



Beloved Country

Orit Ishay's comprehensive show at the Prague City Gallery includes images of bomb shelters, military uniforms, mourning rituals, woman soldiers, and a scrapbook of local dried flowers that had been given to General Allenby. It seems that the entirety of activities Ishay engages in creates an interesting critical course in which information loses its content and reality sheds its substance.

Critique / Hagai Ulrich August 17, 2017

Video works, prints of manipulated images, etchings, and found objects are all part of "Deer Country," Orit Ishay's solo exhibition (curated by Dalia Levin), now being shown at the House of Photography in the Prague City Gallery (Galerie hlavního města Prahy). Ishay plucks culturally, politically, and historically charged images associated with the fundamental issues of life in Israel (bomb shelters in remote areas, mourning rituals, women soldiers, local flora), and, using acts of disruption and interruption, achieves visual abstraction of the original information to the point where it partially, or totally, disappears.

The transfer of information is emphasized in the name of the exhibition, "Deer Country." The phrase is used in biblical verses in the books of Daniel and Ezekiel describing a beautiful land, and in Jeremiah, where the land is described as an object of desire. The curator mentions the association of the deer to Israel's postal service (its symbol) and as a synecdoche for the transfer of information throughout the land of Israel. However, the images in the exhibition emphasize the aspect of its disruption. Ishay takes images and terms that are essentially associated with land, or information-rich objects, disrupts them in various forms and techniques, turning the richness of the object of desire into a shallow surface, a reality of life in the shadow of militarism, in which information loses its content and reality sheds its substance.

5A_Orit Ishay_4172.jpg



[1]Orit Ishay, "Deer Country", Installation view, second floor

Left and center, photographs from the series "the Way, Where is There; on the right' photographs from the series "Desert Dream"

Ishay uses various methods of disruption and interference: deconstructing and reconstructing the image, enlarging, reducing, converting it to black-and-white, pixelating, color manipulation. The particular intervention is listed next to each work. It seems that overall, the concreteness of the action is important only on the anecdotal level since the significance is rooted in the multiplicity and the observation of the full range of processes and the fundamental act of eliminating information. Among the works: *Blind Spots* (2006), a video work in which Ishay takes apart and put together again a black-and-white photograph showing sparrows that appear blackened and frozen in the branches of a tree. The image reveals itself gradually, from complete transparency to full visibility, displaying the whole tonality from black to white; several series of pixelated photographs based on mourning wreaths laid on soldiers' graves, including one of eight photographs of wreaths in shades of gray, and one in which the petals have been Photoshopped out and recombined as imperfect wreaths. In *Sacred Landscape* (2017), Ishay selected images from a booklet of photographs taken in the 19th century in Palestine, showing places of historical, religious, and political significance: photographs of daily, secular life in Jerusalem during a snowy winter, alongside one of Rachel's Tomb and one that was taken in Tiberias. She converted them to black-and-white and cut them in strips, thus disassociating them from the political and historical context, making them nowhere, non-cities.

[3A_Orit Ishay_6183bbb.jpg](#) [2]



[3]Orit Ishay, "Deer Country", Installation view, detail, first floor

From left to right: Blind Spots, video; detail from a photograph from the series "Sacred Landscapes," 2017; the Last Waltz, diptych, manipulated prints from the series "Terribly Pretty, Awfully Beautiful"

[2A_ Orit Ishay_4141aaa.jpg](#) [4]



[5]Orit Ishay, "Deer Country", Installation view, detail, first floor
From the series "Terribly Pretty, Awfully Beautiful"

The original images Ishay uses are saturated with concrete information and are associated with various expressions of life in Israel – the land, the army, militarism, bereavement, and life during wartime. The various tactics she uses and the treatment the images undergo empty them of their original content, producing a new contemporary meaning that casts a critical gaze on the very possibility of speaking about "facts" or of photography as a means of objectively documenting reality.

Works from the series "1917" (2010-2012) hang on the second floor. Ishay photographed pages from a scrapbook of local dried flowers, allegedly given to General Allenby after conquering Palestine from the Ottoman Empire on December 9, 1917. She enlarged the photographs considerably, printed and framed them. However, rather than manifesting the rich materiality of the small, dried flowers, the process of photographing and enlarging caused the images to look illustrative and transparent, extended beyond their original physical properties. The album lies beside the photographs under a glass bell, like an archaeological artifact, or evidence. Next to it are two olive wood figurines of deer that Ishay has found in the flea market. These objects are the exceptions that prove the rule – the original information – before being photographed and then disrupted.





