

Closeup Pictures, From A Distance



Yael Ben-Zion's "Milk."

Comfort and detachment in the photos of Yael Ben-Zion at the 92nd Street Y.

Thursday, April 28, 2011

Caroline Lagnado

Special To The Jewish Week

In a series of photographs currently being exhibited at the Milton J. Weill Art Gallery at the 92nd Street Y, Yael Ben-Zion, a New York-based photographer evokes life in modern-day Israel. Born in Minneapolis and raised in Arad in southern Israel, Ben-Zion moved to the States to pursue advanced law studies at Yale only to pick up a camera and fall in love with photography while working on her law degree.

The 38-year-old travels back to Israel frequently and views the society she left behind with a level of comfort of being home, as well as the detachment offered by her medium-format film camera.

Entitled "5683 miles away" — denoting the distance between the airports in New York and Tel Aviv — Ben-Zion does not simply present family snapshots or charming Israeli vistas in these pictures; she instead shows a variety of shots taken of real life. Her photographs are those of someone who knows Israel well enough to move beyond the obvious.

At first glance many of the photos appear banal. These pictures of the everyday — a variety of still lifes, portraits, interior and outdoor scenes — may seem unremarkable. But on closer glance, it becomes clear that for the most part, these pictures couldn't have been taken anywhere else. It is not just that a container of flour has packaging in Hebrew, or that a (Hebrew) Haaretz newspaper lies on a breakfast table beside a Tnuva plastic milk bag. It's the colors of the landscape (printed richly in chromographic prints in the exhibit as well as in the accompanying book published by Kehrer), showing both the vivid greenery as well as arid desert indigenous to the Jewish state.

Ben-Zion's self-assured scenes are studied and detailed, like the way a stoic black iris has taken root among rocks and sand in one photograph. In "Lea and Shimon," a photo composed mostly of shadows, a woman tends to an older man's forehead, as bits of light illuminate minor details around them. In another shot, a piece of schnitzel is partially obscured by the pink and blue dinnerware laid upon it in a metal tin. The colors of the plastic cutlery rival that of a tall stack of rainbow-colored boxes sitting beside it, seemingly the work of whoever is about to eat the chicken, perhaps while it was heating up.

The book's cover image, "Flags," is mostly composed of a clear sky; a thin line of rich blue water rims the bottom edge of the photograph. At the lower right, a small shack is partially depicted.

An Israeli flag as well as a white flag denoting good beach conditions sway calmly, welcoming swimmers.

It is also the way Israel's larger situation creeps into normal life — in one photo, a green toy gun rests on a child's table, denoting the acculturation of the military; detonated grenades languish in dried weeds in another. The separation barrier is evoked by a gray construction wall at a playground construction site as well as in a shot of a yellow fence on the beach keeping a man in his bathing suit, goggles in hand, away from dry land. We are made to wonder why police tape borders a dirt field where two children kick around a soccer ball, and in an otherwise unexceptional desert camping scene, a potentially menacing fruit knife stands upright in a bowl of green sabra fruit. The resulting feeling evoked from many of these images is a sense of unease.

Through May 2, 2011 at the Milton J. Weill Art Gallery, 92nd Street Y, 1395 Lexington Ave. For information (212) 415-5563.

Read more: [Photography](#) [Jewish life](#) [New York](#) [Photography](#) [tel aviv](#) [Yael Ben-Zion](#)