

Shoot! Don't Talk

MFA2 Exegesis 2017

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ABSTRACT

“Home is my physical body. Home is nature, Earth. The feeling of home is something different. It’s an exchange of unconditional love between human beings. It’s a compassionate energy, which makes you feel safe and gives you courage. It’s a belonging that creates a longing for time to slow down, so you can stay home just a little longer”. (Otzko,2017)

This paper describes my working process in creating my Master’s exhibition – Shoot! Don’t Talk. This work is a summary of a six years’ artistic process which depicts my physical and conceptual voyage. Starting in a small city in south of Israel, and going all the way to the other side of the continent finishing in a small city in Norway. Through photography video and texts my artistic process is dedicated to an exploration and a search for Home.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction to the Project

Description and Concept.....	4
Background and Motivation (Home #1)	4-5

CHAPTER TWO: Context for the Project

Photography and memory.....	6
Memory, Trauma and Space	6-7
Photography and Abstraction	7-8

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

Back to the darkroom	8
Going to the end of the continent.....	9-10

CHAPTER FOUR: Discussion and conclusion

Picturing in the Israel, working in Norway, printing in Sweden.....	11
Analog versus digital	12
Space.....	13
Summary.....	14
Home #2 (The writings on the wall)	14-15

INTRODUCTION

This paper will follow the process of creating my work for my Masters exhibition moving in two parallel ways. The first one is a physical path that started in 2011. The first home I can remember living in Beer Sheva , Israel, going all the way to my current home in Trondheim, Norway in 2017. The second one describes my journey of Aesthetics started in 2011 from a Fine Art traditional analog photography image going all the way to final images I exhibit in the final Master exhibition.

First, I will explain the main concept, background and my motivation for the project. Second, I will present my theoretical research history and references . Third, I will present my methodology and working process. Last, I will reflect on this process , discuss and conclude. I will use and insert my own personal notes and texts describing memories that were edited from personal notebooks during this six years process in order to move back and forth between past, present and future.

My body of work is a summary of an ongoing photography process started in 2011 in an attempt to depict the spaces I refer to as Home. My visual research creates the relationship between photography and concepts of memory, trauma, and space. I explore the possibilities of ‘photographic abstraction’ in order to let go of personal childhood memories by obscuring the spaces of my home landscapes during the printing process in the darkroom. I manipulate traditional methods of production in photography, to create large analog color images that deal with distraction, disappearance and obscure landscapes.

Home #1

Let's begin by exploring the notion of home, my home. I started my voyage in Beer Sheva, at Moria Street, the first house I can remember living in. A small apartment, in a modernist block, like many others build in Israel during the first years after the country was born and when socialism was still a popular idea. In 2011 I started taking several photos of the building where I remember to be my first home. Then carried on taking photos of the next building, and then another one, and another until I finished photographing all the buildings in my block. Later, I expanded to the neighborhood, photographing the streets, the alleys and the architecture. From there I continued in a circular motion moving outside all the way to the point where the city meets the desert. Many photos, many memories. During 2012 and 2013 I created two more series, expanding my borders to the region, and later, to the whole Negev desert. In 2014 I continued this path going into Tel Aviv, my home in the last 10 years. Later went back south and continued a little more going in and out of Israel into Jordan. In that point

of time I started questioning my journey and its possibilities: how shall I keep on going from here? I could not go much further into Jordan with a camera due to the political sensitivity. I was also too scared to go into Egypt. Lebanon and Syria were of course out of the question. As an Israeli Jew I am not allowed to enter most Muslims countries who do not recognize the state of Israel, and the one I am allowed to go in to I am too afraid to do so.

.... We could have ride this perfect light beam forever, but then came the shots. And I saw my dad braking into tears for the first time in my life ... (Negev desert, 1/1/2004)

The first memory of my voyage took place seven years ago, before I took my first picture. I failed to see how the values I seek for my life can fit together with living in the Middle East, in the near future. I hated the conflict that our governments led us into throw the years, and hated myself for falling into their games. Many questions arose around my belief and respect towards political leaders and the political system altogether. Three years and one month of a combat military service, going into battle, loosing dear friends and colleges in the battlefield, followed by traveling to India and south America, exploring new cultures, lands and ideas. Reflecting on my past, questioning values both on personal and national level and going back into memories. I need to find a new home. My Mom is Polish. Her family left Poland in 1969 after being denied to be accepted to Polish University's although she was a straight A student. Therefor I am entitled to a polish passport. Now I crossed all the way to the end of the continent in Norway. I am a middle eastern, EU citizen, Israeli, Polish Jew, living in Norway. But where is home?

