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# A photographer with politics in the frame

Award-winning photographer Assaf Shaham, winner of the Constantiner Photography Award, has a new exhibit at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, one that blends art with political activism.

By Hadas Reshef | Sep. 12, 2012 | 11:11 AM

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'New Ways to Steal Old Souls' Photo by Assaf Shaham

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When Assaf Shaham looks through his camera lens, he sees the world differently.

For Shaham, photography is a tool for critiquing society, which he does with nimble, penetrating virtuosity. Shaham manipulates with his photographs, examining multiple uses for his lenses, playing with scans and layering over his images with visual quotations from photographs and films.

His work revolves around an ars poetica, a device and theory of expression, one that takes the medium of photography and applies to it social and political messages. For such fine work, he has not received the attention he deserves.

Now, at last, he has an exhibit at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

His road to this exhibit has been surprisingly smooth. He graduated last year from the Minshar School of Art in Tel Aviv. In 2011, while still a student, he won the



'Time After Time and Again' Photo by Assaf Shaham

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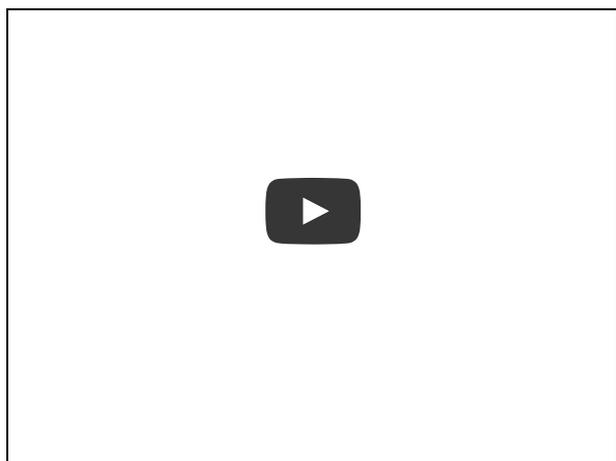
### Israel and Hamas: Enemies that depend on each other

Shpilman Prize for Excellence in Photography. Last April, he put on a solo exhibition at the Tempo Rubato Gallery.

He also took his talents outside of the country, doing a residency at Berlin's Schir Art Concepts, a project center and creative incubator that nurtures relationships between Israeli and German artists. When it rains accolades, however, it really pours, because Shaham had to cut his residency short when he was awarded the Constantinian Photography Award for an Israeli artist.

This prize, from the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, has been awarded every year since 1999 to one or more Israeli artists. Past recipients include Adi Nes, Pavel Wolberg, Roi Kuper and Michal Chelbin. On September 7, Shaham's award-winning exhibition, "New Ways to Steal Old Souls," opened at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

### A simple, unconscious love



Shaham, 28, grew up in the Jerusalem suburb of Mevasseret Zion, where he studied film. He was primarily interested in video editing, and spent his time in the IDF working in the film department of the Israel Air Force.

He also photographed stills when he had to, even though he did not enjoy it at the time. After his discharge, he supported himself by editing wedding videos at, in his words, "an awful studio in Jaffa."

"The editing room was in the owner's mother's home," he says. "The weddings were hard-core. It killed me. Suddenly, I hated editing. It was the dark side of the profession."

He landed at Minshar because it seemed the best option at the time. "Just before I was going to start school, I flew to Spain for a month. I really enjoyed photographing stills, and I didn't really know what I wanted to do when I got back," he says. "Going back to Jerusalem wasn't an option, so going to Bezalel [Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem] wasn't, either. In the end, I enrolled at Minshar. I started studying photography like most of the people I know – out of a simple, unconscious love."

Shaham says that he was asked to bring a photograph he liked to his admissions interview, and he selected one by Israel Prize winner and veteran Haaretz photographer Alex Levac.

"I felt that studying photography is one of the most important things today, like reading and writing, and I fell in love with what I was doing," he says. "It filled and enriched me. I didn't think about anything else. I went totally into it, and I had ups and downs. Going out into the street with a camera was a challenge. Directing didn't seem challenging to me. Suddenly, the photographer walking around looked like magic to me, getting photos."

