Article

In Place of a Missing Place

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Abstract: This essay reflects on works chosen from the Sonnenfeld Collection at the Katzen Gallery at American University in Washington, DC—it originally accompanied an exhibition at that gallery in early 2021—to comment on the observations of several generations of Israeli artists on the land and its meaning for the culture and politics of Israel's coming into existence and evolution during the first 70 years of its existence. Beginning with a pair of photographs of pioneers in the land in the fifteen years before statehood—and conceptually re-purposed by a contemporary Israeli artist in 2008—and moving through decade after decade of engagement with the landscape of Israel in both figurative and abstract modes, with and without humans present within these contexts, veering from brightly colored to virtually colorless images, including paintings and photographs, the essay traces a distance between earlier assertions of presence and the gradual emergence of questions regarding presence, absence, and identity. Israel, in its internal development, is both visually and thus verbally interwoven with the issue of its external relationship with its immediate neighbors and to the shifts between what comprises "internal" and "external"—"this" and "other"—as the context has metamorphosized from the 1930s to the 1950s to 1967 to 1993 to 2000 and to the present.

Keywords: Arab; colonialization; indexical art; land art; Modernism; mysticism; New Horizons; pioneers; shifting gaze

1. Introduction

Two black and white photographs welcome visitors to the exhibition gallery. They depict two young people, a man and a woman [Figures 1 and 2]. The young woman sits beside a crate of oranges she has presumably harvested. The young man poses with a hoe. On the ground are the buds of young plants just beginning to flourish. These protagonists play a small part in visually constructing an early Zionist identity. Smiles adorn their faces. Their bodies are vital and they proudly announce their connection to the land they stand on as workers gently coaxing life from the difficult, virgin desert.

The joyful, devoted farmers in these images are the epitome of the Zionist pioneer. Committed, hardworking, young, and able-bodied, they are here to cultivate the allegedly empty desert that makes up the holy land. Just as the land was not actually empty, the pioneer ethos depicted here is not unique. It was modelled after nineteenth-century European colonialism and contained nationalist sentiments from early struggles against the British mandate.

The photographs are part of the series "The Missing Negatives of the Sonnenfeld Collection" (2008) by artist Yael Bartana (b. Israel, 1970). Leni and Herbert Sonnenfeld took the original photographs of the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine between 1933 and 1948 and adhered to the Zionist worldview. Combined with many other photographic depictions from that time, the Sonnenfeld images contributed to the idea that Palestine was empty. These images of smiling young people doing wholesome work represent a landscape that has produced selective memories and sustained self-serving myths.
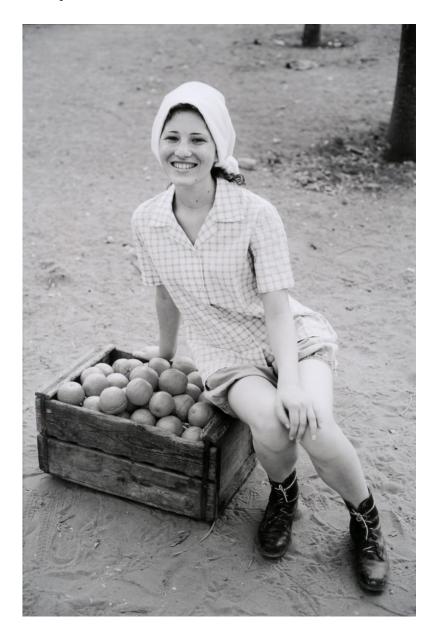
Figure 1. Yael Bartana (Israel, b. 1970), The Missing Negatives of the Sonnenfeld Collection (13), 2008. Inkjet print, 28 × 22 in. The Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, 2013.11.20.

Bartana intervenes in this archive of collective memory that the Sonnenfelds created to make a historical correction, a tikkun if you will.[1] She portrays the same traits and characteristics that were used to represent the early Zionist pioneer, and subverts them by including other residents: Arab Palestinian refugees currently living in the occupied territories, Arab Palestinians within the 1948 borders, and Arab Jews who are Israeli citizens. These ethnic groups are largely missing from this politicized visual language and its utopian horizon. Bartana's images suggest a visual syntax and point of departure for the work in this exhibition, which unpack developments in representation through subtle calibrations.

The exhibition is comprised of works in the American University Museum's Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, and gifts from Nancy Berman and Alan Bloch. It includes work from the 1950s through the early aughts. The mostly male, unanimously Jewish, and mostly Ashkenazi group of artists represent local art movements whose inherited bias towards modernism and the Western canon is repeatedly demonstrated by

their formal preferences. In this sense, the artworks adhere to the modernist framework common to this time. They represent dominant artistic movements in Israel and portray participants lacking any substantial racial or ethnic diversity. This exhibition is not exhaustive. Instead, it is concerned with the specific relationship between history, land, and landscapes.

Figure 2. Yael Bartana (Israel, b. 1970), The Missing Negatives of the Sonnenfeld Collection (2), 2008. Inkjet print, 28 × 22 in. The Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, 2013.11.19.

Landscape painting is European in its origins. Landscapes helped construct national identities through imperial iconography, build nationalist sentiment, and create and reproduce ethnic and racial stereotypes. Never a mere depiction of the land "as it is" or in its natural state, landscapes traffic in amnesia, erasure, and historical revision.

The history of European landscape painting is much longer than the history of the land depictions included in this exhibition, which begins with Western modernist movements including the Paris School, the New York School, and Process Art. However, the imperial function of more traditional, representative landscape painting continues to saturate these images to varying degrees. Practices such as dripped and poured paint common

to those movements were used in Israel to convey notions of war, displacement, and violence as well as erasure. Many of these works have been read as symptoms of the trauma of Holocaust survivors and those who lived through Israel's turbulent founding. This exhibition takes as its beginning a visual language of double meaning from which critical views of Israeli state policies begin to emerge.

The exhibit re-reads this body of work as a series of coded reflections and critiques of state policies: the violence against the refugee Arab population; the silencing of domestic political critics; the oppressive, colonialist nature of land management policies; and the ongoing attempts to erase all traces of Palestinian presence in land, agriculture, and the written and visual record.

As the art in Israel evolved in tandem with international art movements, so too did the official language, Hebrew, in accordance with cultural, political, and military events. Hebrew had already been evolving as a modern spoken language for 60 years or more before this time. However, these events prompted new and revised cultural "norms" that supported and sustained developing political ideologies. This normative and normalizing cultural production included modernist visual art which translated the genres and tropes common to Western art, into a local vocabulary that was, like the Hebrew language, cultivated by the state's nationalist project.

Because of the importance of land to the larger project of the Israeli state, this "translation" is particularly true of earth works and land art. The allegedly "empty" land exploited for capitalist profit is locally realized as a limited physical resource with existential, territorial, ecological, and national implications.

"Landscape", writes Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, "constitutes a visual ideology, insofar as it presents a partial worldview, which is seen and understood from the position of those who own the land". Thus, the images can be seen as a construction of meaning fostered by the social groups who have the ability to frame those images, their relation to that land and their relation to its other inhabitants. Landscape, in this sense, is a tool of power with a dual function: to establish a new, synthetic gaze over a particular geography, and to frame a controlled and constructed space as "natural" and unconstructed (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Cosgrove 1985; See also Roei 2017; Mitchell 1994, 2009; Raz 2004).