Context for the Project

In 2011 while I was working on my first series ‘Yehoopez’, which described the spaces of my first home in the Negev desert in south Israel, I was watching the SFMOMA panel “Is photography over?” (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2010). The panel discussed the idea that Photography as an artistic medium has terminated its relevance in contemporary art. The questions that arose in this panel led me to wonder about my process and if I am doing contemporary art at all. Or, in a narrower way: what is the artistic value of taking photos today. I felt that my motivation of using photography is about something else than documentation, but at the time I couldn’t explain what it is that I was doing. When I started my Masters studies at the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art (KIT) in the end of 2015, I was researching theories of photography, history of art and contemporary art. I was also reflecting on my previous works and the route that my artistic practice has led me up to this point.

Photography and memory

In her article “The magic mirror: Reflections on Photography as memory” Theresa Moerman claims that: “although we sometimes rely on memory as evidence, it is inherently fallible. Studies have shown that memory can be manipulated by photographic and textual suggestion to the point where the mind creates false or flawed memories about events that never took place” (Moerman Ib, 2012). She sees the links between photography and memory by that a constructed image can be more truthful to experienced reality than a documented one. Furthermore, Annette Kuhn calls this process “secondary revision “-an experience is essentially molded into a language that speaks not only to the mind but also to the emotions (Kuhn, 2000).

Memory, Trauma and Space

Memory is always connected to a specific time and place (Herscher, 2015). I perceived the aforementioned pictures not so much as images of landscapes but as visual representations of memories.

In another connection to my research, Hal Foster describes trauma discourse: “Trauma discourse continues the poststructuralist critique of the subject by other means. Satisfying too, contradictory imperatives: to guarantee identity, on the one hand, and to deconstruct its foundation, on the other. Trauma discourse presents the subject as simultaneously evacuated and elevated” (Foster, 2001 cited in Bennet, 2005). Furthermore, during a seminar last year at the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art

(KiT), Johan Gertz explained that memory is about visibility that changes and in the sense of trauma memory cannot be anything else than an abstract image.

These thoughts led me to establish a connection between art, memory and trauma. In turn, this created a context for my artistic practice. I was planning to obscure or erase the spaces represented in my pictures and hoping that by doing so I will be erasing or changing my own memories connected to a personal trauma that happened in my past, in these spaces.

...Where does this pain coming from? I was lucky and skilled, I didn't get killed, nor injured. So why am I hurting myself so much from inside? (Gothenburg, 2016)

Photography and Abstraction

During the last year of my Bachelor's in 2011, while working on a large scale color print, I made a mistake: I moved the enlarger and thus exposed the paper in the darkroom. Because the paper was so expensive I went ahead and devolved the print. I found the final outcome to be intriguing visually. I went forward and framed the image and hung it at my house. I was looking at it for almost 18 months every morning trying to understand what it is that was so fascinating to me. Meanwhile my artistic process was going more and more in that line of aesthetic. I was less interested in the figurative and going more into playing and experimenting with the pictures from my archive trying to make them something else. I can name two contemporary artist and photographers that explore abstraction by photography. Although both of them are coming from different background or interest I can mentioned two specific works that had some influence as a departure point for my own practice: The early works of Michal Rovner's "Outside" series from 1990-91 , and Shai Kramer's "Concrete Abstract" series from 2011-12 (Rovner,90);(Kramer, 2011).

Visually, my main research, in the last two years is about photography and abstraction, and the possible connections between them. In his article Abstraction and Empathy, Worringer claims that the urge for abstraction is a visual response to a physical dread of open spaces (Worringer 1967).

Abstraction as a concept is about making the familiar unfamiliar and is created as a response to the fracture that happened between human and his/her reality. One could also interpret abstraction as a refusal to produce realistic images of the surrounding spaces. It is an attempt to blur and erase the outside world and realities. In his article "The Representation of Abstraction/ The Abstraction of Representation", claims the writer that "...photography has been established as an agent in the questioning of abstraction domain. This may be because photography, the most representational of all other visual media, is ultimately unable to become abstract. Instead, it serves to represent the idea of

abstraction” (Grundberg, 1990). A position is developed that explores my own creative possibilities of abstraction in photography in connection to contemporary art.

