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# Homecoming: Yael Ben Zion's 5683 Miles Away

**By Joanna Lehan**

In a family snapshot, a ten-year-old Yael Ben-Zion stands with her two-year-old cousin in front of her tidy home in the small southern Israeli town of Arad. The children have a wholesome glow of health—sturdy tanned limbs, shiny hair. The smaller cousin holds a toy accordion; Ben-Zion holds an Uzi submachine gun. She handles the pistol grip convincingly, taking a wide stance and pointing the barrel in the direction of the indifferent toddler. She is smiling.

When her cousin presented this photo to her twenty-five years later, Ben-Zion had no recollection of posing that day, neither did she recall the time in her life when such a pose could be regarded as innocently funny. From the vantage point of twenty-five years and 5,683 miles away, she finds this photograph shocking. But there—standing barefoot on the sun-warmed pavement in Arad's famously pure desert air, held in the adoring gaze of her relative's camera—there was nothing amiss. Longing and disillusionment, intimacy and distance, comfort and violence: these are the shifting elements at play in the photographs of Yael Ben-Zion.



*Milk, 2007*

*All images are courtesy of the artist*



*Ella with Protective Gear, 2008*

There is a journey implicit in the accounting of miles she underscores with the specificity of her title 5683 miles away. It's the distance between Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv and John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, the physical distance she traveled from her old life in Israel, to her life in the US, which began with studies in New Haven—and is now centered in New York. Over the last ten years she has traveled home that same number of miles to visit, and with an increasing sense of purpose, to make these photographs.

What drew Ben-Zion's eye during these homecomings were small details, uneventful moments that typify aspects of day-to-day life in Israel, which she captures in contemplative still lifes, portraits, and landscapes. Many of these details, even the seemingly benign, carry a subtle undercurrent of militarization and apprehension, and the particular ways they are absorbed and reflected in Israeli daily life. In the opening image, Milk, a Tnuva bag sits in a plastic pitcher alongside the morning Haaretz—a sight that is both patently ordinary and geoculturally specific. The paper's headline reads: "American Official: Syria is 'Cruel...'" Her unassuming breakfast-table still life, then, becomes a study of the way border conflicts—as routine as breakfast—insinuate themselves into quotidian moments. Her title goes further, suggesting that such news is the



sustenance on which Israelis are now raised, or that it flows with the abundance of the promised milk and honey.

As in that first image, most of Ben-Zion's photographs make such observations elliptically. Fences, walls, and other fortifications are shown or evoked in several pictures, though few of them relate specifically to conflict. A temporary construction wall where a playground will be built brings to mind the controversial separation fence. White underwear hung on a line is dappled with the shadows of clothespins. Squint and those pins become barbed wire.



*Morning, Yom Kippur Eve, 2007*

The numerous domestic scenes, too, evince the pervasiveness of militarization, and here as is true throughout the work, Ben-Zion's titles bring her point home. In one image, that she has titled *Night Vision* we notice that suburban yard work has the air of a reconnaissance operation. In another, a distracted mother sits on a couch piled with folded laundry, her toddler playing at her knees—a scene ordinary in every way except for the career soldier's uniform the mother wears. With the title *Philosophical Fables for Children*, which is also the Hebrew title of the book in front of them, the image becomes vaguely prophetic.



However emblematic these pictures may be, they are also deeply personal. Domestic life is depicted with the intimacy afforded to one who belongs. Ben-Zion is close in these pictures; the camera never seems more than a foot or two from the subjects, in fact. She is down on the floor; she's examining the bookshelves; she's crammed together with friends and neighbors in the

bustle before Yom Kippur. The act of photographing these details is one of longing: she is gathering, keeping, metaphorically holding them close. Yet, with their pointed titles and their subtle depictions of unease we understand that she is equally unsettled and comforted by the details she examines.

For the artist, the examination of these intimately familiar scenes engenders a subtle mind-shift. "Home," the word that is the emotional synonym for "safe," is in fact, not a place of such security after all. This shift in perspective enabled by time and distance is akin to the universal development of seeing one's parents as real human beings—that is to say, flawed—for the first time. There is a pathos to this inevitable individuation, this passage from being a sheltered child to one who can see that nothing is, in fact, safe nor permanent—that there is no going home again.



*Laundry, 2008*



*Lea and Shimon, 2008*





*Black Iris, 2004*



*And Come to Zion... 2007*

*The text was published in the monograph “5683 Miles Away,” published by Kehrer Publishers in 2010. [Click here for the publisher’s website.](#)*

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Yael Ben-Zion is a NY-based photographer whose work often considers the relationship of the personal to the political. She is a graduate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Yale Law School and ICP. Yael’s work has been exhibited in the United States and in Europe and she is the recipient of various grants and awards, including the International Photography Awards and recent grants from NoMAA and the Puffin Foundation. In 2007, her photograph *Crash* was selected for the cover of *American Photography* 23. *5683 Miles Away* was selected as one of *photo-eye*’s Best Books of 2010 and for the *PDN Photo Annual 2011*. It was also a nominee for the German Photo Book Award 2011. *Intermarried* (Kehrer, 2013), her second monograph, was selected for *American Photography* and featured, among others, in the *NY Times Sunday Review* and *Artforum*. [Click here](#) for her official website.



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