Rosalind Krauss's *Notes on the Index*: *Seventies Art in America* (1977) posits that the stylistically and formally diverse art produced in the 1970s shares a particular relationship to representation that she refers to as indexical. Much like the index in a book, indexical art points at something that is not represented by the index itself but substantially exists or is depicted elsewhere. While written in reference to "post-movement art" in the 1970s, Kraus's notion of the index was arguably realized in Israel most fully in the 1990s. The indexical nature of Israeli art from this decade issues from the material conditions of Israeli life. Israeli artists of the 1990s were not drowning in "the sadness of Nebo" but they maintained a very complex relation to it.[2] The traumatic reversal of "the sadness of Nebo", has left many Israelis mourning the shattered dream of an autonomous identity, an autonomous land given to an ethnically and religiously homogenous people and the reproduction of trauma then directed towards Palestine. This "promised" land and landscape cyclically reproduce indexes of sorrow, yearning, trauma, and land inscription.

Indexical local art offers a means of indirectly representing both missing events and the process by which those events were removed from view. The index not only indicates something beyond symbolism but symbolizes its active erasure. Unlike the "traditional" index, it not only points to something that is not signified here, but towards the very process that removed it from the visible frame. It reveals the ongoing currents (acknowledged or unacknowledged) that seek to limit the symbolic apparatus and thereby avoid acknowledgment of a Palestinian presence as well as the violence that brings about this erasure.

The tendency toward a specifically Western modernism also reflects the desire for a regional identity that blended the Middle East and a cultivated, land-centric subjectivity with fluency in the allegedly universal visual languages of Western art history. This was

a bid for both recognition as a unique entity and full participation as equal players in the Western art scene.

This tension between the nativist land-inspired farming identity and the cosmopolitan internationalism embodied by modernist art presents a departure point for the works in the show. It also mirrors the core of Zionist desire: to establish a progressive civil society that is culturally and technologically advanced while remaining close to its biblical sources, and ethnically homogenous.

The show tracks a shifting gaze through a framework supplied by Western art. The belief in a primal unity with an allegedly empty land fulfilled the yearnings of a traumatized minority for a stable place of belonging. The colonial and imperial heritage of landscape illustrations reinforced this central, but false, notion of land as utopian horizon rather than actual place. The gaze shifted in the decades that followed the founding of the state. The corresponding imagery registers a break with foundational beliefs and myths that are distilled through artistic processes of cracking, erasing, breaking, or even suggesting complete abandonment.

The shifting gaze of Israeli artists offers evidence of a deep rupture with the pioneer identity of early Zionists. This constitutive rupture informs Israeli subjectivity and positions it in the abyss between foundational ideals and their shattering.

2. Beginnings (1950–1969)

The exhibition starts with a group of works that reflect the convoluted histories and dispositions of Jewish natives, Jewish immigrants who arrived in Palestine before World War II, and survivors from Nazi death camps, as well as the Western art traditions that the artists imported. Some received artistic training while still in Europe, and some were able to travel and import those artistic tropes to Israel. The works in this portion of the exhibition relate to Abstract Expressionism, Process Art, and the New York School, as well as to L'Ecole de Paris and Art Informel that were formative during these years.

Traditionally, these movements are not figurative but mostly abstract. When people are present in these images, they tend to be Arab. The exception is two allegorical figures in a work by Naftali Bezem. Born in Germany in 1924, Bezem was orphaned by the Nazis and became a significant figure in Israeli art. He is known for his sensitivity to social inequality and awareness of class struggle. He made murals in the spirit of social realism and completed a series of works dealing with the mass murder of Jews in Europe. In Israel, he cultivated his own iconography after spending two years in Paris in the early 1950s. In his work, realist and cartoon-like depictions of figures are depicted against flattened scenery. The female figures in his work usually represent the idea of peace (Ballas 1998). He emphasized the words "shalom" ("peace" in Hebrew) and "Bread" in combination to represent political and economic struggles in a number of works.

Bezem rendered several local events, including figures of Arabs, Jews, and sometimes Black people, in a gesture of racial solidarity. The work commenting on the murder of Arabs at the Kafr Qasim Massacre in 1956 exposed his vision of solidarity and hope for a better future. *In the Courtyard of the Third Temple* (1957) depicts three Jewish women mourning over the body of an Arab. It critiques the Jewish domination of that land and its potential consequences. After 1956 Bezem reverted to imagery from his upbringing, depicting Jews in European attire and not the customary clothing of Zionist pioneers. He described this as a return to the "great wonder of Jewish settlement, not by pioneers but by Jewish men and women in traditional diasporic clothing" (Ballas 1998, p. 17). This leaning towards the diaspora in the early days of the newly formed state indicates ambivalence towards the pioneer ethos. His insistence on the diasporic nature of his characters and the emphasis on class struggle suggests a more nuanced vision that advances human rights against the idea of ethnic domination.

Bezem's work in this show is called *Blessing the Sabbath* (n.d.). This eerie ink-on-paper work has most often been read as the depiction of an affectionate couple lighting Shabbat candles [Figure 3]. This domestic scene is certainly one aspect of the piece, but the image

is far too strange to foreclose other readings. The man is behind the woman and may be holding either her body or the candlesticks. It is impossible to tell whose arms are whose. Her eyes are closed while his eyes are wide open. The candlesticks are recognizable, but, upon closer inspection, they also resemble pitchforks. The candlesticks/pitchforks are anchored at the bottom of the drawing showing a land that is half-populated. This dual movement of placing something traditional and sacred against the anchoring gesture of a pitchfork in a half-populated ground is aggressively ambiguous. Another reading might see a man forcing himself on a woman, as he hovers behind her, holding her body as she is trying to bless the Sabbath. Recall that the female figure in Bezem's works of that time often represent the idea of peace.

Figure 3. Naftali Bezem (Israel, b. Germany, 1924), Blessing the Sabbath, n.d. Ink wash on paper, paper: 23 × 33 in. Gift of Nancy Berman and Alan Bloch, 2018.27.7.

Another early work is *Sleeping Bedouins* (1954) by Jacob Steinhardt (Israel, b. Prussia, now Poland 1887–1968) [Figure 4]. Steinhardt lived in Paris for two years and immigrated to Palestine in 1933 when the Nazis were coming to prominence. Like Bezem, he was not part of the first Israeli art movement, Ofakim Hadashim (New Horizons), which specialized in "lyrical abstraction" as a transnational version of modernist, abstract painting. Their work demonstrates that artistic, Zionist identity was not monolithic. Members of this community bore diverse and complex relations to religion and secularism as well as representations of land and its contribution to myth-making.

Steinhardt's work preceded the cracks that had already begun to appear in a muted fashion with the formation of Ofakim Hadashim. It reflects a naïve enchantment with the authenticity of the land and its residents, namely the Palestinian and Bedouin populations. Other artists, like Yeshayahu Sheinfeld and Shalom of Safed, were producing similarly exoticized images. But what is particularly fascinating here is the inscription of the Bedouins' bodies as part of the landscape. In Steinhardt's work they were coded into its surface, becoming one with the landscape. One side of the woodcut shows a lighted environment drenched with light colors, while the opposite side of the work's surface is blackened (it shows the scene at night). The black surface absorbs their bodies as well as any signifier of land. The Bedouins are part of a blackened surface, like an abyss, that dominates the lower part of the work's composition. Their bodies are not depicted (only their sleeping heads) and the environment they inhabit appears as a total void. The simple rendition of this work offers a hierarchical viewpoint in which human residents are objectified—some may say

fetishized as beautiful rocks or other natural objects—part of the land, rather than inhabitants of it. It recapitulates a Zionist story about progress and the need to bring civilization to this "empty", "virgin", unused space.

Figure 4. Jacob Steinhardt (Israel, b. Poland, 1887--1968), Sleeping Bedouins, 1954. Woodcut, paper: 18 5/8 × 23 5/8 in. Gift of Nancy Berman and Alan Bloch, 2018.27.52.