METHODOLOGY

Back to the darkroom

Last year, I was experimenting with one image from my old series- “ Yehoopez ”. I engaged in testing and trying out different time intervals during the printing process in the darkroom– for instance not moving the enlarger for 6 seconds and then 6 seconds moving it. I also worked in a 4 to 8 second method. This experimentation was to establish a practical method. When I tried to confine myself to specific time frames, utilizing a systematic formalist approach, I was not satisfied with the aesthetics outcome. The image still looked too familiar to me. In time I discovered the more I stopped thinking about specific time conventions and switched to working solely from my emotions at an unconscious level, then the outcome of the image was more in line with my search and aesthetics.

Alongside my photographic practice I developed a new performative aspect of my practice. The act of making the prints is a large part of the process, one that verges on the performative. I become very much aware of my physicality, body and movement in the dark room while creating the images. In the darkroom I hold the enlarger and move it with force back and forth repeatedly in a state of ecstatic movement. In this situation I find myself with my thoughts, feelings and let myself behave freely. It is the act of releasing force, dancing, praying and even screaming. Inevitably, the resulting image is blurred – moving the image away from its former figurative state. The aesthetics of the image is transformed from a classic landscapes fine art prints into much more ‘abstract’ outcome. The subjects in the images are starting to disappear.

Moreover, I was trying to establish the motivation of my own actions. I felt that the darkroom is kind of therapeutic space where I can be myself and by myself. This methodology that based on thoughts beliefs and intuition represent for me a process of letting go from memories of reality I wish to erase. I was producing a number of different prints from each negative, which can never be the same. This printing method allows singularity over the remaking of specific image, over and over again. I cannot repeat the same movement, and I cannot produce the same print. Every one of them is a unique and singular creation. The process is like a memory that is ever changing and in a state of constant transformation.

Going to the End of the Continent.

This year (2016-17) I started by finding a place to print my new works, based on the model of the work I produced last year but with some minor changes. First of all, I am using color images instead of black and white. Using colors negatives was my original idea in the beginning but due to the complex process of finding an analog color developer I have started working in black and whites. I feel that this stage of working was actually very beneficial for me in order to understand and master my new technique. The use of color opened up new opportunities for the image adding a different layer onto it. After a year of searching I finally found the facilities where I could print the images in the sizes I wanted. I was fortunate to be accepted to work in the color darkroom in Valand Academy in Gothenburg, Sweden. (With the support of: Camilla Alvhage, Håvard Karlsen, Florian Schneider and Thomas Schön)

I started by using materials from my three previous works- 'The Third space', 'Leoss' and 'Letting Go'. These were a series of color pictures taken in the Negev and Arava deserts in south Israel (the region I grow up in) with a 6x7 Medium format camera between 2012-2015. I have decided to use between five to eight images from these series. From each negative I have produced four different prints while applying the same printing technique of obscuring the landscapes in the pictures during the printing process.



Untitled
Jordan, 2015

figure1: (Shani, 2015)



figure2 : (Shani, 2016)

The first work I produced was called Untitled landscape #1 (Jordan, 2016). It is an analog color print 100x76 cm in size. I used a frame from my old series Letting go from 2015. This frame was already manipulated digitally few months ago and I wanted to remake it analogly in order to see which one works better. I made color tests in order to get to the point when I can print it "the right way" (like the

original frame from 2015). Afterwards I started moving the enlarger back and forth during the projection while allowing myself to be absolutely free with my body, like I mentioned previously.

I repeated this action three more times creating four different images from the same negative. Untitled landscape #2#3#4 (Jordan, 2016). The outcome of the process brought forward many surprises that I feel are adding another layer to the work. Surprises that could not happen if I printed the “proper way”. Red lines, leaks of ink and smudges formed on the image (see figure 2: (Shani, 2016) due to the combination of chemicals, shadows and light during the process, and due to how my body interfered with the projection light, sometimes touching the paper, or stepping on it. The works seem to hold an appearance of movement, perhaps due to the transformation marks present on the photographic paper.

After I finished these works, I produced 24 prints in the same size from 6 different negatives. Those works are titled Untitled Landscape #5-#28 (place of the actual picture, 2016). I worked intensely, for 12-16 hours per day. Due to the physical intensity of making large prints in a color darkroom, I gradually allowed myself to be more free in the process. Sometimes I sang, sometimes I screamed or prayed. Other times, danced, and even spat on the paper. All depended on the mental state I was encountering at that specific time. Then I decided to stop making new images. In total I have made 28 large analog color pictures in this series which deal with distraction, disappearance and obscure landscapes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Photographing in Israel, working in Norway, printing in Sweden

The images describe the landscapes of my home country in Israel crossing into Palestine and Jordan. I am currently working in Norway which is 5500 km away from the place I took the pictures, and printed in Gothenburg which is another 800 km further away. I started taking the pictures in 2011 from the location of my first house I can remember living in the south of Israel and printed the final images at Gothenburg in 2016. I am looking for a home and a future, but in the meanwhile, I keep getting more and more distanced from my family, friends and landscapes.

