

“I BECAME A LANDSCAPE PAINTER”*

Orit Bulgaro

“I write: I inhabit my sheet of paper, I invest it, I travel across it.
I inscribe blanks, spaces (jumps in the meaning: discontinuities,
transitions, changes of key).
I write in the margin.”
(Goerges Perec, *The Page*)

“...the city splits into its dialectical poles. It becomes a landscape that
opens up to him and a parlor that encloses him.”
(Walter Benjamin, “*The Return of the Flâneur*”)

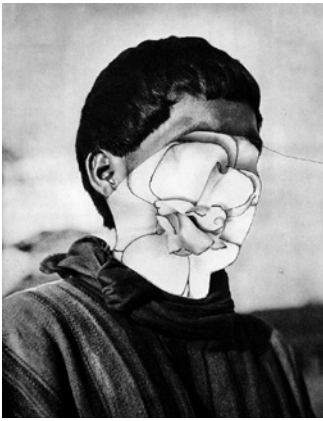


Fig. 17

In the new series of works by Shay Zilberman a single portrait stands out among the various landscapes scenes, its subject posed in classic shoulder-length framing and half-profile. The man depicted wears a dark garment with a wide sloping collar, as that of a monk's, and behind him is an open landscape. His face, however, remains obscure, mysteriously concealed behind begonia petals in full bloom. Opening as it were before our very eyes, the flower seals the face, tightly masking it like a second-skin. The man's gaze thus remains shuttered; veiled under a mask of flora, we can only imagine it. Although Zilberman conceals the eyes of all subjects in his

portraits—whether with organic and floral motifs, lush hair additions, or by artificially shutting their eyes—it seems that here, against the various views that surround him in the adjacent pictures, the shuttered gaze is designated a different role.

There is something timeless about this portrait, which does not lend itself easily to reading. The solitary monk seems to belong in a different time a place, an indefinite domain faraway. Despite the ambiguity of his missing look, the dress suggests a pilgrim set out on his journey, as does the open landscape stretching behind him. He is, then, a man fully immersed in the task of pilgrimage before him. The missing face would then conjure his presumed state of mind—that of a man in pursuit of spiritual revelation, of epiphany. And still, despite the religious calling that ought to have motivated his journey, and which befits retrospection, one still wonders how a revelation might manifest itself to someone in the absence of a look, of eyes.

If we were to imagine the pilgrim's gaze—to see it in our mind's eye—we would likely have him looking at the imagined views and cities that surround him, collaged images as vague and elusive as he is. The pilgrim, this predecessor of the modern tourist, casts a gaze of nostalgia and sentimentality on the views he encounters on his way, landscapes that, however stitched and patched-up, still hold a certain promise, an impact. Yet as one traverse the threshold of modernity, these landscapes are pervaded by an ever-growing air of banality. As the monk pursues his slow, archaic and winding road, a touristic gaze gradually sneaks in, announcing promises and revelations of different kind, more real and material—visions of optical immediacy.

For this movement across space, both that of the pilgrim's and later of the tourist's, is never only a physical one. To sociologist and theorist Dean MacCannell, "the behavior of sightseers and the things they go to see [provides] clues about the hidden structures and meanings of life at the end of the modern epoch."³³ In this sense, tourism may be viewed as an essential existential state independent of whichever site one visits and experiences, offering an exterior, reflexive gaze on things. In his vision and behavior, the tourist testifies to deeper social structures. As he travels from place to place, taking in the sights and impressions encountered on his way, snapping them, he produces an amateur's documentation that not only captures things, but also registers his own culture and background. Hence the concept of tourism comes to hold a metaphorical value.

Zilberman's collages are made of photographic ready-mades. In his current body of work, the representations of views are composed of fragments taken from old illustrated books, photographic albums containing picturesque views and touristic vistas. As opposed to the amateurish photographic practice of the occasional tourist, these are professional shots, executed with neat technicality and precision. And while they cast a fascinated gaze on the view, such renderings also signal the worthy, appropriate route one should follow. Such photographs objectify the visible world and claim ownership; attractions, places of interest, occurrences and experiences are commodified, designated for consumption and appropriation. The picture book format groups different sites together, laying out a whole range of views and experiences to be had, like a multifaceted curated exhibition. But as soon as they are commodified, any trace of a singular gaze is banished from the views. The individual experience inherent in contemplation is cast aside, forfeited.

The intimate size of the collages betrays the picture books from which they came. Yet unlike the collective touristic gaze contained in the albums, as derived from the modes of representation in art and the media, here in the collages the lost subjective gaze reappears. The collaged images generate a private take on existing imagery, as second-hand fragments that reconnect with the well-trodden touristic narratives. The treated image is reincorporated into an endless circulation of images, re-inscribing itself in the social-cultural nexus, but this time with an individual stamp. The new image reconstructs a collective gaze while offering the renewed possibility of an intimate and subjective contemplation of the view, also evoking the surreal.