This work is also interesting because of its color palette. The use of black was not associated with the young Jewish artists who arrived from Europe. This group of artists was fascinated by the blinding local sun, a novelty for Europeans emigrants. White dominated works by Yehiel Krize (b. Israel, 1909–1968), Marcel Janco (Israel, b. Romania, 1895–1984), a Dada pioneer in Europe, and Yohanan Simon (Israel, b. Germany 1905–1976), whose surrealist tendencies are seen in his drifting land motifs. The bright colors and lighted renderings became synonymous with Ofakim Hadashim.

Simon participated in the *Conquest of the Desert*, a specialized expo held in Jerusalem in 1953 at Binyanei Ha'uma, a large convention, exhibition, and performance space in Jerusalem. *Conquest of the Desert* was focused on the themes of "reclamation and population of desert areas". It amplified the Zionist ethos of that time and advanced colonizing ideologies of historical revision and erasure. That year Simon left a kibbutz, a collective settlement, and in 1954 he traveled to Brazil. After his return, his practice diverged from that of the group. According to art historian Tali Tamir "his work [from that period] expresses romantic escape from the art made in the service of the state, and from narrative based figurations" (Tamir 2001).

Avshalom Okashi (b. Israeli, 1916–1980) was another member of Ofakim Hadashim who continued to paint in black. The only Yemenite Mizrahi artist in the commune, Okashi was the most internationally appreciated artist among the group members, and historically the least recognized. He was known among his colleagues as "The Black" due to his darker skin tone. Okashi showed at MoMA, the Hirschhorn, the Guggenheim, and other notable American museums. Despite international renown, he has, unlike his Ashkenazi contemporaries, largely disappeared from local art history.

Okashi's *Negev Sunset* (1965) reflects his process-based period, where he tried to reach ultimate abstraction, as did his counterparts in art capitals internationally [Figure 5]. His color fields are all in black, as he believed that black is the one and only color suitable for describing the traumatized Jewish experience. Let us not forget the historical timeline. Jewish residents at that time had to engage in wars during the formation of the Israeli state. This combined with World War II and anti-Semitic upheavals in northern Africa and in the Middle East against Arab Jews led him to this conclusion. Additionally, his Yemenite origins and the complex relations he had with other members of Ofakim Hadashim contributed to his preference for black over white. Okashi was native to Palestine and was a shepherd while volunteering in a kibbutz. The other members of Okafim Hadashim did not share the same physical connection to the land, nor the bias towards black as a signifying color. They remained devoted to their preoccupation with the bright local sunlight.

Figure 5. Avshalom Okashi (Israel, 1916--1980), Negev Sunset, 1965. Polyvinyl on canvas, framed: 79 1/4 × 30 in. Gift of Nancy Berman and Alan Bloch, 2018.27.33.

The color black is also a powerful symbol of Palestinian struggle and resistance. The color's appearance in visual art and social ritual is one of many parallels that can be drawn between traumatized Israeli subjectivity and the ongoing trauma of Palestinians. Palestinian artist Khaled Hourani has drawn our attention to the role of this color in Palestinians' negotiation of violence, death, and mourning (Shakra et al. 2006). Traditional attire is woven and embroidered with vivid colors in silk. Palestinian women wear these dresses for celebrations, holidays, and festive events. When a husband, son, or father dies, the women become alienated from this vivid color palette and cover it with natural black pigments that only layers of time can remove. Over time, the black reminiscences are etched into those bright dresses as a permanent symbol of the accumulation of loss and agony. Black is thus a complex proxy for memory, trauma, mourning, healing, and accumulated loss.

3. Blocking the Other (the 1970s)

Four works by Pinchas Cohen Gan represent the 1970s. Born in 1942 in Morocco, Cohen Gan's family fled to Israel in 1949. Throughout his artistic career, he described feelings of loneliness and rejection as a Mizrahi Jew in the young, developing Israeli society. The 1970s mark the first decade of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza strip. The occupation that began with the Six-Day War in 1967 was of central concern to artists of this decade as they adjusted to the notion of an ongoing Israeli presence in newly occupied territory.

An immigrant himself, with a critical connection to his surroundings, Cohen Gan's work from this period should be understood as part of his wider conceptual and political practice. In the early 1970s, he was engaged in a series of actions and land art projects that mostly dealt with the Israeli–Palestinian situation. His *Dead Sea Project* (1971–1973) connected a freshwater system to the highly salinized Dead Sea by a hose (Bar Or 2012). The hose moved fish and other living organisms along with fresh water into the Dead Sea. Salinity increases in proportion to distance from a fresh-water source. Cohen Gan wrote that "since life and salinity are in inverse proportion, the possibility of life decreases with its distance from the source", thus suggesting that the mass immigration to Israel, that necessarily detached people from their countries of origin, created an inhospitable situation. To critique the naturalist image that Israel was trying to present, Cohen Gan created an "Anti-Environment" where migration from a "natural environment to a new environment that is endeavoring to consolidate patterns of a natural environment" is magnified (Bar Or 2012, p. 38).

Later, Cohen Gan executed *Action at a Refugee Camp in Jericho* (1974) where he erected a tent at a prison camp in the titular city and gave a lecture called "Israel in the Year of 2000". He conversed with two Palestinian refugees and their associates about that future. His premise for this action was that "a refugee is a person who cannot return to his birthplace". He established a situation of relative equality between himself (as a fellow refugee at that time) and the other refugees as a framework for this action. He later wrote that the work aimed "to give expression to the feelings of a person living in a state of permanent refugee-hood…".

This project presents a radical case for what art historian and curator Galia Bar-Or calls "blocking the Other". "Blocking" refers to the complex array of processes made to exclude, repress, and otherwise hide this otherness from view. The otherness here is the Palestinian presence that has been removed from daily visual language and collective retinal vocabulary. This process of "blocking the Other" increasingly restricted representation in the following years in many areas of Israeli society. Cohen Gan tries to resist this by summoning the blocked voices to become part of a dialog about their future.

Ultimately, Cohen Gan suggested that alongside efforts towards Palestinian erasure is an equally important act of construction, meant to legitimate the state's political goals. While Palestinians are actively suppressed, the figure of the "rehabilitated and loyal Arab" enjoying the benefits of enlightened Israeli civilization operates as a justification for ongoing removal or exclusion. As an alternative to this false gesture of inclusion, Cohen Gan

emphasized his identity as a refugee and a Mizrahi, stressing that solidarity is not built around national definitions but upon multiple shared definitions of identity and identification (Bar Or 2012, p. 21).

In another action, *Touching the Border* (1974), he delegated four civilians to hide semi-confidential security information at different points on the borders of Israel, where they were halted by the Israeli army. He then sent letters to artists' unions in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Jordan (the land borders of Israel) urging them to engage in similar actions. This work points out the political nature of national borders, and their tendency to change frequently due to current events, suggesting that the border is cultural rather than essential or permanent. More importantly, he reframed the idea of national security as a meta structure and a tool that dictates the circulation of information, transparency, human rights, and freedom of movement. The work was activated only when the delegated pedestrian encountered and was halted by a gate keeper (IDF—Israeli Defense Force), suggesting that a cultural border is only apparent when it is breached. *Touching the Border* established a coded information system, inscribed in landscape, to highlight the different status that information attains when it is a matter of "security". The mechanisms established at the border to control information flows are re-affirmed in Israel's cultural field.

Cohen Gan's environmental actions have always been in the service of constructing a coherent refugee perspective. To this end, he regularly performed detachment from his immediate surroundings. In this framework, earth or environment do not function as mythical, empty spaces with extraordinary temporality, but rather as real places shaped by historical time that contain traumatized subjects and are subject to politics. Land here is not an abstract representation but the core of conflict and occupation. Land art and earth works like this have the potential to suggest a third term: a temporality of liberation, neither the colonial fantasy of land outside of time nor the current temporality of occupation and repression.

