

LandEscapes: Mysteries of the [holy] Land

Tami Katz-Freiman

“Landscape” is a specific category, a quintessential genre among the traditional themes of art history. A conventional definition of “landscape,” as in a Web-based art glossary, for instance, maintains that landscape is “a painting, photograph or other work of art which depicts scenery such as mountains, valleys, trees, rivers and forests”. The definition is accompanied by links such as: pastoral, picturesque, rural, idyll, romantic, ecological. Indeed, throughout the history of art, landscape depictions have reflected man’s affinity for nature, from romantic perceptions to various manifestations of Eco-art and Land (or Earth) Art.

In the contemporary Israeli context it is impossible to disassociate the landscape from the politics transpiring around it. Representation of landscapes in Israeli art, mainly by the younger generation of artists, is never naive, and certainly not romantic. Whether a pastoral rustic valley, a dense pine forest, verdant hills, or orchards at the outskirts of the city – they are forever scorched with the fire of conflict and fervor of internal controversy. After all, this is the disputed territory, the “Holy Land” highly-charged with the conflict-ridden politics of the Middle East.

American Earth Art and its British counterpart, Land Art, were perceived as a preoccupation with utopian, cosmic, metaphysical ideas and were regarded as part of the struggle to define spaces alternative to the museum. In Israel, in contrast, the preoccupation with the earth and land touches upon the very

essence of Zionist existence. It always refers to the “national myth” – the belief that we are ostensibly rooted in this land from time immemorial. These are all purely political issues that have nothing to do with the cosmos. In Israel the soil has been appropriated by God and subordinated to the history and needs of the state and nation. Thus, works of art dealing with the land and landscape are *a-priori* tainted by the debate about “justification of our existence”.

The short history of Israeli art from the early 20th century is profuse with depictions of “our country’s landscapes” and our “home-land”; portrayals that reflect the circumstances and values of the society in which they crystallized. Zionist ideology, which raised the banner of agricultural settlement, communal life-style and manual labor, had a crucial impact on the artistic themes and style. Reclamation of the desert through advanced agriculture was the highest ideal for the “New Jew,” the one who sustains himself by tilling the land. Indeed, up until the 1970s Israeli artists were committed, albeit not always consciously, to serving this ideological line out of great reverence for the “place”. The painters of the New Horizons group (the Israeli Lyrical Abstract), for example, who operated during the country’s first years, drew their strength and inspiration from the landscape under the guise of painting universalist abstract, and so on and so forth throughout the years, until the trinity landscape-earth-territory became a cliché.

In the 1970s, in the wake of the Six Day War, and during the 1980s, the first cracks began to appear in the united front, and buds of discontent and protest started to emerge. Representations of the Israeli landscape were no longer

touched by wall-to-wall Zionist indoctrination; they became a platform for questions and quandaries concerning the Occupied Territories, holy places and evasive borders.

The artists participating in *LandEscapes* represent the disillusioned post-Zionist generation for whom “land” and “territory” are highly charged political concepts. They offer an alternative, critical stand for the heroic Zionist position that advocated “conquest of the land” and “reclamation of the desert”. Their works reflect the illusive reality in Israel, the intricacy intrinsic to the perception of the Israeli landscape, and, equally so, the painful recognition that politics has strongholds on every hill and in every vale. It is a reflexive practice that refers to the history of landscape representations in Israeli art as an obsessive theme (the myth of the land), engaging in meta-discourse rather than addressing the thing itself.

And the thing itself – the act of “going out to nature” -- is thus devoid of any romanticism: neither admiration of, nor nostalgia for a pastoral Arcadia or a sublime wild nature. **Ariane Littman-Cohen**’s forbidden forests, **Roi Kuper**’s dying orchards, **Gal Weinstein**’s cultivated plots of deconstructed Jezreel Valley land, and even **Sharon Ya’ari**’s meadows and green fields in the urban periphery – in all of these there is not even a trace of the sublime. This isn’t the Grand Canyon. It is mediated nature, not far from home, the nature of backyards, the nature of cultivated fields, of pre-development rock-laden ground, or of a closed military zone.

