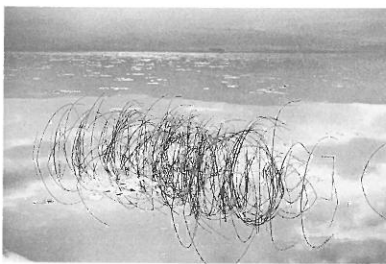


Stark Landscapes in Israeli Photography

Rona Sela

Two works by Israeli photographers in the collection of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art - Sunrise, 1978, by Dalia Amotz, and Mark-Structure, 1990-1991, by Gilad Ophir - address the local landscape in an exceptional manner, and this is what prompted me to focus on them. It is a landscape exposing harsh and unflattering elements - a penetrating, almost violent quality. Both works mark a turning point in the artists' oeuvre: this is the beginning of a critical confrontation with the local landscape in the work of Amotz; so too, Ophir, previously engrossed in universal subjects, reveals the fierce aspects of the Israeli scenery. The present juxtaposition of works of artists belonging to different generations enables a socially-critical discussion by way of the concept of landscape.

Few local artists have devoted themselves to landscape photography. The outstanding names are Peter Merom, Drora Spitz, Chanan Laskin, Yosaif Cohain, Neil Folberg, and their treatment of the landscape is generally perceived as romantic. In the early works of Dalia Amotz, who was mainly active in the 1970s and 1980s,¹ the relation to the landscape is indeed romantic. Even so, one can already detect undermining elements, such as a peculiar vantage point and a preoccupation with barren scenery. With time, Amotz' experimental approach became more acute. Sunrise, 1978, stands out in her work of that period, pointing ahead to her later direction.²



Peter Merom / The Song of a Dying Lake
1950s

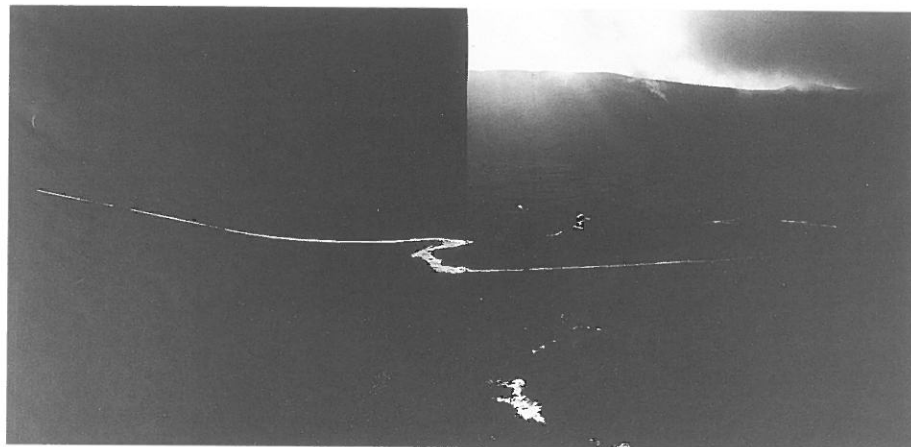
Silver print, 23.4x34 cm

Collection of Tel Aviv Museum of Art

Gilad Ophir's Mark-Structure was donated by the artist to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art after it had been shown as a sketch³ in the exhibition "Stations to the Final Work and From It."⁴ Ophir (b. 1957) belongs to the new school of artists who reverted to non-modern procedures of photography. The exhibition "Cyclopean Walls," shown at the Museum in July 1995,⁵ presented his work from the years 1990-1995, which dealt mainly with deconstructing and re-constructing foundations with historical, cultural and semiotic connections, by documenting building sites which intruded on the landscape and by photographing "structured" landscapes (for example, deserted quarries).

If the sunrise has aural-romantic connotations, Dalia Amotz defiantly erodes them.

Dalia Amotz / Sunrise / 1978
 Silver print and white pencil / 32.5x57 cm
 Collection of Tel Aviv Museum of Art



Gilad Ophir / Mark-Structure / 1990-1991
 Silver print
 Collection of Tel Aviv Museum of Art
 Gift of the Artist

Her sunrise is grim and not in the least romantic. The work Sunrise is a montage consisting of two parts: the right side, a (desert?) landscape with sharp contrasts, the upper part burnt, with an imaginary path drawn below; the left side, completely black (a single white, unidentified line passing through in continuation of the drawn line) - a texture achieved by exposing the photographic paper to strong light. Here, as in her later works, Dalia Amotz records the harsh and burning local light. And as if the natural intensity of the light, impeding on the photographer's work, did not suffice, Amotz deliberately photographed against the sun, breaking the "correct" rules of using natural light and allowing the sun to destroy large parts of the negative. Furthermore, the effect of the natural light being too mellow to her liking, she created an artificial "fire" in the laboratory. The point of departure of the dark Sunrise is therefore the ferocious sun, penetrating everything in its way, inflicting "wounds" and creating a blinding, contrasting surface. As in the artist's later works, the light is highly focused and its glare painful to the eye.

The singularity of Dalia Amotz's works derives from the severe, forceful and uncompromising photographic language she has evolved over the years. Initially influenced by the traditional American photography of wide and majestic landscapes, in the style of Ansel Adams, she presented pleasing views with diffused light, such as that of the early morning hours.⁶ Later on she focused on motifs of a distinctly local nature: thorns, earth, khaki shorts, stones, as well as police helmets and shields, soldiers in a field of thorns - embodying the presence of a permanent threat - children behind tall weeds. The cruel light of the hot hours of the day, fraught with tension and contrasts, charges the images with critical values. Dalia Amotz abandoned the temptations of the serene open space for the menacing Israeli reality. And as these works do not look for "correct" photography (correct exposure, correct printing, etc.), they do not look for a "correct" perspective: what is nearby and what is far away appear to be on the same level. She creates a "new" and deformed surface, reflecting the local experience. The horizon in Sunrise is a turbid line indicating the change in her work.