The works on paper exhibited here are part of Cohen Gan's conceptual oeuvre that includes paintings, sculpture, writing, and performance-based works. These four works (1973) amplify the idea of "blocking the Other". In this series, all untitled, works include sheets of newsprints, folded, torn, and stained [Figure 6]. The collage works reveal alternate tonalities, changing densities, places of exposure, and text that is blocked to varying degrees. The erased text is sometimes visible on the edges, or in places where the black is diluted or faded over time. The image is created by the accumulation of thick layers of meaning, found on the original newsprints, coming together in various degrees of participation, opaqueness, and transparency as they coalesce into four wretched, ripped landscape views. The appearance of these untitled works varies from abstracted topographical imagery to resembling traditional landscape. Using a horizontal structure like traditional landscape compositions, Cohen Gan problematizes landscape "construction" and introduces ideas of rupture and information blockades by consolidating and wrinkling the layers that make up the image.

Next to Cohen Gan's works are works by Jacob El Hanani, who was born in Casablanca, Morocco, in 1947. He moved to Israel at the age of six, after France granted Moroccan independence. Following his studies in Israel, he attended L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris from 1969 to 1970, when Letterism was already widespread. In 1974, he moved to New York, where he still resides, and was influenced by Minimalism and the American artists Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin.

His works are principally on paper and display micrographic Hebrew letters as linear elements methodically arranged to culminate in elaborate compositions. His letter-based practice emerged in the 1970s when the works' Jewish connections were more direct: their intricate nature, made through the painstaking repetition of tiny marks. The repetition represents a prayer, or *Tehilim* (a collection of 150 Psalms that express thanks, praise, and love of God).

The works adhere to a logic of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalistic traditions that insist on the spiritual nature of written Hebrew. As micrography was introduced as a form of

Jewish art, it differed between its Ashkenazi origins, where biblical words were larger and easier to read, and its Mizrahi origins, where letters that make up the *micrography* are generally a millimeter in height, making sentences harder to read. This *art form's origins* are found in parts of Islamic art, indicating that it was the primary and most influential visual source for decoration in Hebrew manuscripts, including *micrography*.[3]

Interest in the spiritual qualities of the written letter is central to the modernist practices of the Khartoum school. Ahmed Shibrain and Ibrahim El-Salahi deployed Arabic script in abstract and figurative shapes. They acted from a similar transnational position, aiming to articulate a local style in modernist terms that solicited a universal audience. An even more concrete example of this transnationalism can be seen in the *micrographic works of the Iranian artist* Siah Armajani (particularly from his "Persian period" 1956–1964), who lived in exile in America. El Hanani's micrographic works are often interpreted solely in relation to his Judaism. But given his exile from both Morocco and Israel, it seems useful to present the Islamic origin of the micrographic text as an indication of the exilic identity he shared with his Persian-Iranian contemporaries. The reverberation of Islamic decorative practices is widespread in Israeli Mizrahi art, and it is interesting to see those traces in works by Okashi, Cohen Gan, and El-Hannani's works from different periods.

Later on, El Hanani's works drifted from a Jewish focus to a critical gaze that questions the formation of collective memory, imprisonment, and oppression. *Barbed Wire (2018)* also employs micrography and speaks to a commitment to sustaining collective Jewish memory from a diasporic position. But the letters form barbed wire, found in prisons and prison camps, borders and checkpoints, and widespread over the occupied territories in the West Bank. *Barbed Wire* alludes to Jewish memory but can also be read as a critique of ethnocentric signifying systems in Israel as well as its use as a physical means to control Palestinians.
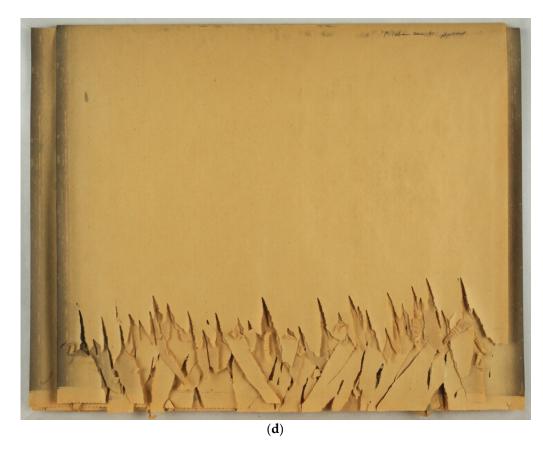

(a)

Figure 6. *Cont.*

(**b**)

(**c**)

Figure 6. *Cont.*

(**d**)

Figure 6. (**a**) Pinchas Cohen Gan (Israel, b. 1942), Untitled, 1973. Sheets of newsprint; folded, torn, and stained, 11 1/2 × 16 3/4 in. The Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, 2012.1.12. (**b**) Pinchas Cohen Gan (Israel, b. 1942), Untitled, 1973. Torn paper, 12 × 16 1/2 in. The Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, 2012.1.16. (**c**) Pinchas Cohen Gan (Israel, b. 1942), Untitled, 1973. Sheets of newsprint, folded, torn, and stained, 11 1/2 × 16 3/4 in. The Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, 2012.1.17. (**d**) Pinchas Cohen Gan (Israel, b. 1942), Untitled, 1973. Torn paper, 11 1/4 × 16 3/4 in. The Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, 2012.1.21.

Juxtaposing Cohen Gan and El Hanani can teach us a number of things: their close connection to their Jewish, text-based origins, as well as to their Arab native countries' aesthetics; the importance of their migration to their identity as Mizrahi; and the opposing visual strategies they take to text. Cohen Gan reproduces and performs the controlling motives that stem from information handling, censorship, and accessibility. That accessibility could be associated with degrees of security that are determined and adjusted in relation to ethnicity. Alternatively, they underscore the importance of linguistic access to Hebrew which is also, although not strictly, related to ethnicity and social hierarchy. The exposure to certain information and knowledge is directly associated with the supremacy of ethnicity and nationality in Israel.

The negotiation between hiding and revealing plays a different role in El Hanani's works as the changing degrees of proximity and distance from the work dictates what you "see". Embedding barely visible text in the larger rendering of a landscape suggests the inseparability of worldviews from physical places and the importance of language to symbolic landscapes. The letters create the image, but at the same time they can disguise its essence. If one stands very close to the drawing, one cannot see the picture, only its parts. Alternately, if one stands too far away, one can see the larger pictorial image but not the tiny parts that compose it. This practice makes the importance of perspective and proximity clear. It is only when that distance is fixed on a middle ground that one can see

what is really at stake. The function of access to information and language is reaffirmed as a controlling element.

4. Blocking the Gaze (1980–1999)

The 1980s and early 1990s were turbulent years in Israel/Palestine. A number of political events influenced the way that Israeli artists reinstated the connection to transparency, opacity, and the direction of the public gaze. In the early 1980s Palestinian artists Nabil Anani, Isam Bader, and Sliman Mansour were arrested for their "disguised" use of the Palestinian flag in their artwork. The blocking of visual modes of communication was multilayered. Colors that might indicate the Palestinian flag when combined were banned from public imagery up until 1994.

In 1982, after clashes on its Northern border, Israel invaded Lebanon. The first Lebanon War included what has become known as the Sabra and Shatila massacre, in the Sabra neighborhood and adjacent Shatila refugee camp in Beirut. Between 460 and 3500 civilians, mostly Palestinians and Lebanese Shiites, were killed by Lebanese-backed Christian militias. A state-led investigation (the Kahan commission) in 1983 confirmed Israeli involvement. However, many documents related to this event remain censored. This had a major impact on the domestic political consciousness of the country's citizens, including artists.

