



Tel-Aviv Beach (Google images)

Visions of Place Lecture  
Ruth Direktor, Curator of Contemporary Art  
Tel-Aviv Museum, Israel  
Feb 4 2016 Towson University Center for the Arts

Direktor's lecture was the first event in a series of lectures, gallery talks and an Israeli film series to coincide with the group exhibition: *Visions of Place*. (A review of the exhibition will be posted here soon.)

The title of her presentation was *Art in Israel Between Modernism and Zionism, In Light of What Came Before and After Along the Tel-Aviv Shore*. The first image Direktor showed is photo by Avraham Soskin of Zionists on Tel-Aviv beach in 1909. They are dressed as if they just got off the boat and haven't a clue as to the climate and conditions of desert life. These pioneers are the first sixty-six plot holders who won their parcel of land in a lottery and are the first European inhabitants of Tel-Aviv.



*Building Parcel Lottery, Soskin, 1909*

Direktor instructs us that an important distinction must be made between Israeli Art and Art in Israel. Does *Israeli Art* refer to Jewish artists only? *Art in Israel* includes Palestinians, Arab Christians, Druze and Bedouins, all of whom were living there before the Europeans in the photo suddenly appeared on the beach, out of another world.

Once the audience is made aware of the void around this group of Europeans, the photo becomes polemical, not neutral. The European Zionists apparently ignored the certainty that other people, who were not like them, lived in Palestine. Ari Shavit describes this blind disregard in his book *My Promised Land*.

European culture was and arguably still is the predominant culture in Israel. Although the larger segment of the population, Sephardim and Mizrachim (Jews from Mid Eastern countries), is finally getting more recognition for their contribution to the culture, Israeli institutions; the army, health care system, and other government agencies are based on an Eastern European foundation.

This cultural dominance is exemplified in the group of early-twentieth-century landscape painters presented. They remind me of the group of Jewish artists who clustered around Montparnasse between the wars, such as Soutine, Modigliani, Chagall, and Orloff. When we analyze their work, we find a Jewish connection, which is especially evident with Chagall, whose paintings are full of nostalgic images of homes of Jews in Eastern Europe. These artists, who left homes and families in the Russian Empire's Pale of Settlement and settled in Paris and learned how to remake themselves in a foreign climate and culture. How did they convey their sentiments through their paintings and sculptures?

One can try to apply similar theories for these artists who planted themselves upon Tel-Aviv beach and painted the seashore, the dunes, and the mountainous, arid landscape. Were these Zionist artists, new to this shore, imagining the art they would have been making back in their homeland? Would they have known whether there were other artists painting in Palestine at that time, or who came before them? Did they ever see nineteenth-century *plein air* paintings of this same landscape.?

There is no neutral landscape in Israel. It is always political, always either left or right. Since the nineteenth century, there has not been an innocent eye. The international audience expects that all Israeli art

will be political. An idyllic scene along Tel-Aviv beach is considered the normalizing influence in Israel. This is where a family can enjoy the sun, the sea, get an Artik (popsicle) and play ball, just like in any other first-world civilized country. But the Tel Aviv promenade is political in that it is a way to forget the “situation.” This strip of beach, part of the country’s first twentieth-century city, is symbolically and firmly embedded in the Israeli psyche; it offers an escape from the conditions attached to life in the rest of Israel.



Historic photos of Tel-Aviv (Google images)

Returning to that first photo in Direktor's lecture, one can see the irony of comparing early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Jews to modern day Palestinians. Nowadays, Palestinians from the West Bank don't have easy access to the beach and when they finally get to Jaffa or Tel-Aviv beach, they are unfamiliar with the sea and the waves; therefore they face an increased risk of drownings. They are ill-equipped, just like the Europeans on the beach in Soskin's photo.

An early and much loved Zionist painter is Reuven Ruben, né Rubin Zelicovici. He came first to Israel from Romania to study art at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem. He left for Paris to study art, then settled in Tel Aviv in 1923. His painting, *Tel Aviv Houses*, is already nostalgic. He painted what was not there by making the homes look European, with terracotta tiled roofs (although homes in Palestine are flat-roofed – notice, by the way, that if I had written “Palestinian homes” the significance would shift). Rubin reinvented himself as a naïve painter although he was well trained in the classical style. In so doing, he fulfilled a part of the Zionist vision – to be childishly and naively optimistic.



*The Beginnings of Tel-Aviv*, Reuven Rubin, 1912



*Tel Aviv Houses*, Yosef Zaritzky, 1930

Some other early landscape painters were presented, including Yossef Zaritzky, who painted on a rooftop with his back to the sea. He was acquainting himself with a different kind of light and landscape from that of his homeland; he was not motivated to paint seascapes.

Arieh Lubin, who was born in the US, studied art in Europe and came to Palestine in 1922 where he painted the hills of Ramat Gan.



