gestures and small movements, of imperceptible little efforts, a glimpse of the potential that lies in the uncovering of a layer, in the shining of a light, or in the moment when a person sets out to do something.

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Family (2012) shows a family sitting on a large bench set on a wooden platform in an open field. It is a recreation area, a park marked by the provisional and the decaying. They sit, as if stranded on a wooden raft, set upon the narrative constructs of history and all its stories, upon the geophysical structures of droughts and floods. The family seems suspended in and buoyed up by this complex evolution. They gaze outwards, introspectively. Being there.

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