

## Behold, I have set the land before you\*: The P6 Group and Critical Landscape Photography in Israel

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In the past two decades, landscape photography has become the most common genre of photography in Israel, and part of the comprehensive discourse in Israeli art focusing on questions of landscape-place[1]. The definition of a geographic-political space, and its development and settlement, have been and still remain central questions in the Israeli experience [2]; over the years, the manner in which photographers dealt with the subject underwent a radical change, the results of which can be seen here in the works of the P6 Group photographers.

Until the 1960s, pre-State and Israeli photography was dominated by an approach that focused on glorifying the Zionist building and development effort. For the most part, these photographs were commissioned by the settlement institutions, such as the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael). It was in this connection that the photographer Amiram Erev created his breathtaking photographs of the new housing projects, industrial plants and infrastructure development projects[3]. Another prominent photographer during the same period was Peter Merom, whose landscape photographs focusing on the beautiful and the exalted were published in dozens of books and albums, making him a profound influence on shaping the taste of the Israeli public. The two photographers shared a common trait: their perception of themselves as part of the Zionist collective. It was from this standpoint that they took their photographs, suiting them to a target audience that perceived itself in the same way. The photographs expressed solidarity with the Zionist idea and glorified the landscape and the labor of those who transformed the landscape. Generally absent from the photographs was a personal and critical perspective in relation to the consequences of the Zionist enterprise on the landscape and those who lived in it.

At the end of the 1970s and during the '80s, a gradual change took place in the way Israeli photographers related to the landscape. This change stemmed from assimilating the influence of international photography, in general, and of American photography, in particular. Following World War II, international photography was dominated by an attitude affected by a spirit of optimism that prevailed after the smoke of battle dissipated, a spirit based on the expectation of a better future. This attitude found its highest expression in the exhibition "The Family of Man," curated by Edward Steichen in 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Exactly at the same time, however, and in a certain sense in reaction to the exhibition, Robert Frank created the body of work that was published in the book *The Americans*. In these works, Frank related contextually to the connection between people and their surroundings and to questions of alienation and loneliness brought on by accelerated development. From the standpoint of both their subject matter and their execution, his challenging works brought into the world what came to be known as the New Documentary. A growing closeness to the man-landscape axis, along with a contextual and aestheticist approach, was conspicuous among the second generation of New Documentary photographers who were active in the 1960s, such as Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand. This was expressed through the use of the creative frame and irony as critical tools



Garry Winogrand, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1957

Despite the tremendous importance of documentary photography, which had a decisive influence on international photography in general and on Israeli photography in particular, the historic revolution in critical landscape photography is generally attributed to the New Topographics, as well as to the group of photographers who transformed color photography into a critical tool in the 1970s[4]. The

concept was born after an exhibition called “The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape” was mounted in 1975<sup>[5]</sup>. The exhibition included the works of photographers such as Robert Adams, Frank Gohlke, Stephen Shore, Joe Deal, Henry Wessel Jr. and others, among whom the effect of the contextual-documentary approach found in Edward Ruscha’s photographs from the 1960s could be strongly felt.



Joe Deal. Backvard. Diamond Bar. California. 1980

The exhibition’s curator, William Jenkins, defined the photographs as “stripped of any artistic frills and reduced to an essentially topographic state, conveying substantial amounts of visual information but eschewing entirely the aspects of beauty, emotion and opinion.” In retrospect, it is obvious that some of those characteristics only appear to exist, since the photographs actually expressed piercing social criticism by means of a strict minimalistic aesthetic that drew upon the use of irony. This school of photography, called Deadpan Photography, was based on the attempt to detach emotion from the photographic subject and was mostly characterized by banality stripped of