[7]Orit Ishay, 1917 #02, 2012, photograph
135x100 cm Archival inkjet print on Fine Art photo paper



[11A_ishay_1917#01 \(r\).jpg](#) **[8]**



[9]Orit Ishay, 1917 #01, 2012, photograph
135x100 cm Archival inkjet print on Fine Art photo paper



In the video work *Serial No. 2953*, positioned nearby, the camera scans a sculpture of a woman soldier (a work by Simon Fogelman, 1960, from the collection of the Petach Tikva Museum of Art). The sculpture, enlarged in the video and blown-up (its actual size is 132cm tall), moves slowly on a rotating platform, in the dark, while archival images of women in the Israeli military (woman soldier's roles, military roll calls) pop up, perhaps as memories. The video seems to closely examine the body and the physicality of the sculpture as it rotates in the dark, while a spotlight highlights its contours and shadows. The close-up images and the dramatic lighting disrupt rather than highlight the physical aspect of the sculpture by enlarging it far beyond its actual size. The historical and political value of the sculpture is replaced by high-contrast, dark, blurred, low-resolution images, with no real content. The specific body is neutralized of its individuality and becomes a cliché – a collective erotic image of the "woman-soldier" in Israeli society.

[8A_Orit Ishay_still from video Serial No 2953 \(r\).jpg](#) [10]



[11]Orit Ishay, *Serial No. 2953*, 2015, video art film
4:00 min, original sound track

Several framed prints are included in *See, Land, Air* (2016), each displaying a single-colored rectangle in shades of beige, green, or light blue and white, overlaid horizontally and completing the image. The tones were sampled from the colors of uniforms worn by soldiers in the Israeli military. Another work contains identical squares, looking like enlarged pixels. The original image (military uniforms laden with contextual and political meanings and human context, and visual lushness



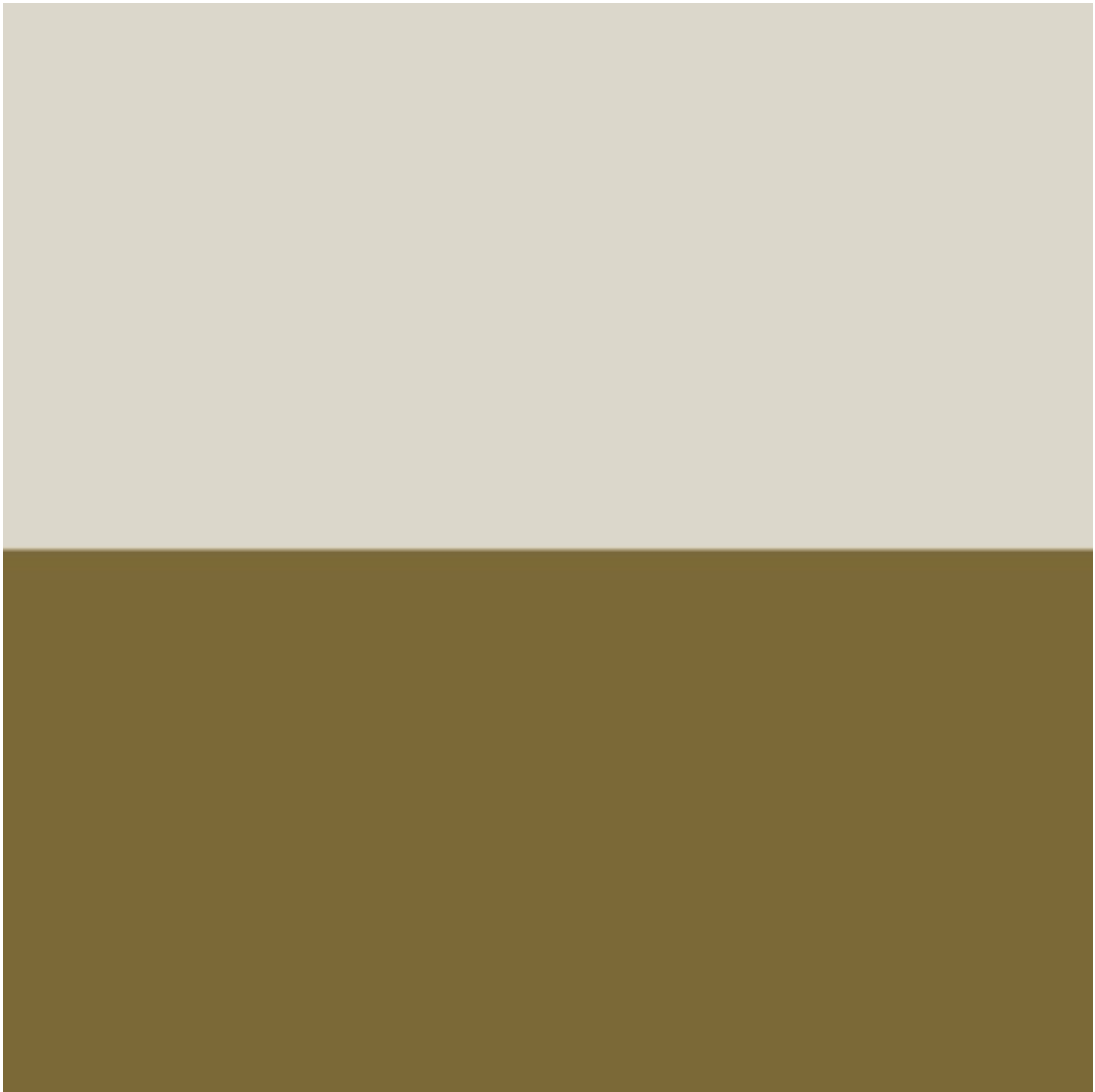
colored by weather and other circumstances) has been severely reduced until it reached its final state, where the physical source disappeared, leaving not a trace.

