

Construction Workers Photographs and Photography: An Intimate Project

How can a photographer overcome one's patronizing attitude towards their subjects? Ron Amir created a visual archive with a group of construction workers, currently presented in his exhibition "Invisible Presence".

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"All the photographs were taken in the setting of a single building and over a span of eighteen months – the duration of its construction" writes Vered Gani, the curator for "Invisible Presence", Ron Amir's exhibition. "During this period, the building functioned as a 'closed set' which the workers almost never left". Amir photographs the construction workers from up close, with a warm insight. He only takes their pictures when they rest, during their private time and on breaks. Despite of this, the signs of their hard labor are evident in every picture – its existence is total. Even in these private times they are still on the site, included and implemented within it.

In the building, the workers live in inhumane conditions, at unbearable levels of crowdedness, dirt and poverty. Their life conditions are directly set by the rate of their own progress: if the floors were not laid today, tonight they will sleep on cold cement. Their leisure times are barren and routine as their working hours. They spend them all together, crowdedly breathing the cement-scented air. Electrical connections are temporary and dangerous. Running water is a luxury they do not have. The beds are no more than wooden boards laid on building blocks. Their cloths and bags hang from nails sticking out of the bare wall. This is an empty-full construction site, populated by ghost-tenants. These are the real faces of affordable accommodation.

And still they smoke, laugh, watch television, take naps, cook, rest, and pose for pictures. They are stuck in a state of a multi-meaningful invisible presence. This is their illegal invisible presence, their half-secret invisible presence in the building, well after work hours are over, unable to return home or wander the streets. This is their invisible presence in the Israeli twilight zone, for all its hypocritical reign. This is their invisible presence in leisure, their presence in a company that creates compressed intimacy. Their presence in the company of a photographer, who eventually grows on them as they become comfortable in front of his camera. This is also their presence in the eye of the beholder, observing them and their images, despite their invisibility.

The view of Kfar Saba, in the fertilized, luxurious, green Sharon district, provides a fine contrast as it is framed by the torn windows, and looks more like postcards stuck on a wall than the actual reality seen through a window.

Amir has given his subject digital cameras and provided printing services. This trade allowed him to evade the colonial image and create a joint archive by allowing them to show the way they wish to be

represented, the way they perceive and experience themselves, the way they want to be seen. He allows them to present themselves, while blurring the speaker's image of an expert patron. He is the silent public-servant. At first glance it seems that the exhibition is divided into close-ups and panoramic views. But upon closer inspection, the panoramic pictures just as also crowded and dense. This is the illustration of the building as a grave; its workers as the living-dead. Amir reveals innovation and creativity even in these harsh poverty conditions, "their magnificent ability to domesticate these skeletal places into temporary environments of sheer, improvised beauty, often while presenting a risk to the safety of the user", as Gani puts it.

A close-up on a heart-shaped ashtray, filled with cigarette butts smoked to the filter line. This has become the symbolic essence of the construction workers' love ("Heart-Shaped Ashtray", 2011). Three shirtless construction workers, lying on a mattress with the blankets and comforters hung by the window to air for a bit. A broken ventilator and an old television sit in a corner. The window shows the image of the peaceful Jewish nature – white houses with red rooftops, surround by green earth and blue skies. An orange backpack hangs above the window frame, like the citrus fruit that nourishes Vitamin C into this Israeli essence ("Habib, Ali and Alla", 2011). The portrait of a young man on the background of a red-pink wool blanket hanging on the wall like a back-curtain, a photography-studio, improvised wallpaper. His hands are white with dried cement dust, his head covered by a hoodie that makes him look like some sort of priest, a ceremonial or ritual painter ("Mahmad", 2012).