any heroism of the photographed subject, spiced by a pinch of irony – elements that were immediately absorbed. As mentioned, concurrently with the New Topographics, a number of photographers – most notably William Eggleston, William Christenberry, Joel Meyerowitz and Joel Sternfeld – were documenting the American landscape using a similar language but working in color, a medium that was perceived as both popular and somewhat inferior. Aside from the banality and irony that characterized the New Topographics, these photographers added to their works the popular dimension of color. At the close of the 1970s, a change could be seen in Israeli photography, mainly in the gradual shift from the photography of glorification, which reflected national solidarity and centralized thought, to critical-artistic photography, which reflected individual perspectives as part of pluralistic thought<sup>[6]</sup>. Two principal groups contributed to this change: new immigrants from the United States, and Israelis who studied abroad and disseminated a new spirit and the influence of the important trends in world photography upon their return. Yosaif Cohain belongs to the first group, while Igaël Shemtov is a member of the second. It can be said that in order to change the manner of contemplating the local landscape, it was necessary to detach or open some distance to allow for a different way of looking, and this way was provided by the newcomers and the young Israeli-born photographers who were exposed to a different perspective on photographing the landscape and surroundings. During the 1980s, notable Israeli photographers such as Eyal Onn, Elia Onn and Shuka Glotman were occupied with landscape photography that shunned glorification and was infused with a minimalist aesthetic. To a great degree, it can be said that the dominant approach was contextual landscape photography from an observational-documentary perspective that sought to detach the gaze from emotion.

This approach paved the way for a penetrating critical-photographic discourse on landscape and on the interaction between man and landscape among Israeli photographers in the 1990s. Among the most notable works in the discourse on housing and residences were the critical photographs by Gilad Ophir which focused on construction sites in the new neighborhoods that arose on the outskirts of some of the satellite cities in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area, a body of work that was shown in the exhibition “Cyclopean Walls”<sup>[7]</sup>. In these works, Ophir emphasized, inter alia, the alienation between the structures and the place in contemporary Israeli building

culture[8], a discourse that was continued in the works of other photographers such as Efrat Shvily[9].

Housing is a central issue in Israeli existence, since one is dealing here with a people that had dwelt in foreign lands and lived in diverse geographic and climatic environments, and whose homes naturally imitated those of their native-born neighbors. When the Jewish people resettled in their historic homeland, they had to establish a housing culture of their own. This was reflected in the gap between the housing traditions the immigrants brought along with them, mostly from Europe, and the local traditions. The process of resettlement almost always took place under the severe constraints of mass migration, difficult economic conditions and security threats. In effect, Israel has always been in an ongoing state of accelerated development, which causes tension between building and the preservation of natural and historic values.

The P6 Group is not homogenous; it includes multigenerational photographers who document the landscape-environment in different ways. This is not a group of photographers that goes out together to photograph, with all that it implies; rather, it is an association whose aim is to present the photographs taken by each individual within a critical discourse that revolves around a particular subject – in this case, the question of housing. Shared by all the members is the long-term interest and intensive investigation of the environment in which they live by means of direct photography.



Yosaif Cohain. New House. Rogaalit. 1983

Yosaif Cohain was born in the United States in 1945 and immigrated to Israel in 1971. In large part, he can be seen as the successor of Ansel Adams and the members of the f64 Group, and of the landscape photographers of America's West Coast[10]. For the past 27 years, he has been photographing *sukkot* (temporary structures traditionally used during the Jewish holiday of the same name) and those who sit in them. The *sukkot* create a clear link between the act of the Exodus from Egypt and the return to the land of the forefathers, the

Zionist act of return after a long and tortured exile. The sukkah is always located next to the new home, usually one that was built in the early years of statehood. The *sukkot*, the immigrants' housing and the largely barren landscape sharply emphasize the basic principle of wandering and temporariness that is so central to the Jewish/Israeli condition. Many of Yosaif Cohain's photographs present those inhabiting the sukkah, people who represent a broad swath of Israeli society. It is evident that they give themselves over to the photographer with pleasure, sometimes in groups or entire families. Many times the photograph could be referred to as "Group Portrait with Sukkah." Some of the people look estranged from the landscape many years after they settled there. One photograph in particular nearly sums up the essence of Israeli existence; it shows a group of youths near a sukkah situated in front of a concrete shelter, while in the background an Arab village and a mosque stand on the horizon.

Igael Shemtov was born in 1952 and began to work as an independent photographer at the end of the 1970s. Most of his works, which present a contextual discourse apparently distanced from the landscape, reveal the influence of the New Topographics. During the summer of 1981, he photographed in Herzliya's Neve Amal neighborhood[11], which remained for years "ex-territorial" to the city, separated from it by orange groves and fields. Most of the structures are "Sochnut" (Jewish Agency for Israel) houses, modestly

built low on the ground, two-and-a-half rooms per family on a plot of about 500 sq. meters that would allow expansion in the future.



