



Ohad Matalon – Across a dark Land

“October 1913”. Apollinaire described “metaphysics” (within the arts) as a kind of “sensation, very intense and very modern that generally speaking, assumes an architectonic aspect. There are train stations adorned with wall clocks, towers, statues, huge and empty squares; on the horizon, on the tracks, trains pass by”. On the other hand, Giorgio De Chirico, creator of such evocative images, referred to the unsettling impression (Freud called it “unheimlich”) that one feels in front of something familiar: all of a sudden, it appears as if it were totally new, as if one saw it for the first time.

Notions like these, well established in the field of Art History, are nevertheless still useful in order to approach Ohad Matalon’s recent project, conveyed through a series of images entitled *Across a dark Land*, shown on this occasion for the first time in Berlin.

Well-known for his brave conceptual approach to the photographic practice and to the very concept of photography, developed among other things in *Today* at the Herzliya Biennial of Art, Herzliya, Israel, in 2009, Matalon is well known especially for the on-going series called *The Zone* (2000-2014), which, at first glimpse, appears to be a complex and multifaceted portrait of the Israeli society, while at a deeper insight, shows itself as a multilayered, contradictory, often ironic and polysemous visual symphony that tackles the notions of reality versus fiction, the prejudices and expectations of the viewer and, to make a long story short, the counterfeit and problematic nature of the photographic image in itself.

Today, Matalon takes us into a Land of Darkness, with no people, almost no life and no daylight. While, once upon a time, the visual richness provided by the variety of people who inhabited his country, Israel, looked to be a huge source of inspiration for his investigations into the visual world, now all that attracts the artist’s attention are single buildings or structures, even fragmented things, sometimes isolated trees, lonely and solitary. They seem to be leftovers of a disappeared world, whose appearance which we can describe as “metaphysical” relies upon their being on the edge, out of any meaning and any recognizable function. They are somehow familiar but, at the same time, radically extraneous, “unheimlich”, a word that I would translate here with some stretching as “with no homeland” (heimat). A strangeness made stronger thanks to the night, that is, in itself, a “different”, meaningful dimension: beloved by Romantics and Surrealists, the dark, obscure night is a metaphor of perdition, transgression and departure from reason; it is the time for illusions, monsters, ambiguities and, above all, it is the least convenient time to shoot



photographs which, as the etymology teaches, are “writings of the light”. Choosing residual elements, almost fragments, abandoned in space in front of a vague, open, blurred and borderless horizon, specifically shot at night, Ohad Matalon doesn’t only force his viewer but also photography in itself to face strangeness, to be out, excluded from a more typical and familiar dimension.

So let’s come closer: we are, clearly at least in some images, in a war zone. Target ii, Zeelim and A Safety House, Urim, look like riddled buildings; innumerable shots, or blows, pulled the plaster out, wrecked the walls, broke the partitions down.

Even the war itself seems to have abandoned them. These images do not inform, do not side with, nor take a stand. The media world and the information channels, especially today, are literally cannibalizing the Middle East greedily waiting for an image that denounces, blames, and distinguishes between good and bad. In such a way that the accusing finger of the one who watches that image could be pointed immediately in order to judge, to cheer, to sentence who and what is right or wrong according not to his experience but to his ideology supported by that very image.

Well, Ohad Matalon does not do that and, even more important, does not let us do that. His work generates questions and problems, even regrettable and distressing ones. It does not give any answer. His images, no doubt about it, portrait fragments of reality, they are not built up in his studio, they are no fakes or photomontages. The artist tells us everything, in a very detailed and honest way, about “where” and about “what”. The Safety House, for instance “was built exactly the same way in many of the young “Kibbutzim” (among them Kibbutz Urim) in Israel. These buildings were used to protect the Israeli defenders from the Arabs that attacked the Kibbutz in the “Independence War” in 1948. Later, many of them started functioning as their Culture House. “This specific one is located today in a training area of I.D.F and is being used as a target for tanks”, Matalon explains. On the other hand, The Gate, that is among these images, perhaps the most unsettling, strange and metaphysical one, is part of an old British Rider police station, from the times The British ruled this area. The Orange tree has been shot specifically for its peculiar illness that affects it and makes it lose all its leaves but still lets its fruits grow.

As Sagi Refael writes: «The image of oranges is identified with the period of Jewish settlement in Ottoman Palestine beginning in the mid-19th century. Orange groves were planted en masse in empty and not-so-empty spaces, during those days of building the Zionist Yishuv. When the state was established, many orchards were abandoned by their Arab owners and taken over by



the Jewish settlers in the newly-founded country. During that period, orange cultivation became an excellent export branch and the orange turned into a symbol of Hebrew labor and the transition from Arab-owned land to Jewish-owned land. The word “Pardess” stems from and alludes to “Paradise” – the concept of the majestic Garden of Eden, site of the Fall of Man and the place believers aspire to reach in order to repair their souls after death“.

Therefore, it is not only the purely visual element, the almost artificial appearance that this tree has acquired, that attracts Ohad Matalon’s attention; indeed his aim is also to catch the passages of history that have charged this very tree with different and complicated meanings, that a superficial and distracted look simply does not grasp.

In order to shoot these structures in total darkness, the artist used a generator and a lot of studio light equipment, which have been carried in remote, mostly deserted areas in open landscapes, sometimes at the artists’ own risk. In order to shoot Tower, for instance, located at the southern part of the border between Israel and Egypt (a restricted area, closed for civilians at night), Matalon, unintentionally, camouflaged the I.D.F forces, which arrived fully armed on the spot 30 seconds after he had finished shooting, considering his flash lights to be fire shooting.

So, this is, in fact the reality of someone who lives on a bleeding border and is constantly under pressure or under attack. Matalon does not hide the political, military and even openly violent evocation that his subjects carry, but nevertheless he bestow on them a very theatrical aura, entirely artificial, that tackles the very nature of the photographic image.

It is a fragment of reality but also a set, a stage. Where are we? What do we want to be told? What are we looking for ?violence, beauty, history, spectacularity ? Ohad Matalon’s images refer openly to the classic, XVIII century aesthetic concept of sublime but they propose a new, convincingly contemporary version of it.

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