

An Other Landscape

Poetic fields and structures in works by Daniel Shoshan and Avi Ifergan

by Etti Abergel

Danny Shoshan and Avi Ifergan set out the contours of shared personal experiences, bringing each back in his own way to Beit Shean, where they were “shaped in the mold of their childhood landscape.” The loadstones of their respective identities are there and it is in Beit Shean that the source of their art originated. Their homes, roots, temperament and direct and indirect inspiration, overt and covert, are located there. In their joint exhibition now showing in Tel Aviv, their stages, ideas and bodies of work encounter and overlap each other at various points of interface: Beit Shean, Tel Aviv, Bar’am.

Daniel Shoshan made the move from Beit Shean to study at Bezalel, Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem, then on to New York City for an MFA from Columbia University. He now lives and works in Tel Aviv. Avi Ifergan was born in Morocco, and immigrated with his parents to Israel where they settled in Beit Shean. Ifergan, an active member of a youth movement group intending to settle together on Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz, was inducted into the IDF and served in the Nahal Brigade. When he was demobilized, he studied art at Bezalel in Jerusalem, later earned an MFA from Haifa University and now lives and works on Kibbutz Bar’am. Shoshan and Ifergan have never exhibited together until now, despite friendship and longstanding mutual appreciation of each other’s work. The new exhibit is an opportunity to discover any links between their oeuvres.

Shoshan went back to his practice of wandering around, documenting the marginal landscapes of his native city, its fields and mosque. The act of documentation gave rise to a process of mapping the edge of emotional territory, an assessment of memory and contemplation of the view. The experiences and impressions then underwent processing, abstraction and transformation into complex semantics that developed through his work and in his encoded, constructivist paintings.

For many years, Ifergan has been photographing huts and temporary field shelters of Palestinian farmers in the Jordan rift. His wandering is patterned and even dictated in advance by a paradigm which has been formulated in his mind for many years. Similar to Shoshan but in a different way, he is mapping an experience of marginality and liminality, an existential experience generated from the relationship between locale and subject. He, too, focuses on the essence of his visual materials, distilling them into drawings and concepts of physical, cultural and emotional thresholds. He devotes himself to images of temporary architecture, “architecture of nomads,” running his echoes through the abandoned anonymous structures which he encounters. These transient structures find their way into his artwork where they take on escapist, ironic names of series of outposts (which are also supposed to be transient structures) located along the northern border opposite his current home on Kibbutz Bar’am. Their flower names have no military or political associations: Poppy, Narcissus, Rose and Lupin. In this way, Ifergan creates a kind of hybrid, a “sha’atnez,” a biblically-forbidden combination, locales integrated with traits whose

contexts raise thoughts of aesthetic, emotional and poetic ranges, resonating in the intervals between power and weakness, harshness and militant masculine roughness and softened botanical delicateness.

Through serial documentation that removes all details, and series of drawings and visual analyses of the formal fundamentals of what he is observing, Ifergan attempts to capture the signs of wearing out, of unraveling bordering on ruin and neglect, signs of longing for the “other,” the forbidden and distanced, with a feeling of identification and mystery, of similarity, great closeness and coerced strangeness.

Images captured by **Daniel Shoshan**'s camera are projected onto the walls of his Tel Aviv studio, stretched out into a panorama of landscape. Through drawing following the contours of forms and events in the landscape, Shoshan deconstructs the enlarged picture into basic formal units, closed, bounded forms that are small as tiny islands, graphic microcosms. Whether they are abstract or geometrical – it is hard to tell – they organize the landscape into an expansive composition as dense and eventful as a cartographic document.

Shoshan's quasi-automatic painterly activity both leans on and recreates geographical, botanical and archaeological markers. This is a picture of a pastoral landscape re-formulated as a graph, an infrastructure, a document encoding poetic and technical baggage, then deconstructing it into an idiosyncratic personal handwriting of the soul. The surface of the photographed view deconstructs into amorphous fragments dancing around to recompose the picture and image of the landscape. It interprets the view and symbolically re-charges with expressions and intimations of emotion, power and passion.

The diligent work on the contours of the bustling elements in the landscape emphasizes the landscape but also empties it out. In this way, Shoshan creates the passionate desire for what we are not, longing for the impossible, for what is lacking in the local, familiar, intimate landscape which he attempts to capture and revive as his original intent.