Igael Shemtov, Neveh Amal, 1981

Shemtov's photographs are not "beautiful" or "appropriate," according to the standard definition of those words. They are direct, straightforward and systematically reveal the world of the neighborhood's residents, who make up a microcosm reflective of us all. The houses are photographed from a distance; the frame almost always encompasses the fence that separates the photographer/viewer from the yard surrounding the house. The photographs simultaneously emphasize both the act of contemplation and the residents' need

to define territory for themselves. The photographs are suffused with a dimension of remoteness stemming not from alienation, but rather from an almost scientific desire to contemplate and to take in as much information as possible. The photographs stress the wretchedness of the houses and the yards, the lack of a housing culture and the distance prevailing between the residents and the surroundings in which they live.



Oren Noy. Untitled. 2007

Twenty years later, Oren Noy (born 1975) photographed the same type of neighborhood in Petah Tikva and contemplates the same use of land. The houses blossomed and grew in accordance with the growing financial resources of each family and based on its aesthetic approach. The photographs generally present a portrait of a house in the midst of a neighborhood of single-family dwellings. As in Igael Shemtov's work, Oren Noy also relates to the territory

fenced in by the resident, in photographs shot from a distance so as to include the fence marking off the house's yard. By means of the frame, the photographer declares the distance that allows the contextual-scientific contemplation and the lack of emotional involvement. Oren Noy's photographs are like a sort of x-ray that exposes all the layers that were added to the house over the years. They highlight the additions to the original structure that accreted over time, layer upon layer and patch upon patch: awnings, plastic shutters, air conditioners, solar water heaters, protective bars, roof lighting. The additions testify to the resident's improving economic situation, to his social pretensions, but some also serve to compartmentalize him from his surroundings. One photograph shows a building elevated from the ground by a series of pillars, as if it were seeking to take off heavenwards and detach itself from the ugly surroundings in which it was stuck. The later photographs also depict ugliness and bleakness, along with palpable strangeness and alienation, which are emphasized by the photographer's choice not to include human images.



Ya'acov Israel. View of Hantke St.. Jerusalem. 2007

Yaakov Israel, born in 1974, photographs the public housing in Jerusalem where he grew up. These are the same multi-unit housing projects for immigrants, a sort of beehive for humans that replaced the tin shacks and tents of the transit camps but where the same anonymous and inhuman quality remained. These housing projects are huge chunks of concrete, like gigantic compartmentalized boxes, which the photographer generally presents from the side, from an unconventional angle. Yaakov Israel's photographs emphasize the backyard, the place where all the items that are no

longer in use are discarded. Here, too, the backyard and the neglect of the neighborhood are a microcosm that reflects the macrocosm, the place of the housing projects and their inhabitants in the Israeli space. His photographic act expresses duality: On the one hand, he draws the gaze to the impoverished neighborhoods that were not part of the Zionist visual discourse<sup>[12]</sup>, neighborhoods like the one where he grew up and to which he feels connected, and on the other hand, he puts their wretchedness on display<sup>[13]</sup>. The presentation of the side of the structure as it fills the frame also creates a unique visual language based on a simple, direct aesthetic. This is a minimalist aesthetic, in the spirit of the great abstract artists; each frame is like a photographic Kasimir Malevich. One photograph depicts a group of housing projects atop a ridge, dwarfing a bus stop below. The blocs of buildings take on a life of their own; they look like monsters or gigantic spaceships that come to strike fear in the human heart.



Yigal Feliks, Untitled, from the series "Communal Living Spaces", 2007

Born in 1979, Yigal Feliks turns his gaze to the housing projects of the future that are being built in recent years on the margins of the established cities, promising their residents "quality of life." But what is revealed to the viewer of Feliks' photographs is a concrete desert, a sterile, meticulously engineered reality that is totally detached from nature and the local surroundings. The "Israeli Dream" reflected in these photographs is the actualization of the nightmare of a

place "enrobed in concrete and cement." The photographs present an environment that appears at first glance to be cultivated: the space is entirely covered with asphalt and paved with mass-produced coordinated tiling, the roads well-signposted and clearly marked. The viewer cannot evade the logical contradiction inherent in the concept "environmental development." Everything looks comfortable and orderly, like a model in an architect's office. This is a reality in which there is almost no bare space, not to mention nature. Blocking the frame by means of the buildings' facades strengthens the absurdity found in these structures. The photographs emphasize the convergence of each resident with his allotted compartment in the beehive; each person has his own marked parking space and the paths are well-ordered, so that the residents will not have to rub elbows with each other or create genuine interaction among themselves.