I feel my artistic process is going in two parallel ways. The first one is a physical road looking for a new home and the second one is a search for a new Aesthetic. But what is at the core of this new Aesthetics? Fredric Jamison described one of the impasses of postmodernism culture as the inability to focus our present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representation of our own current experience (Fisher, 2014). I tend to agree with this statement. But I do feel that although it did not happen yet, it does not mean that it cannot happen in the future. We have to keep on trying since the political conditions are changing faster these days than when Jamison wrote about it and maybe one day we will succeed in putting our focus in the right places.

In connection to my practice I can suggest that my inability to accept the political reality back home led me to new ways of perceiving reality which are more about believing, feeling and trusting faith, rather than rational thinking. Badiou describes the political as a truth procedure and claims that “[...] the truth is a mixture in a real process of singularity and universality, and naturally the question of the relation between construction and the potency is the question of the relation between truth, singularity and the universal anticipation of that truth “(Badiou, 2002). So if Badiou is right then that means that the truth is actually dynamic and in a state of transformation itself.

That recognition had led me to establish my methodology from which the new aesthetic of the images was created. I now feel that the images I was creating represent my own current life experiences or truth. I invented a methodology of printing that uses a medium that was not meant to produce an abstract image. This attempt for abstraction is present by obscuring the spaces in the images and also by the erasure of the time of creation. I ask myself: when is the time of the creation of the work? Is it when the photograph was taken? Or maybe it is the time when I printed the new image?

Analog versus digital

A significant question came forward in my process which is related to the meaning of creating images through an analog process. During one of the exhibitions at Gallery Kit, I showed a color digital print with the same effort to obscure the landscape. In contrast to what I do in the darkroom, I achieved the effect of obscuring using Photoshop filters. One of the main difference between working with analog printing rather than with digital printing is that when you work analog you cannot see the final image in front of you. You only see the final outcome after developing the paper. While working digitally you can see on the screen how the final image will look like.

I was curious to see how the viewers will respond to this image and to explore my artistic boundaries. Last year after presenting the digital version of the work and receiving feedback I was conflicting within myself about the meaning of working with analog printing facilities. This conflict was something I was eager to resolve. At this point of the process I have started wondering if the idea of moving towards abstraction is merely an attempt to mimic some sort of past aesthetics- as in what Fredric Jameson calls 'nostalgia mode': "a formal attachment to the techniques and formulas of the past, a consequence of a retreat from the modernist challenge of innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary experience". (Fisher, 2014). Have I used technology to allow the new forms to emerge, the nostalgia mode subordinated technology to the task of the refurbishing the old?

After printing the works in analog for almost a year later, I can say that working digitally with Photoshop does not work for me conceptually, nor visually because the idea of letting go, accident and singularity of an image cannot happen if I print digitally. Perception is fluid and so is memory. Like a memory, every one of these images is singularity inside creation. I am offering an infinite possibilities of perception represented by an infinite number of different prints possible, in order to describe a single event that happened in reality. It looks to me like the image has more violent appearance due to the act of movement which produces less brightness, more contrast, and extreme changes in colors. The violent act of printing in the darkroom with actions like spitting and stepping on the paper are very present in the final outcome. The red lines that were created by the combination of chemicals on damaged and wrinkle papers also add to this feeling.

In the words of Jameson, I see connections to my work. I also see nostalgia taking form in a contemporary experience; to return to a past feeling and not a moment in time that build up into a kind of new Aesthetic for me from which new forms emerge. (Fisher, 2014).

Space

Visual Representation:

The space I wish to present in the Masters exhibition will be composed from an installation of a 7 meter 3.5-meter black box, containing 8 large color analog printed on glossy fine art paper.

- 1.Untitled landscape # 5-8 (Negev desert Israel 2016), 96x76 cm
- 2.Untitled landscape # 2 (Negev desert Israel 2016) 96x76 cm
- 3.Untitled landscape # 15 (Negev desert Israel 2016) 96x76 cm
- 4.Untitled landscape #22 (Negev desert Israel 2016) 96x76 cm
- 5.Untitled landscape #26 (Negev desert Israel 2016) 96x76 cm.