The collage technique not only intertwines the private with the generic, but also produces an amalgamation of times and places. In Zilberman's works, the reappraisal of the landscape offers then the mirage of feigned travel, of a romantic, circular journeying between past and present, cityscapes and country views, wilderness, civilization, and back again. Self-contained capsules of domesticated nature are weaved into open expanses, then into built environments. Zilberman connects rocky landscapes and buildings, or an archeological stone staircase with that of a modern building in concrete around which is a cultivated garden, a patch of subdued vegetation growing next to a wilderness shrubbery. This movement raises thoughts on the power relations between man and nature, on the impossibility of a direct encounter with nature, still unsoiled, unmediated and ungoverned by man.

Most of all, the general impression arising from this series of views obscures the mental and physical differentiation between one touristic site and the next—as is also the case in each isolated collage, in the interweaving of the limits of times and places. This artistic strategy reproduces the touristic modes of representation prevalent in popular media, where the

different sites are packaged into an all-encompassing touristic conception—a catalogue of the world upheld by the tourism industry, made of distant, dislocated spots on the map. The spatial and temporal continuity between the places and their corresponding historical, localized narratives is disturbed—a phenomenon which Zilberman, the tourist-collagist, follows through, reconstructing a fictive cultural heritage and a novel global identity. The technique of collage, by pasting together distinct geographical territories side by side, outlines an ‘imagined geography,’ an echo of the physical territory to which it refers—a mental image reflective of the culture, politics, history and society that inhabit it.**

Zilberman’s work process brings to mind the construction of a model stage set of intimate proportions. This theatrical set corresponds to a realistic landscape, yet the artist infuses it with private fantasies of his own, manifesting the movement between the private and universal aspects of contemplating the view. The commodifying gaze cast on a sight of touristic interest, which congeals in the photographic collage into a dead souvenir, receives here a new life. The work of pastiche and reconstruction afflicts a wound in the collective gaze, opening in it a strange domain of ambiguity governed by rules of its own. In *Untitled (Promise)* (fig. 37), the ambiguity arises from the uncommon relation between foreground and background, planes that are traditionally differentiated. A similar effect can be observed in *Untitled* (fig. 44), where the textured surface of the background seems like an oversized sample of the apartment building in the foreground. Moreover, an ant with its cast shadow are clearly discernable on the background plane, giving



Fig. 37

a surreal effect that not only distorts scale, but also the presumed immateriality the field of vision. In *Untitled* (fig. 46), the mountainous landscape of a desert stretching to the horizon morphs into a the view of a lush valley, its cultivated parcels seen in aerial view. And in another work, *Untitled* (fig. 34), also featuring an architectural erection, a gigantic exotic plant overshadows the standard apartment building seen in the center, compromising the normal coherence of scale in aerial perspective. In many of Zilberman’s collages, both of nature and cityscapes, the combination of distinct elements creates the perplexity of a view simultaneously seen from near and far, thereby renouncing the point of view of traditional painting in favor of the augmented fiction proper of collage.



Fig. 44

Along with the universal aspect inherent in the touristic catalogue, the works bring sights and attributes typical of the local Israeli landscape, from Metzudat Ze’ev in Tel Aviv (a 1960’s high-rise in brutalist style) and modernist architecture in general to cactuses and desert views. In *Untitled (Promise)*, the arid, sandy hills evoke a primeval land of genesis, still untainted and full of promise. Yet the image itself cannot attest to an authentic, unmediated encounter with the primeval landscape it depicts, but rather to a stylized rendering aware of its own mediation and manifesting itself as such—a collagistic ready-made generating the feeling of déjà vu, a particular gaze attesting to its own regeneration as representation. The marks of the collagistic cutting and pasting are exposed



Fig. 46



Fig. 34

through stitches that hold this composite image together, confounding the eye: The upper contours of mountaintops fuse with pieced-up desert views, which recreates the image as a reinvented palimpsestic space, with the marks of former interventions still visible.

The landscape is just as condensed in the urban views as well. Ostensibly referencing concrete urban vistas, those views, complete with their buildings, vegetation and roads, rather point to a mental state, to a subjective gaze cast on an already represented view, an image stored in collective imagination. The theatrical set erected in the collage captures and immortalizes the shift from the touristic view as documented in photographs to a reflexive mental view, an imagined geography; the realm of memories past stretches beyond into a continuous present. The urban images correspond to a Western brutalist architecture, a modernist hodgepodge of industrial-looking geometric structures in exposed concrete—a style of building familiar to the local Israeli eye.

These are not merely pictures of views, nor do they offer the open expanses for the eye to see. It is the road, most of all, which is highlighted in them. In some of the collages, a trajectory is traced through the spatial barriers and divisions already present in the original source materials. Staircases, bridges, vegetation, shadows and scaffolding cross the view from side to side, etching it with signals and vectors for the eye to follow. While these appear to block the view, denying access as it were, they also invite us to respond to the challenged offered by the recomposed image, calling on the viewer to tour it with the eye. It is an invitation to wonder through a physical, but especially a mental space, where we join the chain of touristic gazes with new ones of our own. They summon forth a private gaze on an exterior view of the world, which is just as much an interior—a gaze intended, perhaps, to complement the sealed gaze of the monk.

* The artist in conversation

** Lucy Lippard, *Forward*, in Dean Maccannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. xi.

*** David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).