Another boy, this time wearing a pair of jeans and a red t-shirt, is standing on a rooftop – one hand laid on his side and the other holding a hose for stability. With a blinding light behind him, the rays of light frame his body and create an angelic image, like a dream figure with construction dust littering the front of its pants ("Habib – Self Portrait", 2011). An empty bed, standing tidy – blankets are folded as if after a military inspection. By the bed stands a cement block that functions as a night-stand and on it sits a small ventilator. The sand floor is covered in cement shavings ("Bed and Ventilator", 2011). Filthy plastic flip-flops. Cigarettes. Improvised main sockets. Cement splashes. A torn calendar page, perhaps from some tourist agency arranging trips to Mecca, is hanging on the exposed-brick wall. A picture showing millions of people around the Qa'aba. This creates the illusion of space, but even there it is crowded. Mecca's PR view is no different than that of Kfar Saba – they both show open skies and they are both illusions that cannot be reached, fantasy lands albeit their real existence. The days on the calendar are crossed with X-marks, for future account-settling with the boss ("Countdown", 2011).

An array of dangerously improvised main sockets and wiring provides illumination – an exposed light bulb rests of the bed like a round, naked roundness of a woman – but also hot water – with an exposed wire fixed to a board and put in a "Super Flex" spatula-filling bucket filled with water ("Electric Spoon", 2011). A sleeping corner which walls present, other than pictures of women, pictures of dreamy, leisure country-side lives – some imagine Mediterranean where people ride bicycles underneath palm trees as a white sail boat floats calmly on the flat blue sea in the background ("Ramaddan and Alla", 2011). A crowded and dense frame of six men resting together, their mattresses close with no space between them creating, in fact, one giant bed – a king size that does not allow for any distance between their bodies ("The Guys from Hevron", 2011). An ancient radio-tape antenna was further elongated by a

heart-shaped metal wire. "Crystal" soda bottles, cans of white beans in tomato sauce. A guy shows the photographer an origami-style trick – folding a beige towel until it turns into a bird ("Nasha'at", 2010).

An improvised electric barbeque made from the spiral heating-elements of a heater is laid horizontally on a board-made foundation. Blankets hang in the corners of the rooms to create the slightest illusion of privacy in one's dressing room. A group of people sitting on the open rooftop with a hookah, partly looking as the Mediterranean emperors sitting on top of their palace; and partly looking like Rapunzel, locked in her tower and waiting to be rescued ("Rowar, Amin, Mahmad, Fuaz and Omar", 2010). In all the photographs, the harsh, cold gray (of the cement and concrete – dominant settings for this event) and the soft, warm colorfulness (of the mattresses, the blankets and the various patterns of linens – laid in a pile like in the story of the Princess and the Pea) are at constant conflict, a mutual dominance rivalry. The cement colors the bodies and the cloths, fills the lungs in grey but the people fight their nothingness with their vitality and viability, creating an aesthetic habitat for themselves even in these outrageous, practically illegal conditions of poverty.

Amir connects to the socialistic tradition of documenting workers in general and during resting times in particular, a kind of humane photography that is less common today, motivated by the will to document the living conditions of the subjects, including constant field exploration and waiting for the events, for the random and spontaneous occurring relation between humans and the objects around them. This is the kind of photography that takes interests in people, in their particular representation for all its companionship, personality, skills and talents, for all their capabilities and helplessness. It skips the hegemonic paradigm of liberal photography, where discourse is limited to "looking at other people's suffering" as Suzanne Sontag once put it, and connects with the rich social-democratic history of working-class photography, of the proud disowned, that began in the 20's in Russia and Germany and continued to spread to the United States.

This is also the intentional, aware history of creating a new historic subject through the frontal culture, through visualization of the subject's life conditions. Alongside the rich grace, the cared-for ready-made aesthetics, the resourceful innovation of poverty and the burning-beauty of youth, Amir creates an expanded realistic portrait of ugliness, a life of disgrace and humiliation, of a social-status order that creates "a world that seems as if even the people who will live in such buildings once their construction is complete will never be aware of its existence", as Gani said it. This is the world of construction workers "who are deprived of the basic opportunity to be proud of what they built with their bare hands".

"Invisible Presence", Ron Amir. Curator: VeredGani. Artists Studio Tel-Aviv.

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