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## The P6 Group and critical landscape photography in Israel

Jochai Rosen\*

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.<sup>1</sup> The definition of a geographic-political space, and its development and settlement, have been and still remain central questions in the Israeli experience;<sup>2</sup> over the years, the manner in which photographers dealt with the subject underwent a radical change, the results of which can be seen 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. 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 close of the 1970s, a change could be seen in Israeli photography, mainly in the gradual shift from the photography of glorification to critical-artistic photography, which reflected individual perspectives as part of pluralistic thought.<sup>3</sup> 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>4</sup> In these works, Ophir emphasized, inter alia, the alienation between the structures and the place in contemporary Israeli building culture,<sup>5</sup> a discourse that was continued in the works of other photographers such as Efrat Shvily.<sup>6</sup>

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 the Land of Israel, 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 immigration, 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 historical values.

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The P6 Group, a selection of whose photographs is reproduced below, 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 in, and intensive investigation of, the environment in which they live by means of direct photography.

Yosaif Cohain was born in the United States in 1945 and immigrated to Israel in 1971. For the past 27 years, he has been photographing *sukkot* (the temporary huts constructed for use during the festival of Sukkot) 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.

Igaël Shemtov (b. 1952) began to work as an independent photographer at the end of the 1970s. During the summer of 1981, he photographed in Herzliya's Neve Amal neighborhood,<sup>7</sup> which remained for years "ex-territorial" to the city, separated from it by orange groves and fields. Most of the structures are "Sokhnut" (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. 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.

Twenty years later, Oren Noy (b. 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 Igaël 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 residents' improving economic situation, to their social pretensions, but some also serve to compartmentalize them from their surroundings.

Yaakov Israel (b. 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>8</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>9</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.

Yigal Feliks (b. 1979) 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's 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, 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 manifest a familiar approach to describing landscape in art: the use of an open frame and shooting from a high vantage point produce 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 Israelis' attachment to this place, and the constant need for development.<sup>10</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 well-organized and scientific aspect expressed through 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 deal with issues such as evacuation, convergence, and resettling in Israeli housing culture, but also clearly reflect the overall uncertainty of Israeli existence.

## Notes

1. See Maor, *Marked Landscapes*.
2. Rosen, "The Abused Landscape," 23.
3. Raz "Only What His Eye Took In," 41.
4. Rosen, "The Abused Landscape," 24.
5. Sela, "Emptied Walls and Constructed Landscapes."
6. On urbanization in Israel as it is reflected in the works of local photographers, see also Zeevi, *Marah ironit*.
7. On this body of work, see also Haikin, *Igael Shemtov*, 206–9.
8. Haikin, "A General Look at Repressed Landscape," 37.
9. Ben-Dov, "Earthly Jerusalem," 34.
10. 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 Maimon, "Merhav mehiyah."

## Notes on contributor

Jochai Rosen is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Art History at the University of Haifa. He has written extensively on Israeli photography and is the author of *Soldiers at Leisure: The Guardroom Scene in Dutch Genre Painting of the Golden Age* (2010).

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**Photos from the exhibition *Building a Place: The P6 Group and Critical Landscape Photography*, Rubin Museum, Tel Aviv, 2010**

Yosaif Cohain, *Sukkah* with goats in yard, Moshav Yishi, opposite Beit Shemesh, 1983



Yosaif Cohain, *Sukkot* with purple railing and children, Netivot, 1990



Igael Shemtov, Neveh Amal, 1981



Igael Shemtov, Neveh Amal, 1981



Oren Noy, Untitled, 2007



Oren Noy, Untitled, 2007



Yaakov Israel, 4 Dahomey St., Jerusalem, 2002



Yaakov Israel, 125 Hanurit St., Jerusalem, 2006



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



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

Orit Siman Tov, Afula: Rescue excavation, 2006



Orit Siman Tov, Tiberias: Rescue excavation, 2006

