

## Jisr al-Zarqa – Haifa – Holon

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Ron Amir's body of work has evolved for over an entire decade, while remaining focused on an area measuring approximately one-and-a-half kilometers. This is a remarkably long period of time for the development of a single photographic project, especially within such an incredibly restricted geographical area. Amir's photographic activity takes place along the strip of sandstone extending between the Mediterranean coast and the Haifa-Tel Aviv highway; between Caesarea, Kibbutz Maagan Michael, and the Taninim Stream. This is the area of the Jisr al-Zarqa municipality – where Amir has been photographing people, streets, houses, and the beach since 2002. This is also where he worked for four years as an artist-teacher, introducing dozens of residents to the possibilities embedded in photography.

The history of Israeli photography includes no other project defined by a similar focus and consistency, and circumscribed within such clearly defined physical confines, while simultaneously introducing into photographic practice such a wide range of gazes and forms of representation, and opening up the possibilities contained in the photographic act. In this context, one may think of the typological bodies of work created in Israel during the 1980s and the early 1990s, which centered on the visibility of different sites and on their defining architectural traits. Especially relevant are the photographs taken by Yigal Shem Tov in Herzliya's Neve Amal neighborhood in the 1980s; Efrat Shvily's photographs in new neighborhoods and settlements in and around Jerusalem in the 1990s; and, most notably, Gilad Ophir's photographic project during the same decade, which examined the development of real-estate projects along the Israeli coastline, from Rishon LeZion

in the south to Or Akiva in the north. Ophir's gaze focused on new building practices in Israel, while calling attention to their hybrid architectural style and to their middle-class character as a further evolution of the Zionist building project. Two decades have gone by since Ophir photographed those nascent neighborhoods. In Jisr al-Zarqa, which is located in the vicinity of Or Akiva, there still are no new neighborhoods. This is a place that seems to give rise to no dreams – not even real-estate dreams.

One of the significant differences between Ron Amir's project in Jisr al-Zarqa and its precedents in the context of Israeli photography is Amir's focus on people rather than typologies. He does not limit himself to a particular aspect of photography, or even to a particular genre, but rather engages with a single site by creating various types of photographs – exteriors and interiors, individual portraits and group portraits, while undermining traditional divisions between staged and documentary photography.

Amir's body of work is simultaneously presented at the Haifa Museum of Art, the Israeli Center for Digital Art in Holon, and the Jisr al-Zarqa High School. The first two institutions, in Haifa and in Holon, are part of the art establishment. Yet given the urban reality in which the creation of a special museum building is considered to be a luxury, both these art centers are located in former school buildings. The Haifa Museum of Art is housed in a stone building that was built in the 1930s, during the British Mandate, as an English-language girls' school attended by Jewish, Muslim, and Christian students. Following the foundation of the state, this school was transformed into a regular public high school.

The architectural vestiges of the school building – long corridors lined with former classrooms – are still visible within the museum. This educational, multi-cultural past resonates in the background of Ron Amir's exhibition at the museum, while tying it to the two other exhibition spaces in Jisr al-Zarqa and Holon.

The Israeli Center for Digital Art in Holon was originally located in the former Geulim School building in the Neve Arazim neighborhood, which closed once the neighborhood's population began aging and the number of students diminished significantly. In mid-2012, the center moved to the Jesse Cohen neighborhood, on the western side of Holon, while the building it vacated was once again made into a school – a process reflective of the demographic changes taking place in Holon. The center relocated to the former site of the Weizmann School, the Jesse Cohen neighborhood's elementary school, which was closed down by the Education Ministry. This building has yet to be adapted to its new purpose, and exhibitions are currently presented in the original classrooms. In this manner, one may observe not only the works of art, but also the environment in which neighborhood children studied over the years.

Since Jisr al-Zarqa does not have a space designated for the exhibition of art, the local high school seemed like a natural choice for housing the third part of this exhibition. The school is a central public building in Jisr al-Zarqa, and the art exhibition is displayed on its premises just as the Eid al-Fitr prayers are held in the local basketball court, due to the lack of sufficient space in the village's two mosques (see Vered Maimon's article, p. 154). In addition to the practical aspects of using three high-school buildings, the staging of this particular exhibition in these buildings appears as an act of poetic justice given the educational dimension inherent to Ron Amir's project, and the photographic training he has provided over the years to local boys and girls.

The line running between Haifa, Jisr, and Holon delineates a Mediterranean identity that is far from monolithic, while pointing to different forms of marginality in Israel. With a train that once ran to Beirut and a mixed Jewish, Muslim, and Christian population, Haifa represented, and perhaps still represents, the Middle East, while serving as the capital of Arab culture in Israel. Holon is a city that grew out of the sand dunes, yet without the aura surrounding the first Hebrew city, Tel Aviv. Indeed, its proletarian character calls to mind the former character of the city once known as "Red Haifa." Jisr al-Zarqa, which is home to an Arab population, stands out in terms of its confinement to the margins of Road No. 2 – a highly disturbing situation in the context of Israeli reality.

In March 2012, the Haifa Museum of Art presented the exhibition "Haifa – Jerusalem – Tel Aviv," which sought to map out past and present chapters in the history of art created in these three cities. Among other things, this exhibition sought to undermine the historical narrative that defines Israeli art as shaped by the tension between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. In this context, Haifa served as a parable for artistic and other forms of marginality. Ron Amir's large-scale photographic project now allows us to draw an additional line, which runs from Haifa through Jisr al-Zarqa to Holon – while touching upon the themes of marginality, difference, and otherness in the context of Israel's hegemonic agenda.

The Israeli Center for Digital Art has been active in the Jesse Cohen neighborhood for over three years. Its activities are motivated by the understanding that the center must act locally and address concrete issues and problems, while maintaining a wide-ranging perspective that treats its immediate environment not as a unique case, but rather as an environment shaped by local and national socioeconomic policies, as well as by global influences. This recognition has led the center to forge professional relations with art centers

active in similar neighborhoods both in Israel and in Europe. In an Israeli context, one of the challenges created by this mission is the overcoming of ethnic and national divides – which remain the most palpable form of separation within Israeli society – in order to develop relations predicated upon shared learning and action in different sites throughout the country. The concerns shared by the Jesse Cohen neighborhood and Jisr al-Zarqa are not coincidental, but are rather the result of related planning policies. Finding a common denominator capable of bringing together the residents and artists working in these different places is a true challenge, and Ron Amir's exhibition is a first step in this direction.

The collaboration between the Haifa Museum of Art and the Israeli Center for Digital Art in Holon is a fortunate by-product of this project. Indeed, the possibility of cultivating a shared approach that may facilitate relations between different art centers in Israel appears as a central strategy for maintaining and fostering artistic activities during a period marked by a significant decrease in the funds allocated to local culture and art.

We would like to thank all those who contributed to the realization of this project – Gilad Melzer, who conceived of and curated the exhibition; Vered Maimon, Doron Rabina, and Sami al-Ali, who contributed articles to this catalogue; Israel Lottery Council for Culture & Arts; The Midrasha School of Art, Beit Berl College; and Vivian Ostrovsky and the Ostrovsky Family Fund, who supported this catalogue and exhibition. Our heartfelt thanks go to the residents of Jisr al-Zarqa for their collaboration. Finally, we wish to thank Ron Amir, a photographer who believes in photography and restores the faith in its power.