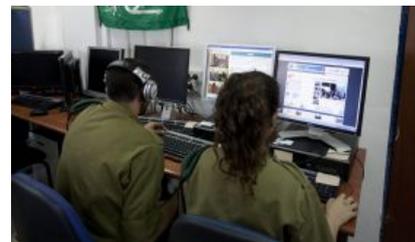
*Q: In the past, you described a social documentation course given by Noa Ben Shalom and Gaston Itzkovitz during the second year of your studies, which brought about a major shift in your perception of photography.*

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"It was a terrible experience. They asked us to choose a project with a socio-political orientation and get started. I went to Kfar Shalem, which interested me in those days – the evacuation of the homes in order to construct skyscrapers. I started photographing, and it was clear to me who was weak and who was strong, whom I supported, where I stood and where I was in the situation.

"I thought that this was an evil real-estate project, where the inhabitants were being forced out without proper replacement housing. I thought I could help them, even if only by listening. I was devoted and felt good about it. They accepted me and shared with me, but suddenly in this black-and-white place, everything looked gray.

"Suddenly I saw that some inhabitants had squatted in apartments so that they would be evacuated and receive compensation, and they were the ones who agreed to be photographed. People see an opportunity when they see a camera. I realized that photography couldn't solve these problems. All it could do was take them to different extreme. I lost all faith in documentary photography. It seems obvious to me, but it didn't then."

To express the confusing layers of this situation, Shaham's photographs display multiple layers of artistry. His work resonated deeply with the judges of the Constantiner Photography Award, who wrote, "Shaham deconstructs and foils basic and sophisticated tools for creating and processing images, and juxtaposes concepts of early photography with digital manipulations, exposing their clumsiness."

Photography, Shaham had learned, was not just an art medium. It was a highly potent instrument.

"I started becoming interested in what photography actually could do," Shaham says. "I wanted to understand what this thing was that I held in my hand, what this tool called a camera was. I started to examine the photograph and the inner logic of the photograph, what this tool was that I held in front of me that I went outside with. I started to go inside the camera and take it apart, down to its foundation, to think about what photography is, what the basic elements of a photograph are, to take off all the layers."

*Q: What form does it take in your work?*

"During the third year, I created the series 'Time after Time and Again.' It started with reading about the making of the first color photograph – not by a photographer, but by a Scottish scientist named James Clerk Maxwell. Light was created by the colors red, blue and green, and he photographed the same object three times, each time with a different filter of each color. Then he projected the three photographs onto three projectors. I did an experiment of my own. I took a camera and did a triple exposure of the same color negative with the three filters, but nothing happened. The photograph looked completely ordinary, with the right colors. I started moving objects within the photograph so that the filters and the structure of the light and its effect on the colors could be seen. The photograph of the sundial, which was shown in the museum exhibition, has the essence of the process. The change comes from the movement of the sun at sunset. That's what turns the light into an object."

*Q. Exposing the methods in the color photos and the scans is a politicization of the medium. Do you have a hard time with my calling your work social and political?*

"My work is based on the love-hate relationship I have with these things. I have a complex love affair with political art as well. On the one hand, it seems to be impossible to avoid political art because of the place and the time, but I don't really see myself as a political creature. I don't know why it's hard for me to admit it. I'm not totally a political creature. I'm politically active – an activist. I feel guilty that last summer I didn't play a bigger role [in the social justice protests]. And if my work is political, what does that really mean? What does it say about my motivations? I see it as my needing to get up and be at the forefront of the demonstrations, and I'm not doing that."

*Q: It is difficult for you to describe your work as political because you*

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*don't attend enough demonstrations or get arrested during them?*

“That’s it, exactly. The interesting question is: Where does art happen? If it happens in a gallery or in an art school, then that empties the work’s content of politics. How many people attend exhibitions in galleries? Last summer, I did a residency at Schir Art Concepts in Berlin. I had an apartment and a studio there, and I kept track of the demonstrations from a distance. Suddenly, there were photographs of police officers taking pictures of citizens, who photographed the police officers as a form of resistance. Then, something interesting happened to me during a Google search – when you type ‘citizens photographing police officers’ and the reverse, you get the same photograph. That’s a hindrance for the search engine.”

