

Memories in Vacuum and Western Beach:
Questioning the Nature of Space in the Israeli Context

By Anat Litwin¹

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I am interested in the ways in which artists explore spatial meanings--cultural, social, and political--and the ways in which spaces can carry both personal and shared meanings. I recently curated a show at the Makor Gallery in New York entitled *Baalil/Evident*,² which was dedicated to the exploration of the private and public readings of place. The ambiguous nature of place, at once shared and personal, lets artists question power relations and social rules. In the Israeli context, place has a charged political significance, overlaid with social, cultural, and gender meanings.

Here, I juxtapose the art work of two emerging Israeli artists, Merav Ezer and Yahezkel Lazarov, who explore space, gender, and the human condition in the modern Israeli context. In her work, Merav Ezer deals with the ambiguous notion of "home." She casts and preserves domestic scenes in light boxes in which deserted feminine objects indicate a sense of abandonment or escape from home. Yahezkel Lazarov explores the Western Beach, a site charged with local social and political meanings. He chose this site as a framework for tracing modern people's relationship to the environment. In his hyper-realistic photographs he succeeds in tracing situations that can be read as metaphors for the human condition. In different ways, both artists examine places charged with personal and cultural meanings, places in which history, tradition, modernity, nature, and gender come together. Through their exploration of these places, the artists raise questions of social constraints and the meaning of belonging.

There are other connections between the two artists: both depict intimate spaces charged with personal drama and reference to gender roles. These spaces are personal, yet have wider social resonance. Both artists seem to understand that the variety of narratives that can be produced from these spaces allow them to function both as sites of personal as well as universal stories. In these two works, the very notion of "site" expands from the specific to a wider human notion of place.

The value of place is strongly embedded in the Israeli and Jewish identities, as represented through a few key themes: the biblical concept of the Land of Israel as "The Promised Land"; the mythic image of the Wandering Jew—one who has no home; and the ongoing bloody conflict between Israelis and Palestinians over the occupied

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² The *Baalil/Evident* exhibition (November 4-December 8, 2004; Makor Gallery, 35 West 67th Street, New York) included works by Merav Ezer, Yahezkel Lazarov, Deborah Garwood, and Peter Allen Hoffmann. The title, *Baalil/Evident*, relates to the evidence of personal traces within the landscape/site. This theme was explored throughout the exhibition.

territories. Moreover, the Hebrew word for place, *Makom*, has spiritual reference, and is used as one of the traditional Jewish names of God.

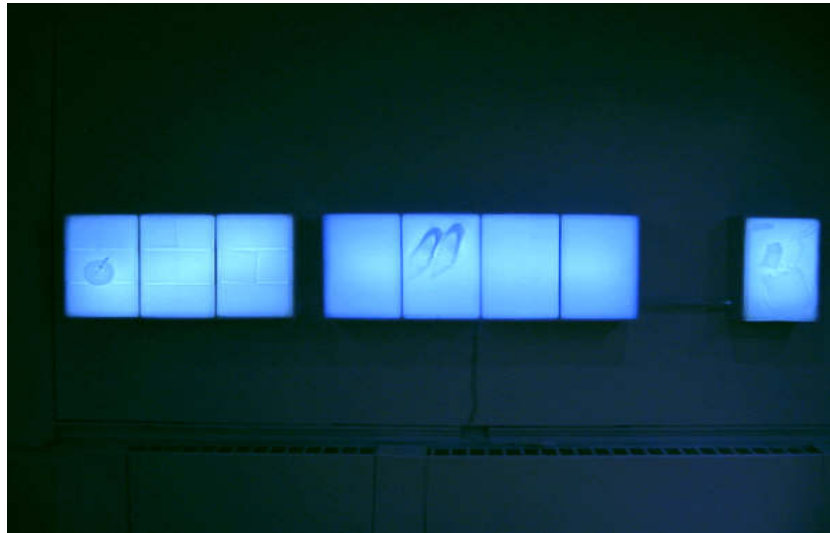
At the same time, the Jewish religious rituals are time-based--most Jewish observances depend on a certain hour of the day or season of the year. By contrast, Israeli national identity is grounded in the notions of space and territory. Ownership of the land is a crucial component of the Israeli identity. While Ezer and Lazarov do not address the Israeli and Jewish meanings of place directly, these meanings function as the cultural context in which their art should be read.

Memories in Vacuum

Merav Ezer, an Israeli sculptor, uses the technique of vacuum forming to trace domestic scenes. This technique allows for the direct copying of objects using a heated plastic sheet manipulated by a vacuum tool. *Memories in Vacuum* is a light box installation depicting objects associated with conventional femininity and modernity: high-heeled shoes, an emptied purse, and a full ashtray--all signifiers of clichéd feminine gender roles. The use of tile and neon light on personal and mundane objects is jarring and conveys a sense of interruption, perhaps violation of the intimacy of home space. The broken tiles and the harsh neon light evoke the sense of fragility of “home.”



Merav Ezer, *Vacuum Memories*, #1, #2, #3, Mixed Media, Overview, 2004.



Merav Ezer, Vacuum Memories, #1, #2, #3, Mixed Media, Overview, 2004.