The landscapes represented in these works are fundamental icons, quintessential symbols of the Zionist ideal, of the homeland's re-building and its flourishing via settlement, agriculture, and economics. However, the manner in which these icons are addressed conveys criticism, irony, anxiety and discontent. The dreamy landscapes of the past have become the nightmarish realms of the present and future. In Weinstein's work it is the mythological Valley of Jezreel, the jewel in the crown of modern agriculture, that was transformed into a disassembled jigsaw puzzle. It is a crushed utopia, like a patchwork quilt covering the Zionist dream. In Kuper's case, these are the poisoned orchards just before their uprooting, saturated with compassion and irony. In Littman-Cohen's pieces, these are the Jewish National Fund forests, the leisure retreats, which in her family history turn out to be censored forests where entry is denied. In Ya'ari's case, these are the landscapes of Saturday morning strolls that emanate a pseudo-pastoral air of a natural retreat, a sort of escapism, but in fact are read as a trap, conveying a sense of a dead end.

Sharon Ya'ari

Sharon Ya'ari's photographs (*Last Year*, 2000) depict an Israeli landscape and people in nature: mother and daughter looking at a meadowland; three women by a stream; a group of people at a crossroad of gravel paths; or people clad in black scattered on a blooming hill. The series was photographed at various unidentified locations in Israel, mundane places devoid of a heroic past: green fields of wild flowers, a section of a winding asphalt road at the heart of a forest, or fallow fields on the outskirts of towns and cities. Ya'ari dubs these landscapes "borderlands," intermediate realms.

Most of the photographs were taken in winter, thus lending to the landscapes a foreign, short-lived European hue of deep and fresh greenness. Ya'ari's digital intervention is minimal, almost indiscernible, and yet it generates the desired enigmatic effect. Prima facie, these are innocent Saturday morning strolls, while below the surface there is a sense of unease and a vague foreboding feeling. It seems that the political tension permeating everyday life in Israel has also invaded nature. The people seem trapped in some ritual that is possibly a funeral, possibly a picnic. The potential of violence is omnipresent. Through a seemingly simple syntax of an indefinite local landscape, Ya'ari captures in his photographs the very essence of the existential and metaphorical symbolic narrative in Israel.

Gal Weinstein

Gal Weinstein's floor installation, *The Valley of Jezreel*, 2001, features an image of cultivated agricultural landscape, processed in the form of a gigantic 189-piece jigsaw puzzle made out of Astroturf and the cheapest office type carpets.

Cultivated plots of land in diverse shades of green and brown comprise the spectacular patchwork quilt of the Jezreel Valley. This is the mythological valley of Zionism's heyday: a vast valley located in the north of Israel, delineated by the Nazareth mountain range at the north, by the Gilboa Mountains at the south, and by the Carmel mountain range at the east.

The Valley of Jezreel is an icon of deeply rooted, fertile, and productive, rural Israeli landscape, one of the cornerstones of 1920s pioneering Zionist

settlements, representing the marvels of modern agriculture, an Israeli brand marketing the “blooming of the desert” miracle. Weinstein’s strategy of representing this glorious valley from a bird’s-eye-view (or a helicopter’s view) echoes the numerous observation points located on the mountaintops surrounding the valley, wherefrom many Israelis observe the captivating vista (in the average photo album of the Israeli family there is at least one photograph documenting such moments of exhilaration). The decision to deconstruct the valley by means of a jigsaw puzzle reflects the ironic reference of many Israelis toward the shattering of the dream.

Roi Kuper

In a series of meticulous black-and-white photographs (*Citrus*, 1999-2001) Roi Kuper presents orange orchards at different stages of dying and decay. The current series elaborates on his consistent preoccupation with the concepts of urbanization and reclamation of the desert in the local Israeli context. Like the Valley of Jezreel, the orchard too is a mythological icon in the annals of Zionist settlement. Marketing “golden apples,” as oranges are called in Hebrew, was the most glorious branch of export during the first years of the Zionist enterprise, an Israeli brand in which to take pride.

By means of a cold, introverted and ostensibly objective gaze Kuper documents processes that have been accelerated in the past decade as a result of changes in land designation from agrarian land to land for construction. The citrus groves – the crown of collective agricultural labor settlement in Eretz-Israel, the symbol of hope and vision of a new life in a new country – gradually transform into real

estate parcels intended for accelerated development and construction. Kuper documents the slow demise of the deserted dried trees prior to their uprooting: dry leaves, severed branches and truncated stumps; a wounded, bare landscape of degenerating vegetation. His photographs reflect a social state-of-affairs where the collective national ethos is replaced by pure capitalistic individualism. In other words: the vision of the desert's reclamation has been replaced by the fantasy of real-estate and hi-tech.

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