Orit Siman Tov. Afula: Rescue Excavation. 2006

Orit Siman-Tov, born in 1971, proposes a slightly different look and an unconventional subject. The group of works she presents deals with rescue excavations, which are archaeological excavations carried out to analyze a site with antiquities before the site is covered over for the purpose of development. Siman-Tov's photographs also have a sense of contextual distance and the familiar approach to describing landscape in art. The use of an open frame and shooting from a high

vantage point produces a panoramic picture that always includes the excavation and its surroundings. This reinforces the tension between the historical dimension served by archaeology, which has been central to proving our attachment to this place, and the constant need for development<sup>[14]</sup>. The photographs emphasize this tension: between old and new, between past and future, between scientific contemplation and banality, between atrophied time and time that races ahead. They also stress the visual tension between the foundation, well-organized and scientific as seen in the excavation's squares, and the dynamic flow that surrounds it.

The P6 Group's project "Housing in Israel" proposes a critical, contextual look at a central element of the local culture. It is a look that expresses awareness of the visual language and the aesthetics of art history, but chooses to connect more distinctly with the currents in photography whose proponents see the camera as an independent and unique tool for visual expression. The photographs emphasize the temporariness of

Israeli existence and their reflection of questions such as evacuation, convergence and resettling in the local housing culture, as well as reflecting the lack of clarity in relation to the borders of the land.

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Deuteronomy 1:8 \*

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[1] See: Haim Maor (2003). Marked Landscapes: 'Landscape-Place' in Contemporary Israeli Art, Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, The Avraham Baron Art Gallery.

[2] Jochai Rosen (2007). "The Abused Landscape: The Works of Young Israeli Photographers," *Afterimage, A Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism*, 35(1), p. 23.

[3] Naama Haikin (2002). Amiram Erev: Almost at the Right Moment. Tel Hai: The Open Museum of Photography.

[4] Rosen (2007), p. 24.

[5] William Jenkins (1975). New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape. Rochester, New York: George Eastman House.

- [6] Guy Raz (2005). "Only What His Eye Took In: A Comment on Local Landscape Photography." From: Framed Landscapes: A Comment on Local Landscape Photography (exhibition catalogue). Haifa: University of Haifa Art Gallery, p. 7.
- [7] Rosen, 2007, p. 24.
- [8] Rona Sela (1995). "Cyclopean Walls and Built Landscapes." From: Gilad Ophir: Cyclopean Walls (exhibition catalogue). Tel Aviv: The Tel Aviv Museum of Art, unpagued.
- [9] On urbanization in Israel as it is reflected in the works of local photographers, see also: Ofer Zeevi (1999). Urban Mirror: Reflections of the City in the Camera's Lens. Ein Hod: The Janco Dada Museum.
- [10] Eyal Ben-Dov (2002). "Israeli Landscapes in Black and White Are Political: On the Landscape Photography of Yosaif Cohain". From: Yosaif Cohain – Photographs (exhibition catalogue). Tel Hai: Open Museum of Photography, pp. 5-6, 9.
- [11] On this body of work, see also: Naama Haikin (2009). Igaël Shemtov: Purposeless Functions. Tel Hai: The Open Museum of Photography, pp.15-17.
- [12] Naama Haikin (2004). "A General Look at Repressed Landscape." From: Yaakov Israel: A Repressed Landscape (exhibition catalogue). Tel Hai: The Open Museum of Photography, p. 5.
- [13] Eyal Ben-Dov (2004). "Earthly Jerusalem." From: Yaakov Israel: A Repressed Landscape (exhibition catalogue). Tel Hai: The Open Museum of Photography, p. 7.
- [14] The body of work represents a continuation of Orit Siman-Tov's occupation with archaeological sites and with the burden created by the past when it imposes itself on the present. See: Vered Maimon (1998). Living Space: Distant Near. From: Distant Near (exhibition catalogue). Curator: Wulf Herzogenrath. Herzliya: The Museum for Contemporary Art, unpagued