I would like to install my work in an exhibition space that will allow me to highlight this links between past and future, memory and feelings, anxiety and fear that represents my current living experiences or truth. I hope that in the installation I will allow for these links and connections to come to life. In that sense, I see my exhibition space exists on the gap between an old memory that I wish to erase, or as future visions of potential violent, erasure or disappearance that attempt to represent feeling of existential anxiety rising when I think about my home.



Figure 3: (Shani, 2017)

Summary

The main objective of the past six years of my artistic process was to depict the spaces I refer to as Home. I went back exploring and photographing in places I could refer to as home. My visual research created links between photography and concepts of memory, trauma, and space. My approach towards the images I created in the beginning of the process was as representations of memories from my past home landscapes. When I look at the final images in contrast to the “original image” from my old series from 2011-2015, I feel that there are no longer relate to the past. The new images are breaking away from the time they were captured, being produced much later, sometimes four or five years later.

I am on a search for a home and in the meanwhile describe my life experiences, thoughts, and feelings I had during this voyage through the visual syntax. This physical journey is represented in my current aesthetics which had been transformed during the process. I am very afraid of the road that our leaders in the Middle East are taking us. History taught us that what happened in the past is bound to repeat itself. Extreme nationalisms combined with fear, poverty, lack of education or critical thinking and separation, will eventually lead to blood.

Home #2 (The writings on the wall)

I can't see a future here. In the last 20 years ever since Israeli Prime minister Rabin was shot in 1995, I have seen my country going in a mad and dangerous path. People are scared and angry. The collapse of the Oslo agreement between Palestine and Israel led to a blood bath on both sides. Children in south of Israel which never met a Palestinian in their life cannot go safely to the bathroom for the past 7 years without worrying about running for shelter. If you live in the south of Israel in cities like Ashdod or Ashkelon, you have 15 second to go and seek shelter once the sirens go on. If you live 7 km to the border or closer, you can't go outside at all when things heat up every couple of years.

Corrupted politicians did everything in their powers to keep us scared, and divided. Making us believe that all our problems should be blamed on the other side. Exactly like our brothers on the Palestinian side.... (did you know that Israelis and Palestinians carry the most similar DNA structure?)

There was hope once but it died. Hamas on one side, Isis and Hezbollah on the other. Israeli governments lead by liars, thief's corrupted and Fanatics taking the whole country into war again and again. Blaming the other side on the situation, like we didn't take their lands, like we aren't hurting innocent people, even if it's by mistake, taking their freedom, their identity. Chaining us forever to the conflict. Not offering any solution.

Meanwhile they are stealing our national gas, our industries, our pensions, our social care, selling them to their close friends with no shame. Stealing from holocaust survivors, rewriting history books, erasing names of streets, teaching our children false narratives based on fanatic religious rhetoric. Anyone who critiques the occupation is being called a traitor.

How can I send my child to war? How can I take that chance that they will be ok? I have seen what happen to families that weren't so lucky, I won't be able to go on after losing a child. 2000 years of exile for the Jewish people, ending with a holocaust that exterminated one third of the Jewish population around the world. If your family came from Europe like mine, most of them were murdered. The survivors came to Israel, went into war again with the Arabs in the region from the first second the U.N agreed on the declaration of Israel. Almost none of those people got mental treatment after these traumatic events. In spite of that they built a great country in 60 years. Becoming a meaningful force in, science, computer, medicine and security, of course security.

Here is the thing I do not understand about the idea of "Holy lands". Twice in history we were kicked out of this land, because we did not get along with our surroundings neighbors. Exiled twice, for 2000 years. And then we get a country and what do we do with it? We keep fighting, and forgetting one of the most important things written in the Torah, which is compassion. And for what? The holiness of a land? Promised to us by an abstract god. How can they not understand? Sure, we are "winning" the war with the Palestine's but the fractures that occurred between ourselves: the hate and racism between right wing and left, people from Arab countries or from Europe, religious people vs Non-religious. This will bring an end to the third Jewish state. Maybe the Jews should not have a country, maybe it's our destiny to live a nomadic life. We managed to survive 2000 years without a state. Maybe the Zionist were wrong but what if they are right? Or maybe the religious people are right? I have to admit that in the scope of long period of time I have seen reality twisting more in their direction than the way I perceived it. So maybe they are right? And if so where does it leave us? I feel the winds of death around me, I fear the lives of people and I am afraid it's going to happen any day now.

Y.S, 2015.

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