The invasion of Lebanon was a turning point for some Israeli artists who began to incorporate post- or even anti-Zionist gestures into their practice. This political shift was often demonstrated in a new approach to landscape that implicitly questioned the state's policies and propaganda (Soltes 2020). *The Israeli journalist Amiram Nir's formulation, "silence, now we shoot" was representative of the political tenor of the time. The phrase was widely circulated, reaching the status of social norm in the following years. Nir suggested that wartime is no time for critiquing governmental policies or operations; war is a time to obey and act. But it also implies a change in the democratic processes of the state, and in the relationship between state policies and critique.* Acts of terrorism by both sides took place at that time. In 1984, Jewish fundamentalist terrorists conspired to bomb *Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. In 1987, the Hamas organization emerged from the Palestinian protests against the occupation. This response to 20 years of occupation is known as the First Intifada.*

The belief that secrecy and silence is necessary to security became more common and widespread in the following years. But the '80s and '90s marked a reckoning with the idea that the country was not necessarily holding integrity or transparency in the highest regard. This is visible in the work of artists grappling with notions of a gaze blockade. The works from this period depicted mostly underground bunkers (common to civilian homes in Israel) in a way that portrayed both the ongoing occupation and battles over the land. Micha Ullman's (b. Israel, 1939) interventionist practice is exemplary. In one of his actions, Ullman exchanged the soil of a kibbutz with its neighboring Arabic village, to amplify questions of ownership and to build solidarity with previous owners of the land through an act of appropriation.

Other artists might be briefly (for limitations of space) noted who emerged as part of this reckoning process. Ronit Yeda'ya portrays the lateral blocking of sight. Eldad Shaaltiel and Ilana Salama Ortar (Israel, b. Egypt 1949) deal with the fragility and vulnerability of bunkers with an aesthetic that negotiated transparency and opacity. The works of Michal Rovner (Israel, b. 1957) and Moshe Gershuni (Israel, 1936–2017) directly address the enforced inability to see political reality.

Rovner created "Outside" (1990), a series of sites depicted through blurriness and distortion of the gaze. The sites are mostly Palestinian refugee camps or Bedouin encampments. The series suggests both their visual inaccessibility to the Israeli gaze, and their distorted existence in national hegemonic imagery.

Gershuni, arguably the most influential Israeli artist of his generation, created a series of works characterized by his use of red, the combination of local secular poetry, mainstream pop songs, religious Jewish quotations, and the incorporation of his own blood.

This series expressed anger over national policies, political disgust, and criticism of human rights violations.

Unlike El Hanani and Cohen Gan, the text in Gershuni's works does not serve as theological epiphany or as a means of disguise, but rather as a direct attack on the painterly surface, and the political situation. For Gershuni, the two were connected—we, Israelis, cannot solve the questions art raises before we solve our crimes against the other. The work here reads "Goodbye soldier". It speaks to his agony over bloodshed, Israeli wars, and the devaluation of human life [Figure 7]. Gershuni experienced several personal transformations that were evident in his use of textual motives. According to curator Sarah Britberg Semel, this symbolized the "collapse of a single worldview, solid and militant, and instead offered a wider, complex, open and indecisive vision of existential questions" (Breitberg-Semel 1981).

Figure 7. Moshe Gershuni (Israel, 1936--2017), Shalom Hayal, 1980--1987. Mixed media on paper, 19 3/4 × 27 1/4 in. The Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, 2012.1.41.

Gershuni became widely known for the statement, "the problem of painting is the Palestinian problem". This textual gesture made as part of a larger project in 1977 pushed Gershuni even further outside of the closed circuit of national beneficiaries. Yet, he insisted on this position until his death. For Gershuni, this meant that until Israel stops to look away from the Palestinian occupation, problems will persist. He pointed to the need for self-reflection and deep collective deconstruction that speaks to Jewish trauma and its denial of Palestinian trauma. Gershuni realized that this denial has to do with the Jews' traumatic past, but still demanded a reckoning with this rupture. Any aesthetic, painterly, or conceptual problem, he suggested would remain unresolved until there was a resolution and acknowledgment of the Nakba—"catastrophe", as the Israeli War for Independence is referred to in Palestinian historiography. He therefore repositions the problem outside of the painterly surface and redirects this "request" to his viewers. This declarative sentence, written in Hebrew, presents itself as an objective fact.

"The problem of painting is the Palestinian problem" speaks both to the place of the Hebrew language, artistic or spoken, as well as questions regarding control, access, and borders. At one end is the modernist confrontation with the limits of the canvas—questions that accompanied the post-war generation and were thus woven into the inability to ex-

press trauma. At the other end is the problem of segregated language. By reproducing the anti-Semitic European notions of "the Jewish problem", Gershuni also hints at the racist treatment and linguistic laundering the state directs at its Palestinian residents, by using the same verbal currency that was directed at Jews.

Despite his political alienation, Gershuni received the prestigious Israel Prize in 2003, as an acknowledgement of his engagement with the body, prayer, and other dimensions of Jewish identity, and for his influence on Israeli art at large. Gershuni refused to come to the ceremony and shake the hands of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Culture, saying he is "happy to receive the award but saddened to receive it under the political and cultural climate happening in Israel" and that "this is no time for festivities". More importantly, accepting the award would have conflicted with his political beliefs and artistic practice. Because he refused to physically receive the award and shake the hands of local politicians, they rescinded it. This was itself a powerful statement about the visual mechanics of state policy and the importance of controlling images in order to screen and deliver state ideology.

5. Indexical Art (1996–2006)

The 1990s and early aughts were no less turbulent than previous decades in Israel/ Palestine. The decade began with the Gulf War. In response to the invasion of Kuwait, a 35-nation coalition led by the United States attacked Iraq. Iraq retaliated by launching missiles on Israel and Saudi Arabia. The First Intifada did not subside until the end of the Gulf War, with peace talks that ended in the Oslo agreements and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Suicide bombings were followed by military operations. The Oslo talks and the peace agreement with Jordan in 1994 aggravated Jewish fundamentalists and spurred violent attacks, reaching a crescendo with the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 which foreclosed on the possibility of an end to the occupation.[4]

Five years later, the Camp David Summit took place in July. In September 2000, former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who led the opposition at that time, visited the Dome of the Rock accompanied by scores of military and policemen, thus igniting the Al-Aksa Intifada. The Palestinian uprising known as the Second Intifada lasted until 2004. This was followed by the building of the separation wall, (which sought to undercut suicide bombings but also represented state efforts to limit and block Palestinian existence from the public gaze), by the evacuation of Israeli forces and settlements from the Gaza Strip, and the second Lebanon war.

The public atmosphere reaffirmed its consensus of silence and the national norm "silence, now we shoot", slowly but firmly set in. The escalation of silencing allegedly made sense because security threats were also escalating. Israel has been ruled in a state of permanent emergency since its founding, but this still represented a significant escalation resulting in the consolidation of a more nationalistic subjectivity.

The work produced under these circumstances—as the official narrative was consolidating itself in support of endless occupation—subtly registers the inscription of this military hegemony in the landscape. The photographic works of Roi Kuper (Israel, b. 1956) and Shai Kremer (Israel, b. 1974) mostly show empty, deserted landscapes that largely adhere to adjectives like picturesque, sublime, or pastoral. They capture Israeli landscape in a classical devotion: traditional composition, virgin land, and horizon lines that at first glance lend themselves to the formal national story. Yet, they index something else—the views are wounded and tactically punctuated by militaristic interventions: smoke seen from afar, traces of military vehicles, or empty bullets coded into the land.