At the galleries, politics draining in the gutter

In his "American Dream" series, Shaham took postcards of well-known locations such as the World Trade Center in New York, the Shrine of the Book and the John F. Kennedy Memorial in Jerusalem and a photograph of the Marine Corps War Memorial in the United States, which is based on the well-known planting of the flag at Iwo Jima. He scanned all of them, and at a certain moment he moved the photographs along the scanning beam, lengthening the images and emphasizing certain motifs to add significance. For example, the lengthened scan of the twin World Trade Center towers makes their absence today resonate all the more. In the photograph of the Shrine of the Book, the optical illusion looks like a mushroom cloud after a nuclear explosion.

But Shaham is always ready to push even further.

“Is it enough?” he asks. “In the end, as far as I’m concerned, the message amounts to its location. If it’s in a commercial gallery, that empties it of content. That’s how I feel. Even when it’s about public transportation, I make a distinction between activities at the Bat Yam Museum for Contemporary Art and rioting in the middle of Tel Aviv. Maybe it has to do with the way that my close environment functions when it comes to political subjects.”

*Q: You are now exhibiting at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. More than a few hundred people will be there. You can exhibit radical art there.*

“I think there’s room for subversive art at the museum, but there’s something about these institutions and establishment places that strips the politics from the thing. I was at a biennial of political art in Berlin, and there’s no politics there. Politics happens in the street. These institutions drain the meaning from the works. That’s why it was important for me to publish my work on the Internet. YouTube is a political arena. Putting work up on Facebook is a political act. Politics have drained out of the galleries, but I’m not saying let’s not do it.”

*Q: In the series 'The Collectors,' you photographed men gathering metal objects from trash heaps, with formalistic square shapes on their faces.*

“All right, I admit it. I’m political. The work was created because I live in south Tel Aviv. I see the metal-pickers passing by downstairs all the time. I felt like documenting them, and when I went to the junkyard in the Elifelet [a street in south Tel Aviv] area and took the colored square with me – it’s a quote from 'Reservoir Dogs,' where the robbers have names like Mr. Pink, Mr. White, Mr. Brown and so on.”

In "Roller," which was exhibited on YouTube, Shaham shows all his Facebook friends as the song "We'll Meet Again," recorded by Vera Lynn, plays in the background. This is the theme song of "Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb," a film by Stanley Kubrick about megalomania and the atom bomb. The connection is more relevant and chilling than ever.

### **YouTube as a political arena**

The closing work of the exhibition, entitled "The King Is Dead, Long Live the King" at the Tempo Rubato Gallery, will also be exhibited at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The title of the exhibition refers to the death of

photography and its discovery by means of new methods.

“In my work 'Hiroshima,' you see the silhouette of a human being and the silhouette of a building, taken from a book of photographs of the 20th century,” says Shaham. “Showing it is completely in the style of Sherrie Levine – appropriating an image and transferring its meaning to the other works in a new way. In the exhibition at the museum, I’m going to show an additional scan of a work by Paul Citroen, an artist from the first generation of the Bauhaus. In the image, you see a man watching theater through binoculars. In front of him is a black background where he is swallowed up. At first, I thought about doing something that would be inspired by that photograph, but in the end I decided to scan it and show it. There’s the man looking at something through the binoculars, and then the photographer watching him as he watches something else. Then I appropriate the situation and make the viewers look at it. The acts of watching and appropriation are an integral part of photography, but I am the biggest watcher who closes the chain.”

Assaf Shaham, *New Ways to Steal Old Souls*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Open Mondays and Wednesdays from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M., Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 A.M. to 10 P.M., Fridays from 10 A.M. to 2 P.M., and Saturdays from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. Closed Sundays.

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