

Barzach

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If we list the things that make Ron Amir's photographs of Jisr al-Zarqa and its residents possible – curiosity, familiarity, trust, collaboration, involvement, reciprocal interest, shared time, continuity, identification, and mutual responsibility – we will come to understand that the fundamental value expressed in Amir's work, the value that in many ways underlies it, is friendship.

As one considers the many potential pitfalls of a photographic project predicated upon the observation of the strange and unfamiliar, of the cultural other, one becomes aware of the deeply human relationships forged between Amir and the people he photographs, which attest to a kind of closeness unaffected by ethical reservations. Amir's photographs involve the writing of a double biography, in which various risks, changes, and events simultaneously impact the photographer and his subjects. This is the underlying principle of this long-term project, as well as what endows it with political validity. It involves an internalization of the potential problems awaiting Amir's gaze (including his national, social, and cultural affiliations), as well as a definition of the photographic act in relation to a set of internal oppositions that arise in a particular sphere. In this context, the definition of what is permissible evolves out of a series of interdictions beginning with "Thou shalt not."

What is at stake here is not the creation of conditions for welcoming the allure of otherness; instead, the dissolution of "otherness" becomes a subject in its own right. The lengthy sojourn in the geographical and human sphere of Jisr al-Zarqa; the familiarity with its way of life and with the personal and familial history of the photographed subjects; and the educational activities offered within the community, while assimilating into

it and into the life of village, are not merely the existing circumstances or the means used to make this kind of photography possible; rather, they exist within it as a concrete image.

The hegemonic paradigm of liberal photography, which engages in a limited ethical discourse through its gaze at the other, is exchanged in this case for a gaze created by an active collaboration between the photographer and his subjects, as they shape the event and the image to which it gives rise based on a common interest. The photographic act is thus both the by-product and the climax of the photographed event, so that the distinction between cause and effect is blurred; the gathering produces a photograph, while the photograph, in turn, is the reason for the gathering. This dynamic gives rise to a portrait that captures the honest desire for mutual acquaintance, as well as the reservations and differences that accompany it.

*Barzach** was the name given by Amir to one of the earliest exhibitions centering on his work in Jisr al-Zarqa. In Arabic, this word refers to the encounter between fresh water flowing through rivers and streams after the rain and salty seawater. Due to the difference in saline content, these two bodies of water do not immediately intermingle.

In the context of Amir's photography, the term *barzach* signifies the desire (and difficulty) involved in intermingling. It is expressive of a desire to create a gaze that takes care not to charge its subjects with the value of "otherness." This is a gaze whose political validity stems from the obvious identification between

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the photographer and those he photographs, from their friendship, and from the powerful subjectivity inherent to the stance of the photographer who refrains from exploiting the effects of otherness.

These observations underscore the importance of the prosaic quality inherent to the photographs, which serves to focus the gaze on the drama of human relations. These photographs capture no extreme events; at the very most, they contain an "event." Their power stems from the insistence on lingering, on sustained observation, and on the value of "duration." They exchange the "decisive moment" for patience, and trade in the ultimate image for a gradually accumulating set of qualities.

Amir began to hesitantly circumscribe his physical arena of action on the beach – the village's western, public border, and slowly penetrated to the heart of the village – a trajectory running parallel to the chronology of a tourist who becomes a guest, and then a close friend. This arena of action was defined by the friendships created between Amir and his subjects, as well as by the educational activities he initiated – including, among other things, teaching and the establishment of a photography studio in the village community center.

In Amir's presence, photography becomes a tool for creating interactions, for active engagement rather than mere observation. Such active engagement, moreover, cannot be taken for granted: intermingling is a dramatic and ambitious desire given the isolated existence of Jisr al-Zarqa's residents in a number of different contexts: geography (with the exception of the country's mixed cities, this is the only place where Arab residents live along Israel's shoreline); nationality (in relation to the Jewish population as well as in relation to Arab society), and socioeconomic status (in relation to the residents of Caesarea, who erected a dirt rampart to create a physical and cultural barrier between Caesarea and Jisr al-Zarqa).

For an outside observer, Ron Amir's photographs facilitate a process of acquaintance. The photographs of interiors taken in local homes capture the first instances of mingling between the photographer and his subjects. As such, they represent trust and closeness just as much as they represent a specific cultural arena.

At the same time, the power of Amir's photographic project also lies in the subtle traces pointing to the constant gap between what is captured by the gaze and its location on the outside. One of the photographs that most saliently capture this quality is *Malek* (p. 132), an image of a child posing in his family's living room with various Ninja accessories, as if preparing to attack. In this photograph, the eye is stabbed by a strange body – a child's body with an intense gaze holding a sharp object that is oriented frontally, towards the photographer and the viewer. As one becomes aware of the generosity of both the photographer and his subjects in the context of this photographic project, *Malek* enables us to also turn our gaze to the islands of aversion and holding back.