In the course of the 1940s and 1950s Peter Merom created The Song of a Dying Lake,⁷ a unique body of works within his oeuvre, allowing - with today's perspective - for a critical interpretation. Dalia Amotz continues this direction and invests it with heightened validity. She was the first and nearly the only photographer active in Israel in the 1970s to consciously use the local landscape as a map for a critical charting of the living conditions in Israel and a delineation of their special values.

Mark-Structure, 1990-1991 signifies the beginning of Gilad Ophir's going out to building sites and to landscapes scarred by culture. The work marks the transformation of the sign into a schematic house. If Dalia Amotz investigates "classic" landscapes, disrupting their lofty aspect in the photographic process, Ophir consistently documents "constructed landscapes." Contrary to Dalia Amotz, Gilad Ophir seeks to preserve the "objectivity" of the treated image, to capture it from a position where he and the photographed object do not intrude on each other's presence.⁸ This chapter in Ophir's work, which was summarized in the exhibition "Cyclopean Walls," illuminates the social and political aspects on the one hand and the subjective psycho-analytical element - the act of vacating/occupying a house as a record of a mental process - on the other.

The phallic element, already present in Gilad Ophir's early works, becomes increasingly evident: a shape thrusting upwards within a plateau, creating a dialogue between the vertical and the horizontal, monumental houses constructed on "virgin" land, bare poles rising from gaping holes on building sites, a lone cypress in an open landscape, etc. The vertical always overpowers the horizontal, the landscape; it cuts, amputates, breaks it. To Gilad Ophir, the cypress, the pillar, the pointed hill, the poles on the building sites, the erect building, the billowing smoke in the landscape, the beam of light are principally elements of power and control by dint of their aggressive presence in space. The landscape, photographed with apparent objectivity, encapsulates political signs, thereby prompting a discourse on charged local values. The evolution of the phallic element in Gilad Ophir's work traces an elusive course of conspicuousness versus aloofness from a binding concrete interpretation. The

early trees (1983-1986) and the eucalyptuses (1992), still devoid of cultural and social implications, lead to a series of abstract works. The later Cypress (1995), in contrast, standing on the borderline between the hills, connotes the cypresses demarcating Jewish cemeteries which, in the artist's words, surround open wounds (graves), as potent symbols of a society, its religion and tradition.

Moreover, Ophir's work investigates memory residues imprinted by the Holocaust and consciously reconstructs symbols representing brute force. Blocks, 1993, is reminiscent of barracks built in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. Gilad Ophir calls the series of buildings he photographed in Kiryat Rishon "Fascist Facades." The work Column, 1991-1992, T-shaped or cruciform, combines several images: a nude woman, duplicated five times; above her, a figure from an election poster of an Italian politician swinging his fist; above him, in turn, a somber landscape with a light path. Untitled, 1991, likewise constructed as a cross, juxtaposes strong images from the collective memory (for example, the burnt boy running naked, who became a symbol of the Vietnam War), confronting these with religious icons or classical symbols.¹⁰ These works, Ophir, explains, conjure up figures from historical and Christian sources and, in the encounter between art, religion and power, their representation forges an ambiguous meaning mainly relating to the theme of control and the relation between victim and victimizer.¹¹

Manifestations of power - an increasingly normative feature of Israeli society - are visualized in the photography of both Amotz and Ophir through their unparalleled preoccupation with the concept of landscape. In this sense there is an affinity between Gilad Ophir's intrusive phallic images and Dalia Amotz' aggressive penetration of the photographic paper.

Notes

1. Unlike the emerging trend among local photographers at the time, Dalia Amotz never associated herself with a specific movement, group or art coterie.
2. Two works from the group to which Sunrise belongs were included in the show "Skyline," curated by Micha Bar-Am. See: **Skyline. Israeli Photographers Contemplate the Landscape**, exh. cat., Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1988.
3. The work represented a stage in the evolution of The Monads Are Windowless, 1990, which probed the process of deconstructing and re-constructing symbols.
4. Curator: Yona Fischer, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1992.
5. Although the values of his works are attuned to the contemporary spirit, the mode of photography and terminology employed by Ophir - a direct, documentary photography informed by critical-conceptual values - were exceptional in Israel at the time of his "Cyclopean Walls" (with the notable exception of Elia Onne in the 1980s).
6. See: Untitled (Road), 1975, Collection of Tel Aviv Museum of Art.
7. Peter Merom, **The Song of a Dying Lake**, Davar Ltd., 1960.
8. From talks with Gilad Ophir on the occasion of his exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1995.
9. According to Ophir, the classical figures hint at fascist art in Italy and Germany, which is based on neoclassicism. Ophir drew my attention to a project of a retroactive photographic documentation of Italian architecture from the years 1920-1949, with an emphasis on fascist architecture, photographed by Günther Förg in 1982-1992.
10. For victim-victimizer relations as they haunt second generation Holocaust survivors, see: Dina Wardi, **Memorial Candles**, Keter Publishing House, Jerusalem 1990.
11. According to the words of the artist in the catalogue **Persistence of Memory. The Third Israeli Biennale of Photography**, Mishkan Le'Omanut, Museum of Art, Ein Harod 1991.