The way in which the painterly drawing takes place turns traditional landscape painting on its head: as seen through the camera, the landscape is translated into a kind of negative, processed into a painting full of holes, perforated, shot at and made into fragmented pieces, a painting peeled of its realistic identity. Instead of technical replication of that same charged landscape and its transformation into a manual skeletal drawing, what results is a schema of landscape, a matrix, a frame. However, paradoxically, his line drawings in oil paint or on plywood have the warmth and sensuousness so characteristic of the handwriting of expressive painting.

The viewer finds himself moving between the polar opposites of the negation and intensification of emotion as the gaze wanders between broad perception and a fragmented secondary space, from the general view to a sea teeming with molecules and tiny distant islands of a perforated negative space as if negating the drama of itself and challenging us to a more complicated act of decoding the archetypical and archaeological landscape of Beit Shean

In the exhibition space itself, the painting will undergo another spatial transformation as Shoshan executes the drawing on an even larger scale, expanding the landscape assimilated within himself to about 10 meters of action painting, in an almost mechanical Sisyphean deconstruction of his childhood picture of the landscape. The viewer's experience of being swallowed up in a field of signs brings mindfulness to the experience of observing. In his previous exhibition in the same space one year ago, in an installation, *Disrupted Video, 2008*, his brothers were filmed while immersing themselves in the sea for purification. Their bodies sink under the water while their heads try to stay above the sea. In Shoshan's current wall paintings, it is the viewer who undergoes emotional immersion in the sea of deconstructed signs floating on the painting's surface, charging it as a magnetic field organizing the forms into automatic and sovereign salients.

The controlled, laconic deconstruction of the images of the local landscape and its transformation into a sea of thin, countable, prosaic fragments creates a postmodern breakdown of an expectation of the Romantic sublime. Instead, the viewer experiences a deconstruction of spiritual infinity, as the experience is privatized into loneliness, mundane moments and assimilated into a dense, hollow painterly experience, empty of the Divine and far from the concept of "home" as the realm of the conceptual goal of this journey. Shoshan still experiences the world as an isolated heterotopia, with the artist as the one attempting to set boundaries of the world while demonstrating control over them from the imaginary vantage point of the Foucaultian panopticon. In the past, as well, Shoshan used to pose heaps of private and intimate emotions juxtaposed with formal and philosophical structures, as he created systems with personal subjective experience, language, emotion and free imagination on one side and formal regulations and standards on the other.

The landscape fragments create a broken dirge and feeling of loss of perfection, an elegy for lost worlds and landscapes emptied of the very same suggestive, rhythmic and mystical atmosphere that arose from Shoshan's early cosmic carpet paintings. In his earlier works, repetitive patterns were designed and painted with extreme care while keeping to the geometrical order and rules. The oils were in saturated colors with warm, deep brushstrokes. His former abstract harmony interfacing with the ideal composition of modernist geometric painting has now been replaced by destroying the domestic and separating similarity and reality, the concrete and imagined. Densely crowded images, blurred amorphous forms hovering in the picture space transform the balance, glory and Baroque splendor of his abstract geometric paintings that drew upon the tradition of Islamic painting with their spiritual mathematics. In Shoshan's current work, the landscape looks like an unraveled carpet as the model order and analytical formal precision have become laconic.

The landscape is still stylized, still based on a qualitative tradition of oil painting and the mature gestures of a skilled painter, but here the artist moves and wanders more freely through the compositional space. His act of deconstruction creates a secondary world in which he lets go of the representational image and transitions to a sensuous inter-subject vibrating image. The works in the current exhibition signify fields of poetry and elegy: beyond the painted field deconstructed into units of knowledge and

consciousness, they expose pulses of emotion, sadness and a feeling of loss. A covert wound becomes more and more open. The constructivist support looking like so many shutters or cells and cages is unraveled in a process of philosophical, painterly and emotional transformation. The landscape becomes internal, with connectors between form and signs of farewell and remembrance.

Avi Ifergan's journeys through Beit Shean are based on actions similar to Shoshan's: documentation of locale, return to the studio for the hard work of decoding and transformation. However, Ifergan's motivations are different from Shoshan's. Shoshan proposes to transform the tradition of classical oil painting, Ifergan, an art theoretician who paints optical paradigms of culture, operates eclectically and reacts to landscape and its experience through objects and complex installations that recreate and simulate life's original form. He builds imitations that substitute for the lost original, or for what was impossible at the very outset.