Gilad Ophir (Israel, b. 1957) takes a more direct stance; his works are focused on the impact of military equipment on the land (Roei 2017, pp. 65–89). Both Ophir and Kuper work in series and deploy them to bring notions of manufacturing and production to the surface, borrowing tropes from post-minimal and conceptual art.

Writing of a similar series, scholar Noa Roei observes that,

> … the work conceptualizes the framework that allows military spatial presence to remain unseen when it manipulates the genre of landscape photography. The recurrent display of imperial and military signs that have become opaque, unseen or uncounted for is coupled with a critical acknowledgment of landscape as the framework that allows these objects to escape one's view in the first place… Even works that seem to open out to the horizon and so to follow the rules of landscape imagery, or to document the endlessness of the desert landscape, negate the depth of the composition by partly blocking the vanishing point or by accentuating details that push the focus to the front of the image. (Roei 2017, pp. 65–89)

Ophir, Kramer, and Kuper indicate that the "[Palestinian] presence" was excluded, pulled out, banned, or censored from language by the long-term processes of social silencing—the militarization of society that is distilled in the ongoing occupation of Palestine.

Kuper's diptych *Untitled* (2003) demonstrates this most clearly [Figure 8]. The desert landscape is seen empty, and its "classic" composition shows an allegedly untouched vista. A closer look reveals traces of a military vehicle that cracked the land. The broken earth, the cracks that were made by a massive vehicle are not only a testament to its absence and therefore a former presence, but also its own vanishing. It thus testifies to the construction of the image as such, and its non-natural, non-neutral nature.
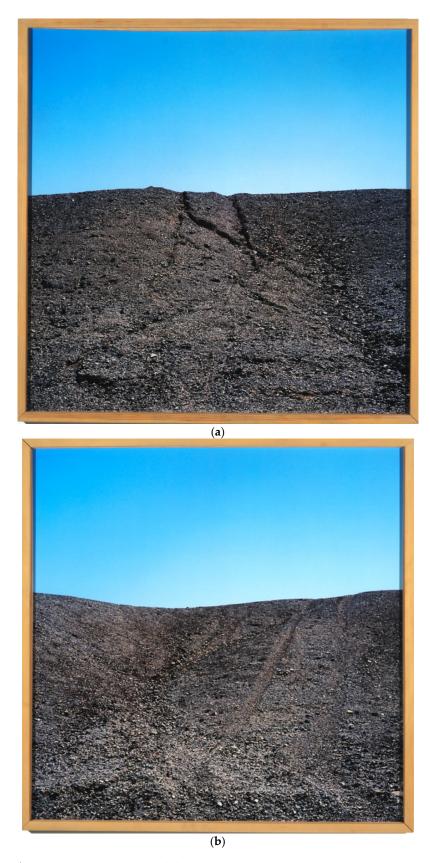
The traces do not only function as indicators or hints of a missing "thing/presence" that could or should have been there, they function as evidence of something that disappeared or was removed. The traces testify to their own construction (therefore, they are not organic in the natural framed scheme) and their own history of disappearance and uprooting.

Indexical works point to traces of data that indicate something that was removed from the signifying order of things. The data they indicate are outside of the ordering linguistic apparatus. They are a missing thing, and their traces bear witness to their absence, and to the signifying systems that exclude them. Here, the index functions as a means to make the absent present, by revealing its coded traces, and its removal from the landscape. They do not just indicate the absence of these traces but the active erasure of their existence. They expand on the apparatus of indexical art proposed by Krauss, by excavating the missing place and its informed erasure.

Signs of war, excavation, and displacement are evident in all the works in this group. In it, they reaffirm their previous encounters with the missing protagonists; with the erased past and the visual removal of agency from the retinal codex.

One work succeeds in a different formulation. Israeli American painter Miriam Cabessa (Israel, b. Morocco 1966) is known for her use of bodily gestures and domestic utensils on the canvas. This painting is made in her manner of abstract expressionism, but it presents an alternative logic that includes a focal point, horizontal structure, and clear hierarchical composition [Figure 9]. The upper parts of the painting are drenched with light colors in thin layers, but most of the canvas is covered with thick dark layers. A stenciled figure is reproduced across the lower width of the canvas. It presents an allegedly Egyptian figure whipping others next to the Pyramids. The others are likely to be the enslaved Jewish [Israelite] people. The largest portion of this work is blackened; superimposed upon it is the depiction of a whip that rises above the rendering of the Egyptian myth. The whip is the painting's focal point and therefore the main constitutive, controlling element of the work. In this sense, the whip guides the movement of the painting and of the gaze.

(**a**)

(**b**)

Figure 8. (**a**) Roi Kuper (Israel, b. 1956), Untitled, 2003. Photography, 31 1/2 x 31 1/2 in. The Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, 2011.3.18. (**b**) Roi Kuper (Israel, b. 1956), Untitled, 2003. Photography, 31 1/2 × 31 1/2 in. The Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, 2011.3.19.

Figure 9. Miriam Cabessa (Israel, b. Morocco, 1966), Untitled, 1996. Oil on Masonite, 31 1/2 × 31 1/2 in. The Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, 2011.3.9.

The Jewish myth of leaving Egypt can be interpreted in two ways. It can be read as "the beginning" and as reaffirmation of the biblical text that "promise[d] the land to the Jewish people". But it could also be read as a different point in time, representing the artistic evolution in Israel and thus it reaffirms the biblical text "Lech Lecha" "לך מארצךדלך" "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house".

6. Ecologies of Disappearance (2004–2010)

Environmental destruction cannot be disassociated from processes of modernization, urbanization, and colonization. Under a capitalist tendency for expansion, natural spaces are destroyed, and ecological systems annihilated or reconfigured for profit. The specifically Western and capitalist notion of "use" (for industrialization, profit, etc.) is a convenient alibi for colonial domination of "unused" or "uncivilized" spaces. Israeli land management is not as anodyne as it sounds. It justifies expropriation, exploitation, and displacement under the auspices of improvement.

The policies of Israel in the occupied territories in relation to ecology and agriculture are less known internationally. Many are familiar with olive trees, their importance to the Palestinian community and their ongoing abuse by Jewish settlers in occupied territories. In the past few years there has been a growing momentum of settler violence directed at Palestinians, particularly during harvesting season. These attacks on centuries-old trees and traditions, result in violence against the general population and farmers cut off from their land.

Less well-known is the Israeli handling of plants like akkoub (*Gundelia tournefortii*), za'atar (*Majorana syriaca*), and miramiyyeh (*Salvia tribola*) (See also Eghbarieh and Takhsha 2017; Mana 2020). Since 1977, Israel has regulated the harvesting of these plants in ways that directly affect the lives of Palestinians. It is another bureaucratic tool of land preservation that supports the settler colonial agenda in the occupied territories. Those regulations declare a species protected and therefore banned from collection. The accompanying penalties are practically directed at Palestinian communities who have used these edible

plants for centuries. There are no official scientific studies proving a need for these bans, with the exception of one paper that recommended exemptions for personal consumption, which is the main violation the penalties enacted. In yet another act of enclosure, military industrialization, and profit-making as a token of progress, farms in northern Israel grow those plants and sell them both domestically to the Palestinian population and globally with the label "made in Palestine".[5]

Two works from 2004 by Sigalit Landau (b. Israel, 1969) and Ori Gersht (b. Israel, 1967) comment on those policies. Landau, in a still shot from a video work, creates a floating surface of watermelons, the fruit that grew to symbolize Palestinian resistance. The watermelons float on the salted waters of the Dead Sea. Some are whole, some torn open, but they remain in close proximity, suggesting a collective presence. As time passes, they fade and drift away on the water, separated from one another, until their presence becomes etheric and they slowly sink into the oblivion of this "Anti-Environment" (to borrow a construction from Cohen Gan).