[10A_יבשה3 ואירועים קבע.jpg](#) **[12]**



[13]Orit Ishay, Sea, Land, Air, #03, 2016, pigment print
105x105 cm, Archival Fine Art photo paper

[9A_יום2 אוויר ב א סדיר.jpg](#) **[14]**



[15]Orit Ishay, *Sea, Land, Air, #02*, 2016, pigment print
105x105 cm, Archival Fine Art photo paper

Public Domain (2009) is a typological series of photographs of brightly painted bomb shelters in peripheral settlements in Israel. The small, framed photographs are hung in a grid. The shelters Ishay photographed were built in the 1950s and 1960s, to protect the public from a military attack. Over the years, following changes in technologies and also in requirements (for example, the building of safe rooms inside homes), they have become superfluous but still very visible. To soften their threatening presence people from the communities started to paint the shelters in bold colors, to make them more pleasant-looking. The result, as Ishay's photographs testify, was just the opposite, since the bright colors made the structures stand out more. But this is not the kind of photography that provides information and documentation is not the main topic of the images. The stressing of the ornamental colorfulness of the shelters against the background, and the manner of hanging the works disconnects the shelters from their context, from the political significance of their presence in public spaces, and from the cultural-historical context of their appearance, which is reminiscent of the pixelated uniforms of the soldiers or, very differently, the enlarged images of



dried flowers.

[13A_09 Public Domain 50x40cm sderot \(res\) \(Large\).jpg](#) **[16]**



[17]Orit Ishay, Public Domain, Sderot, 2008, photograph
40x50 cm, c-print

[14A_07 public domain \(r\).jpg](#) **[18]**



[19]Orit Ishay, Public Domain, Tzelafon, 2007, photograph
40x50 cm, c-print

Oz 21 (2016) is a 15-minute-long video depicting two events taking place in two separate locations in Arad, a town in the Negev, the southern region of Israel. In the first segment, dancers perform some kind of a military roll call next to a Brutalist structure in the center of the town, while a fragment from *Don't Call It a Night* by Amos Oz – a book about a remote desert town, written when Oz was living in Arad – is read aloud in the background. In the second part, the dance is more free and abstract, at the edge of town, next to a large sculpture surrounded by desert, while in the background the song "the path to light" is played, performed by the Arad Seniors Choir. The choreography comprises even, mechanical movements. The formal similarity in the appearance of the dancers and their movements suggests that their individuality has undergone reduction and generalization. The narration from Oz is also disrupted, fragmented, with even breaks between words, creating a robotic effect and neutralizing the descriptive wealth that normally characterizes Oz's writing. This time, rather than impact the resolution of the video image or its visibility, the action of the dancers, the mechanical movement, and the de-individualization blur the concrete information, so that instead of Arad we get everywhere, and instead of individuals – a group of identical, non-specific items.

Beside each work there is a brief explanatory text, meant to provide the Czech viewers with background information that, for Israelis, is familiar and banal (bomb shelters, wreaths, women in the military, General Allenby). The exhibition is in Prague, and the way it is described to the Prague audience is different from the way it would have been in Israel. The addition of general explanations by Levin operates similarly to Ishay's works – concrete information becomes meaningless, and a lot of specific information undergoes reduction into a general syntax, lacking concreteness. Like the



multiple techniques Ishay employs, so do the accompanying texts show how the flow of information is blinding and general knowledge leads to the obliteration of the specific information. The whole of the actions in "Deer Country" is more important than the anecdotal act, the abstraction of knowledge is more important than specific information. Ishay's observation and criticism of Israel's reality becomes a more fundamental question about the deletion, uniformity, and blurring of information, about the role of photography as a documenter or creator of reality, and about the very possibility of treating information as facts. The whole, the disruptions, and the uniformity connect the local viewers to what they know about the military, bureaucracy, and meaninglessness from the history of their country and the historical-literary space of their city. Thus, it might be interesting for viewers from Israel in the Prague exhibition to view their reality through images that disturb the source and are distant from it.

[16A_where is there_the way_110x152.5cm.jpg](#) [20]



[21]Orit Ishay, Where Is There #03, 2012, photograph
110x155 cm, Archival inkjet print on Fine Art photo paper

“[Orit Ishay: Deer Country](#) [22]”, (Curator: Dalia Levin), Prague City Gallery, House of Photography,
Revoluční 5, Prague 1, Prague, 6.6.2017 – 9.10.2017

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[22] <http://en.ghmp.cz/orit-ishay-deer-country/>