The possibility of seeing this photograph as a portrait centered on the child's subjectivity is immediately dissolved by the presence of national symbols. The domestic space is penetrated by the surrounding geographical and political sphere, which blurs the boundaries between interior and exterior. This photograph is not imbued with the sense of solace associated with domesticity, nor with the related experience of retreating from the world outside. Even as an autonomous image seen in isolation from the project as a whole, it provides a comprehensive picture of the visual, political, and socioeconomic conditions that function as a metonymical sphere for the photographed child. Like *Malek*, who stands at its center, the house itself tensely prepares to be observed, and is fully immersed in the act of showing and being seen: the objects in the photograph come together to form a

single, frontal arrangement reminiscent of a theatrical fourth wall, while being relegated to what is, from *Malek's* perspective, the periphery of the photograph. Yet the openness to the gaze is clearly conditional, and the photograph's rhetoric does not succumb to it: its distancing power stems from the impression that the photographer's gaze is under attack. One hunter faces another. The one setting a visual trap faces a child disguised as an aggressor, a fighter. An Arab child faces a Jewish photographer. A "subject" faces a "speaker" – a "subject" defending himself against the photographer's proprietary gaze, against the conquest of his portrait for the sake of creating an image. The photograph fights back, and is metaphorically transformed into a space of resistance. This space is occupied by the one whom the photographer attempts to speak for or represent, out of interest or identification, while transforming him into a rhetorical component of a critical gaze intent upon the pursuit of justice; the one whose voice is dubbed into a loud cry by a gaze that underscores his weakness or helplessness, as part of a demand for change included in the dubber's humanistic project.

The photographer's gaze becomes potent when it is aware of the privileged stance from which it operates, and when it incorporates this stance into the image. When the presence of privilege is neither transparent nor vague, but rather acquires a factual dimension, it becomes a condition for the existence of the image and serves as an active component of the final product. The revelation of the tragic aspects of the encounter between the strong and the weak, between the sovereign and the one subjected to him, is one way of imbuing the image with an ethical charge. This is not an indifferent, neutral encounter, nor one that ends with the restoration of justice. Rather, it marks the point of friction between two sociopolitical circles, and produces a portrait of the conditions underlying their encounter.

Malek charts the distance separating the photographer from the viewer and precludes our ability, as viewers, to automatically assimilate into the photograph and feel at home in it. It draws a line between the photographer's presence in *Malek's* home, which is based on familiarity, mutual trust, and affection, and between the viewer – an uninvited guest located in the protected sphere of an outside observer.

The image of a child posing in an act of self-defense or attack in the public area of the home, against a background image of the Dome of the Rock, Arab typography, and an enlarged photograph of a man, serves as a lightning rod for the various identities associated with the term "Arab," while blurring the various types of difference it contains into a single, monolithic definition. In this context, little or no distinction is made between the Arabs residing in different areas within Israel, between Israeli Arabs and Palestinian Arabs, or between Muslims and Christians. Like part of the Arab population itself, this monolithic definition is based on the use of the terms "Arabs" and "Palestinians" in an interchangeable manner. And so the images hanging on the living wall are changed for, or interchanged with, symbols of "the struggle": the photograph of a relative who went to work in the south comes to resemble that of a *shahid* (a martyr) of the kind displayed in the homes of bereaved families, and the Dome of the Rock appears as a symbol of belonging and ownership defended by a child fighting in the Intifada.

Within the reality of life in Jisr al-Zarqa, which is delineated in this project with great care and a growing degree of detail, the photograph of *Malek* (p. 132) stands out as signifying a different type of relationship to the real. The direct realism characteristic of Amir's photographic project is quietly invaded by a fantastic territory, which overlays the sphere of concrete existence. This is a documentary photograph of a child's fantasy, a reality centered on playful disguise. This is not "a child

immersed in play," but rather a child demonstrating a game; he has what to show, and the photographic act is a form of realizing and distilling the act of imagining and disguising oneself. The front is now occupied by a sovereign child who prides himself on his actions, his weapons, their skilful handling, the act of resembling a —, his game, his heroism and courage, his imaginary power. Bruce Lee of the coastal road, Ninja fighting the tyranny of Caesarea. The photograph charges the intangible, ephemeral sphere of what is imagined with the tension stemming from the dissonance between desires and fantasy and between reality and facts. This photograph was born of a collaboration between subject and photographer on the creation of an image, even if their points of view are different: Malek wishes to be captured as a hero and fighter, while the photographer sees a child imagining himself to be a hero and a fighter. For him, the photograph is a means of registering his power. For the photographer, by contrast, it is a means of documenting his vulnerability. *Malek* resembles a photograph of the hunter at home, of a road fighter in his living room, of an adventurer on the carpet, of an explorer in familiar territory. For the viewer who is not a guest, a close acquaintance, or a friend who feels at home, this is a foreign country. For the photographer, this image – like many other photographs taken in Jisr al-Zarqa – represents the simple, heartfelt request of the photographed individual to have his photograph taken.

The political sphere in which Amir's artistic project unfolds calls for an immediate ethical examination of the photographic act. This interpretive demand precedes any discussion of the other acts to which his photographic practice gives rise. In many ways, Amir's photographic ethic is a defining aspect of his photographic gaze, in all of its different modes.

The history of Zionism is filled with encounters between different types of otherness (with the members of different cultures brought together by Judaism). This history repeatedly presents Israeli-Jewish society as existing in tension with the forms of otherness within it, while underscoring its opposition to them.

As in every immigrant society, Israel's cultural heterogeneity calls for awareness to the dramatic, charged nature of the human encounter. The Israeli sphere is shaped by constant movement between extremism and the dissolution of categorizing mechanisms. This is a movement from the categorical to the singular, from the soft contact between two bodies to the rigidity of thought as expressed through identity-related terms and definitions.

The representation of Arab figures in nineteenth-century photography as archetypal images of Middle-Eastern people gave way, in the early twentieth century, to their representation as imaginary biblical figures; later on, Zionist propaganda presented these figures as backward and inadequate in relation to the modern Jew. In this context, photographs of Arabs in Israel have served as a seismograph for difference and for the impossibility of truly seeing. This is the background against which Amir's photographic project unfolds. The placement of this project in the conflicted context of Israel's identity politics facilitates an understanding and definition of its unique, exceptional character, while blurring the categories into which it may be absorbed.