Gersht's work shows a displaced olive tree. The olive tree is symbolically overdetermined by its association with peace and its actual significance to Palestinian economy and trade, culture, farming, and communal traditions of food and festivity. The photo depicts the tree with its bottom roots and lower trunk extracted and exposed, open and vulnerable. The printed image was taken with a low contrast and a long exposure resulting in an intricate depiction so delicate and fragile that it makes the photographic object look as if it is about to disintegrate. The image is made on the verge of annihilation. In parts, the image surface is so bright that it looks like a burned negative; like the tree pixelated, exploded, and burned in its medium of representation. It is not only the loss of that long-lived tree, but the transference of this trait of loss outside the picture frame, to be manifested in the artistic object itself. It therefore leaks out and foregrounds feelings of vulnerability, helplessness, and disintegration that are registered in its very appearance.

Amon Yariv's (Israel, b. 1975) photograph, *Olives and Dates*, lays olives and dates on Israel Defense Forces (IDF) uniform fabric. The fruits that stand for the land of milk and honey also mark their significance in Palestinian culture. The fruits are meticulously arranged, possibly hinting at the systematic and bureaucratic order of the displacing acts. They are placed in a single row on the uniform that in turn lends itself as an endless backdrop, encompassing the entire picture frame. The color of the uniform dominates the entire pictorial landscape, in turn ordering the natural fruits.

American Israeli artist Dana Levy photographed plants in the botanical gardens of New York City and Brooklyn. She took photos of their accompanying labels (*Proud Land, Jerusalem, Forget Me Not*) as a paraphrase of the biblical command "*If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; (6) let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour. (7) Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall; how they cried, "Strip her, strip her to her very foundations!"*[6]

Levy placed the displaced plants' names in a significant order: "proud land"/"Jerusalem"/"forget-me-not". The plants themselves pronounce a literal sentence on the colonization of nature through the destruction of localized ecological systems in the name of education and taxonomy. The work deals with colonization of unprotected living organisms, a broad category that could easily include humans, in the quest to rearrange the world according to races and species. The work looks at how the process of extraction relates to naming, narration, and nature and the countervailing efforts at self-narration and self-government by the subjects of these state projects. Since the work is made up as a tongue-in-cheek Haiku and composed of uprooted organisms, it also urges us to think about the appropriation of those taxonomies in an effort to launder the act of displacement and colonization.

7. Submerge/Erupt (2000–2016)

The shifting gaze of the artists in this exhibition reveals the deep social processes of reckoning within secular Israeli society. From hesitant question marks and locally visible

cracks that began to emerge in the 1950s with young nationhood, to the consequences of waking from the Zionist dream in the 1960s and 70s, the show lays out the evolution of the political consciousness that led to recent artistic interventions. What began as a questioning of the "necessary" violence that accompanies nation-building developed into representations of the concealment and silence that accompanied this state violence. Artists referred to notions of blocking otherness itself by means of blocking information about the other, that is the Palestinian and Arab populations. Over the next 20 years, images spoke to a "blocked gaze" that reproduced physical blockades and obstructive mechanisms through perspectival shifts in image production. Artists made art that commented on the denial of sight. This attempted erasure noted by these artists was later absorbed into coded and encrypted performances or work that, in Krauss's phrase "indexes" presence through absence. The index exposes the constitutive nature of the Palestinian erasure in the Israeli state. In landscape and in language, the Palestinian subject and territory is made non-existent—an attempt to create a non-subject for critical refusal and resistance.

This evolution reflects the linguistic terrain, where the Hebrew word for "occupation"—"Kibush"—has been so thoroughly delegitimized that it is practically disappearing (it has largely been removed from school books) or is devolving into nonsense.[7] This removal, in turn, was the function of an evolving visual and legal terrain. In the past twenty years, two major reports analyzed the Israeli building of settlements in the occupied territories. It is not within the scope of this essay to reproduce the reports. However, it is important to note that the Sasson Report (2005) determined that the situation in the occupied territories was illegal while a similar report produced by the Netanyahu administration avoided questions of legality altogether by simply concluding that there is no occupation in the West Bank.[8]

After the occupation was removed from available systems of signification (spatial, legal) it was summarily excluded from the language itself.[9] Not only was resistance impossible, verbal acknowledgement and debate were less viable than ever.

The erasure or denial of trauma has inevitable, tragic, and dramatic results. Trauma does not disappear when silence is imposed. The lack of compatibility between the acknowledged traumatized past of Israelis and the ongoing, unacknowledged Nakba of Palestinians by the state of Israel, paves the way for a complete annihilation of humanistic values. It plays out as the fundamental reversal of the guiding principles of the Israeli state and Judaism as a religion of social justice. This active denial results in escalating, ongoing settler violence and other processes of ethnic cleansing and displacement.[10]

In 2008, terrorist acts known as "Tag Mehir" (price tag) began. They were a fundamentalist response to the destruction of illegal Jewish settlements in the occupied territories by the Israeli police. The Tag Mehir attacks destroyed mosques and other property and included violent attacks on Palestinian individuals.

The year 2008 was marked by The Gaza War. In 2012, Palestine became a non-member observer of the United Nations and Israel launched Operation "Pillar of Defense". In 2014, three young Jewish settlers were kidnapped and murdered by Palestinian terrorists precipitating an escalation of violence on all sides, and the kidnapping and murder of sixteen-year-old Muhammad Abu Khdeir. The Second Gaza War, in the summer of 2014, known as "Operation Protective Edge", was accompanied by the radical silencing of any criticism of state actions. During Operation Protective Edge, Israeli forces killed 526 Palestinians younger than eighteen. One Israeli child was also killed. In 2015, Israeli settlers committed the Duma arson attack in which an eighteen-month-old baby was burned alive.

The active renunciation of Jewish principles by the Israeli state produced images that made it obvious that active complicity in state narratives of righteousness could no longer be uncritically sustained. What the images from this period show us is fragmentation, discontinued lines, explosions, and fragility. They imply a nascent recognition or reckoning. There is tension between the actions of the state and the image of the state—the difference between the story that Israel tells about itself and the reality that is undeniable.

All of these images include depictions of disintegration, annihilation, inversion, and cuttings. Michal Helfman's (b. Israel, 1973) work, *Mitzpe Ramon*, is one out of a series of three that depict local landscapes. This entire series is based on broken lines, prominent in the artist's works, particularly her landscapes. This broken line stands in opposition to other transnational modernist traditions that portray the line as a symbol of perfection, unity, and continuity. The broken line in Helfman's work is both an aesthetic commentary on modernism and the idea of completeness, continuity and contiguity in relation to the land. The depictions are dark and porous in their reflection of the unified idea of the land as a territory.

Orit Ben Shitrit's *Intoxicating Sovereignty (Jerusalem Fall Afternoon)* (2008) is a photograph that aims to expand history painting into photography [Figure 10]. Ben Shitrit built a miniature bricolage model of built environments in Jerusalem from different times in history, including the city with a rendition of the second temple (of which there are no visual records).

Figure 10. Orit Ben Shitrit, Intoxicating Sovereignty (Jerusalem Fall Afternoon), 2008. Archival pigment print on Luster, 40 × 60 in. The Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, 2013.11.40.

The "fall" in the title refers to the golden light that hovers over Jerusalem in the afternoon. But the lack of horizon in the rendering inverts this reading. Ben Shitrit denies orientation to discuss the Palestinian erasure and the newly constructed narratives of control over the city. The Holy City here has a wrinkled topography, crumpled and cut through.