In his attempt to respond to the concept of "home," Avi Ifergan photographs and draws the temporary structures set up by Palestinian farmers in their fields in the Jordan Valley, huts that look shaky and seem about to fall. These huts are "cleaned up" in his drawings, devoid of any identifying marks or actual location. Ifergan is attracted to the almost anonymous existence of these wobbly shelters and identifies them as an interesting echo of that same "home" to which he longs to return. He examines them as an alternative not devoid of a certain seductive "home-like" imaginary that seems to envelope, safeguard, bound, define and brings into being.

The farmers' huts are drawn with truncated geometric lines overlapping interface points, looking like stitches sewn by a virtuoso and stylized hand, transmitting the sensation of landscape. The drawings of the harvest huts move between almost decorative surface two-dimensionality and three-dimensional volumetric construction with the potential of being actualized as a sculpture in real space. Ifergan's poetic processes embed images and associations from different places into the archetypical structure that tries to become real as a "place," as the ultimate house, home to someone distanced from his birthplace. Here he is, returning to contemplate the image of the alternative home from an aesthetic and philosophical distance which also enables an inclusion of the experience of displacement, emigration and staking one's claim in the imaginary location, no matter how desolate.

His Beit Shean and the memory of wandering through the archaeological ruins are reflected in later works and come together with visual insights and sources. It seems that the actual landscape of the Jordan Valley region as seamline and border are only a stimulus to continued research and theoretical development of the paradigm of the temporary edge and its conceptual application to formalist and cultural fields. Being *a priori*, preceding the realization of the paradigm, is a multilayered state with various strata of memory and knowledge, relics of individual and social experiences and matrices of representational forms in response to cultural and artistic actions. The collection of these negatives build up a reductive yet sensuous poetics embodying a tormenting longing for a total experience and the formulation of objects and installations that contain a utopian fantasy of a normalized, repaired world.

Ifergan makes use of industrial, post-Pop and post-Minimalism materials, such as imitation natural wood formica; elegant black formica as the didactic neutral platform; white formica resonating with the modernist kitchen culture and hints of Malevich's white square; colorful formica giving intuitive colorful washes to the images; flooring and wall coverings such as wallpaper or PVC on formica – all as substitutes and fictions for organic, natural materials, “pods covering pods” as he spoke of them.

A critical parodic aspect associated with post-Pop consciousness and a renewed search for the mythical and magical in day to day experiences appear in Ifergan's earlier works, for example in his “Banana-Peeling Machine,” “Shell Structure,” or other works with a man's shirt with stigmata; a father's shirt moving around the gallery floor with a motorized mechanism; reflecting the gallery within itself by marking out a floor space with a vibrating neon light to form an enclosure closed in onto itself, sculpture in green masking tape of two vacuum cleaners vacuuming each other; a proposal for cultural architecture as an eternal geological stratum; the ironical use of poorly articulated and severed physicality; a grotesque comment on masculinity; addressing prescription drugs as a metaphor for healing and repair; a process of alienation and disruption of objects and the source experience to the extent of waiving the total experience upon whose ruins structures of knowledge grow, the discarded husks and cocoons that undermine the artist in his search – all of these have participated in and still take part in Ifergan's inertia of reformulating an alternative mythology.

For the pieces in the exhibit **HETEROTOPIA**, Ifergan's platforms are materials and color schemes serving as both background and independent images with their own philosophy and symbols. The pasted-on botanic images are not truly assimilated into the shiny formica surfaces, but hover and float above them. A complex sensation of magical beauty, alienation and strangeness emphasize the artificiality of the link between image and platform to expose the foreignness, the virtual and concrete border, lowered barrier and unfeasibility of the osmosis between the semantic fields and between languages and experiences. At this juncture, Ifergan proposes an aesthetic fantasy and fiction of collision between images and properties. Extremely precise surrealistic poetics accompany his rational, well-formulated dialectics.

It seems that Shoshan and Ifergan are taking off into **An OTHER Landscape**, into a new location in their creative processes, like a duet between liturgical poets of ideas. Both are exiles from the traditional home, wandering about between inside and outside, fields and landscape, fictional and concrete, East and West, belonging and alienation, contemporary and past, cultural refugees floating and sinking, rising up and grabbing hold:

Beit Shean – Jerusalem – New York – Bar'am – Tel Aviv – Beit Shean... and back again...