The motif of high-heeled shoes brings to mind legendary female characters trapped in unwanted homes, seeking escape. Shoes enable heroines in distress to transform reality into fantasy and vice versa. Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz* is given a pair of ruby red slippers with the power to bring her back to Kansas from the fantastic Land of Oz. Cinderella's glass shoes are endowed with magic, allowing her to escape from her enslavement and to unite with her male rescuer.

Ezer's shoes and other personal objects are fragmented and trapped in time. They are displayed in neon light boxes as part of an obscure preservation system. The artist has created a new archeology in which the objects tell tales from a frozen present, experienced as distant and removed. Ezer's ghost-like objects are haunting reminders of the fragility of home that literally bring to light social constraints of women in both fantastic and realistic realms. These works both question and reflect the shattered promise of safety and belonging that home supposedly provides.

Western Beach

Yahezkel Lazarov, an Israeli photographer and actor (Gesher Theater), presents a series of photographs entitled *Western Beach*, which depict the Israeli sea shore between Tel Aviv and Yaffo. This deserted beach has been neglected by the local municipality. Swimming there is restricted because of the old sewer structures which pollute the sea (seen in the photographs as cement boxes). However, instead of being a "no-man's land," this beach has become a multi-cultural space frequented by Israelis from Tel Aviv, Palestinians from Yaffo, and immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

The series functions as a storyboard in which each of the five photographs is part of an ongoing mysterious narrative taking place on the Western Beach. The viewer must fill in the gaps of the narrative and link the images. The series is rich with modern Israeli political, social, and environmental references such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,

post-Soviet immigration to Israel, and pollution. Because this information is not directly accessible to the non-Israeli viewer, and because the setting could be any seascape, the viewers may find in these photographs a range of narratives concerning gender, leisure, modernity, and the environment.

If the first photograph represents traditional gender relations (man out at sea, woman staying behind, on an old dock near tent/home), the second photograph raises environmental concerns. In it, a lonely male figure sitting on a man-made polluting structure illustrates the human alienation from the environment.

The scene depicted in the third photograph evokes motifs of the law, crime, and innocence. This scene documents, perhaps, an attempted illegal border crossing. Two police officers, a male and a female, ostensibly protect the seashore from invasion or other danger. Both officers represent authority and the disciplining power of the state; their individual gender does not matter, as it is subsumed by the authority bestowed upon them.



Western Beach #1



Western Beach #2



Western Beach #3



Western Beach #4



Western Beach #5

**Western Beach, Yahezkel Lazarov,
Photograph series #1 - #5, Prints 16" x 20," 2004.**

The fourth photograph could be a family scene. A woman and a man to the side are engaged in a dialog; they seem to be equally positioned vis-à-vis three children playing in the sand. Another adult male, possibly a relative or a friend, is situated closer to the children. The group is seemingly an extended family, yet, while the nearly naked bodies are exposed by the glaring sunlight, the relationships between the characters remain paradoxically unexposed.

The fifth photograph, portraying a beach scene of a man covered with sand, can be read both as a man's reunion with the land and as a reminder of death. The figure buried in sand seems to become an almost natural part of the landscape. This image echoes the second photograph; however, it represents a connectedness to the environment, rather than alienation from it.

This set of photographs functions as a poetic metaphor for the human condition. The ephemeral and ever-changing nature of the human being is symbolized by the gradually changing tide in the background, relating to a time cycle. The seashore setting is a place where all is at risk of being washed away. The characters are wanderers in this landscape. Lazarov's lens captures the human interaction with the environment and with each other. This portrayal includes exploration of gender relations. In the course of the series, the gender roles change, from the clichéd roles of the first frame, to the ambiguous, or perhaps alternative gender roles in the third and fourth frames. Indeed, the ecological motif seems to be in sync with the alternative gender roles, for in the final frames, there are no polluting structures and the characters have direct, sensual relations with the land.

As to the Israeli and Jewish cultural meanings of these images, territorial elements (tent, paved dock, cement structures) and time signifiers (changing tide, traces of footsteps in sand) are brought together, resembling a possible coexistence of the spiritual and secular aspects of one's being and the connection between eternal Jewish wandering and Israeli ownership of land. Most of the participating figures are facing the sea, positioned with their back toward the viewer. This positioning refers to a cosmic dimension, acknowledging a modest scale of human's existence compared to the vast existence of the universe. The unseen horizon represents the eternal and the spiritual *Makom*.

Artists Merav Ezer and Yahezkel Lazarov "occupy" the sites of domestic space and Tel Aviv seashore as a framework for unraveling the power relations that exist therein. In each, the idea of "ownership" over identity and "ownership" over place (Israel as the Promised Land) are thrown into doubt; Ezer's *Memories in Vacuum* explores social constraints on one's identity; particularly, imprisonment in traditional gender roles. Lazarov's *Western Beach* confronts the masculine ownership-based approach to place, emphasizing the fragile and ephemeral nature of humanity. In this context, possession of land and traditional gender roles become irrelevant and absurd.

In the *Baalil/Evident* exhibition, I chose to juxtapose these two zones--the private and the public--and to explore the interrelations between natural and artificial, and between social and individual. The work of the artists functions as a bridge between these spheres on which viewers are free to wander. By putting together these works, I hope to remind viewers of the importance of art as a connecting device, enabling the creation of a genuine sense of belonging, free from social constraints.³

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