Gal Weinstein's work (*Untitled*, 2006) represents his wider practice of working with synthetic, cheap, and easy to obtain and largely ephemeral materials. He illustrates local landscapes and places that hold symbolic mythical or historical value in local culture. In these constructions, the artist presents a version of these sites that exposes itself as barren, futile, and synthetically engineered.

This work, made with remnants of steel wool, shows an empty landscape with an explosion. The image is made so delicate and fragile that a closer look will expose its lack of inner continuity, its explosive, fragmented, and fractured nature. His traditional choice—rendering Israeli mythical, non-religious sites through flammable, synthetic materials—points to failure, disintegration, and annihilation. Similar concepts are suggested in works by Naomi Safran-Hon (Israel, b. 1984), Lihi Turjeman (Israel, b. 1985), and Michal Rovner.

Unlike Palestinian imagery, which often reflects notions of hope, Israeli artists are mostly depicting irreversible loss: loss of a dream, of hope, of belief in the purpose and founding myth of the state. In place of what has been lost is breakdown itself—a fundamental rift or rupture, the reality of apartheid and ongoing, de facto wars. This gap today seems incommensurable and its results disastrous. Apocalyptic feelings of suffocation and drowning therefore dominate the last works in the show. This period also marks empty time, time without dreams of a better future, time of no aspiration, time when the horizon marks the end of earth rather than an infinitely receding possibility.

The photograph by Roi Cuper's *No Escape from the Past* series (2002) shows the beautiful sunny Mediterranean but not as an optimistic image. Rather it closes in on the viewer. It does not offer its horizon as expanding distance, but announces itself as a barrier. A "No Exit" sign.

The last two works in the show are video works by Gilad Ratman (Israel, b. 1975) and Michal Baror (Israel, b. 1984). Ratman's two-channel 2009 work, *The 588 Project*; The Donald Rothfeld Collection of Contemporary Israeli Art, American University Art Museum, shows a group of individuals drowning in a swamp. Members of this community perform full, vertical submergence in mud pits to the point of disappearance. This disturbing, suffocating happening portrays drowning. Baror's is the only work on loan here, and the only work that includes the voice of the Arab subject. It is focused on the marshes that were drained by early Zionists as art of the "conquering the land" momentum. In Smaller Place (2021; artist's collection), Baror converses with Muhammad Ammash, a historian and native of Jisr a-Zarqa, today in northern Israel. Ammash recounts the history of the village's residents, members of the Arab al-Ghawarneh community, who lived beside the Kabara Marsh and drew their livelihood from it for 600 years. His story closes the show, as the viewer is stationed back in front of "The Missing Negatives of the Sonnenfeld Collection".

In 1950, amidst the fight for the decolonization of Africa, the poet Aimé Césaire observed that "colonization works to de-civilize the colonizer". In this formulation, the colonizer is the product of his own dehumanization: "Colonization dehumanizes even the most civilized man… the colonizer who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal" (Césaire 1972). Whether or not Israel's policies are a pure demonstration of the European colonial model is an open question; it is evidently a polarizing question. However, it is beyond denial that Israel has executed colonial acts. Césaire's understanding reveals the catalyst for this latest artistic phase. It is not only the reproduction of trauma that is directed at otherness, but the self-reproduction of the traumatizer, as well.

The sorts of questions addressed by works in this exhibition reflect the ongoing interest—with increasing intensity in the last several decades—on the part of Israeli artists to question the mytho-history of the state as it has been visually and otherwise articulated in the course of its first seventy years of existence. The sort of Jewish Israeli presence asserted in earlier images, including in some cases the inclination to ignore the presence of prior and contemporary non-Jewish inhabitants, is addressed again and again in an expanding array of new visual self-expression. The increasing acknowledgement of the work of Palestinian Israeli artists adds an important layer to this discussion. Thus, the visual language in use is also overtly, if sometimes subtly, a language of political commentary appropriate to the history and the current reality of the State of Israel.

Notes

1. In the modern era, *Tikkun* conveys the idea that Jews bear responsibility not only for their own moral, spiritual, and material welfare, but also for the welfare of society at large.

2. This biblical reference deals with Moses standing in front of the promised land, while he cannot access it. "ואליה לא תבוא כי תראה את הארץ מנגד". The sadness of Nebo marks sorrow for the unreachable, unattainable wish, and it is mentioned in *Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America* by Rosalind Krauss.

3. See also "The Polonsky Foundation Catalogue of Digitized Hebrew Manuscripts" Polonsky Foundation, British Museum, https://polonskyfoundation.org (accessed on 22 April 2024).

4. Rabin was murdered by a Jewish settler because he was about to end the occupation and establish a Palestinian state. That would have meant the evacuation of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The Jewish settlers were strongly against this, and their spiritual leaders had begun to endorse violence in defense of religion. At that time, the idea of a Palestinian state had support in Israel, and the majority of the nation wanted to end the occupation. Rabin's assassination ended this era of potential negotiation and established an ethos of permanent occupation.

5. Jumana Mana "Where Nature Ends and Settlements Begin".

6. Psalms: 137.

7. Ben-Amos "The Occupation in the Israeli Education System: Between Recognition and Denial," in Tal, N. and Naveh, E, eds. *History Education: Sites and Intersections* (Tel Aviv: The Mofet Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad-Sifriat Poalim Publishing House, 2022). The word "Occupation" is not inherently political; it had become so by its usage in the Hague Conventions of 1907 and the 4th Geneva Convention of 1949, that established binding laws over an occupying country in a state of occupation. While Israel has been occupying the territories and its Palestinian population since 1967, the word "Occupation" in Israeli society is heavily charged and can easily cause tension and discomfort, as well as the notion of its speaker being unsupportive of the Israeli state, as explained by The Association of Civil Rights in Israel (2012). In relation to the Nakba, a subject largely missing from the Israeli education system, mentioning the occupation was never officially banned yet, according to Avner Ben-Amos, most high school study books deny or normalize its existence. Friedman and Gavriely-Nuri examine this normalization, as well as the defamiliarization of it, which Ben-Amos defines as the complementary aspect of direct denial and as well-rooted within occupation representations in the Israeli education system. This could also be called interpretational denial, a form of "knowing but also not knowing, or knowing but won't or can't admit of knowing". The educational system in Israel harbors both types of denial: though there are some approved civics books that, to some measure, do acknowledge the occupation, the published civics book of the ministry of education in 2016 did not address the occupation at all. According to Ben-Amos, in the 2009–2010 history matriculation exams in Israel, no questions about long-term changes in the occupied territories were included. In 2007 and 2016, related questions were asked but the right answers, according to the ministry of education's guidelines, were almost entirely in relation to Israeli land expansion. Since these exams guide the teaching curriculum, it is safe to assume most teachers do not go deeper into this topic. Daniel Bar-Tal argues these denials to be a form of self-censorship applied in order to prevent harm from one's own group. From Vered, Ambar, Fuxman, Hanna, and Bar-Tal's point of view, self-censorship is a harmful practice in education since it allows adults to influence adolescents (2017), yet Naveh suggests this exact result is desirable to the Israeli education ministry, since it aims to shape students' consciousness in accordance with the official Zionist narrative (2017). In regard to self-censorship in Israeli museums, see my article in *Curating Under Pressure*, 2020.

8. The Levy Report, officially called the "Report on the Legal Status of Building in Judea" (2012).

9. See The Association of Civil Rights in Israel, "Kibush Zu (Lo) Mila Gasa," 12 June 2012, accessed on 4 December 2021: https://law.acri.org.il/he/21851.

10. See Israeli Civil Administration, "Report on the Escalation of Palestinian House Demolition" https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.10445516?utm_source=App_Share&utm_medium=iOS_Native (accessed on 22 April 2024); See also https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/rklnhctnf (accessed on 22 April 2024).

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