*Hills of Ramat Gan*, Arieh Lubin, 1924

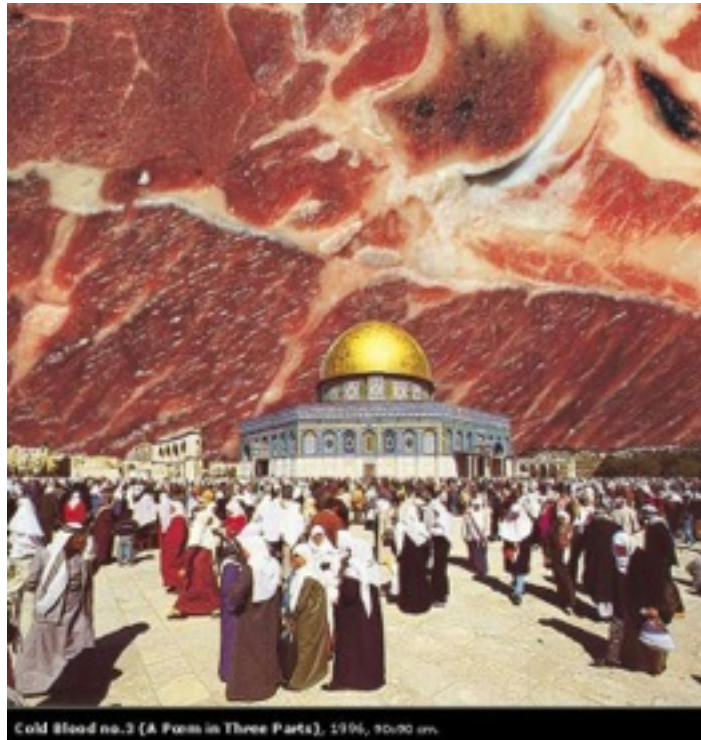
Painting the scenery along the beach remains a relevant topic for artists in Israel. To bring the painters and subject up to date, Direktor showed us the work of a more contemporary artist, David Reeb (born 1952). His work is considered to be the most political of the past few decades. His paintings of hotels along Tel Aviv beach are in a minimalist, graphic style. Devoid of people, they convey a post-apocalyptic feeling. In *Yisrael Rotzeh Melchamah*, a billboard informs us that “Israel Wants War!” it is a warning that tourists are afraid to be on the beach and won’t be staying in the luxury hotels during a war. During the most recent skirmish with Hamas, this past summer, Israelis went to the beach *davka* (in spite of what you might expect) to prove that nothing can stop them from being “normal.”



David Reeb, *Yisrael Rotzeh Melchamah*, 2007

A major shift in the approach to representing the landscape by contemporary artists is that they no longer go on site to work. Many of them are no longer strictly painters; they work in their studio with all kinds of equipment and unconventional materials.

Hila Lulu Lin inserts paintings of red meat hanging in the sky over the beach and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem; she harkens back to Soutine's paintings of carcasses.



Gal Weinstein's installation at the 25th Sao Paulo Bienale in 2002 became controversial when it was viewed by an international audience. Palestinian sympathizers immediately saw this as a message about needing more space for Jewish occupiers' homes in the West Bank. The artist's intended concept was the contrast between interior and exterior and the protective space a home can provide. I would be remiss if I did not mention that financial sponsorship by the Israeli government for Israeli artists in the 2014 Sao Paulo Bienale was boycotted by organizers who participated in the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, an international campaign to end the Israeli occupation of the West Bank) movement and some of the exhibiting Israeli artists participated in the boycott.

Weinstein also represents the topography of Israel with installations of carpet squares.



*Jezreel Valley, Gal Weinstein 2002*

His installation of carved fiberboard represents desiccated mud and is a statement about swamps that were drained in the 1950s to allow farmers to grow crops and reduce the spread of malaria. Subsequently, pressure from environmentalists allowed the land to be returned to its swampy condition; it is now an important stop for migrating cranes.



*Hula Valley, Gal Weinstein 2005*

Ronen Edelman's site-specific installation on the Tel Aviv beach promenade delineates streets that used to be part of an Arab village on the same land. Street names in Hebrew and Arabic are written in white chalk, like lines on a soccer field. The people who lived there are invisible. "Using football field marking

equipment, I marked the grid of demolished streets and houses of the Manshia neighborhood. The markings drawn by the sea, on the border between Tel Aviv and Jaffa, bring the historic streets and houses to the surface. The white lines delineate the quarter that lies under the lawns. The markings are reminiscent of police markings at a murder scene, in this case the murder of the houses, the architectural murder, the cultural murder of Jaffa.” (from Edelman’s website)



*Ghosts of Manshia*, Ronen Edelman 2007

Yael Bartane, a video artist, represented Poland at the Venice Biennale in 2011. The title of her video trilogy, *Mary Koszmary*, is a reference to nightmares. *“It explores a complicated set of social and political relationships among Jews, Poles, and other Europeans in the age of globalization. Using the structure and sensibility of a World War II propaganda film, it addresses contemporary anti-Semitism and xenophobia in Poland, the longing for the Jewish past among liberal Polish intellectuals, the desire among a new generation of Poles to be fully accepted as Europeans, and the Zionist dream of return to Israel.”* (from the Jewish Museum’s website).

The audience was puzzled that an Israeli artist was selected to represent Poland at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Direktor explained that a member of the Polish Parliament had introduced an initiative to invite all displaced Jews and their descendants to move back to Poland. In essence, he suggested, “We need you back now.” This is as unsettling as any anti-Semitic statement could be; it made me uncomfortable. I was interested to hear many of the questions asked of Direktor after her presentation, most of which centered around the relationship between Nazis, Poles, Russians and Jews during and after World War II. The audience clearly had little to no understanding of these entanglements or disentanglements.

During the reception I was asked which image I liked best of that Direktor presented. Without hesitation I answered, “the palm trees that were moved from Gaza to the beach promenade,” by Noam Holdengraber. In the photo the trees are bandaged, as a person would be. It is not clear whether the bandages are protective, used for transport to ensure a safe journey, or if the trees were actually wounded. I liked it because it made me think about something I hadn’t thought of before. I knew that people were displaced



when Gaza was turned over to the Palestinian Authority but, up until now, I had not considered any other aspect of the situation. That should be what art does; it make us see things in a new light.



*Palm Trees on Tel Aviv Beach (not part of the lecture, Google images)*