

King of the Forest

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Elon Ganor's new series of photographs was conceived during a quest for a hiatus. Looking at them will lead us, the viewers, on a journey, winding among the foliage of trees and bushes, where few rays of light stab their way through the darkness, anchoring and reassuring the lost wanderer. We can almost hear the crunch of the leaves underfoot and feel the fluttering of branches on the hand as it clears a path and opens a window to seeing. The proximity to the ground and the concealed point of view position us as hidden onlookers, as if waiting for a quiet moment which will enable us to emerge from the shadows.

The title of the exhibition presenting the current series, "King of the Forest", echoes the romantic ballad by Johan Wolfgang Goethe, "The Erl King (*Der Erlkönig*)", written at the end of the eighteenth century, which tells the story of a father and son riding through a dark forest. The mythic spirit of the Erl-King, who snatches the souls of youths who pass through his territory, chases them as the father tightly holds his frightened boy. As they reach safety the father finds his son's body lying lifeless in his arms.

The interpretation of the series is informed by the biographical inversion in Ganor's life at the time, when he was caring for his dying father. The son takes on the role of the caregiver and protector, but he is also the one who braves the unknown darkness of the forest until he breaks out into the comforting daylight. His wanderings in his private garden and in public woods became breathing breaks for the artist, as he was seeking to go on a journey between darkness and light, metaphorically this time, in which his grasp on life might be stronger. Ganor throws himself into the strain between wandering and orientation, between desperation and hope, while how strong is his hold on reality and when he is losing his foothold remains unclear.

The observation point, as if through an arrow slit, or from a hidden foxhole, has been adopted by Ganor in a previous series (Untitled, 2009), where he used wooden boxes, which he has built, to photograph public beaches in Tel Aviv, on the Dead Sea, and in other locations in Israel and abroad. The observer's gaze, mediated by the camera lens, seems to go through another tunnel of vision, in addition to the human one, which narrows the gaze like the sniper's sight. The wooden box through which Ganor takes the photographs serves as armor for the photographer/voyeur, even though most of his body is visible to his subjects and to anyone present at the shoot. Most of the picture area is soft-focused and abstract, like an eye narrowing itself when blinded by the sun, the better to see the distances ahead. The images visible through the box are mostly sea views fading into the horizon, with groups of bathers, young and old, popping here and there and focusing the gaze closer, even as it strives to go beyond the imaginary horizon. Ganor's point of view hides behind the double mediation of the box and the camera, but it also contains the shooting position, discussed by Susan Sontag regarding the taking of the photographic image – "to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed" and transfer it to the print.¹ The arrow slit disturbs the romantic image of the peaceful beach,

¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux publishing, New York, 1977

a place for recreation and escape from the bustle of daily life. The infinite sea is arrested between the narrow borders of the photograph, which again is trapped within the photographer's wooden box. The bathers seem to be sitting ducks, but also objects of desire, representing physical pleasures in a territory where a person can be free of the chains of culture.

However, these photographs do not inform the Erl-King series only through the remote observation point, or the terrible sadness which imbues them, but also by the vibrant use of visual tricks and the play of lines versus stains, specificity versus abstraction. The inner surface of the box is not just a conduit through which the sharp marine image is clarified – it occupies most of the picture area; it is not simply an “extra” in the drama of the photographic image, but rather its star player. The light flooding the inside of the box creates a tonality of changing shadows, like in an abstract painting, a cloudy atmosphere which hangs over the festive image. The sides of the box create a tactile frame, giving the photographic print an illusion of volume and three-dimensionality. The frame disrupts the perception of distance and space, between the empty, foggy tunnel close to the camera's (and the viewer's) eye and the sharpness of the objects deep in the composition, which in turn fade away too. Out of groups of easily identifiable bathers, common objects dissolve into the sea - a small wave, a sailboat, or a distant swimmer so that his head is blurred. Ganor confuses the viewer by creating a multi-layer composition where the dark spirit of the enveloping frame slowly strangles the specific image. The image drains, its core spreads and disappears, defining shape and volume for an empty space, from the point of view of the photographer/viewer all the way to the edge of visibility. But while in the arrow slit series the position of the photographer is perceived as that of a hunter, who narrows the territory of the gaze and uses it to capture prey for his lens, in the current series a reversal occurs, and Ganor adopts a tentative position, between holding on to reality and losing control, hiding from what is not clearly visible. The bright sky which has previously spread across the picture space is now almost invisible, framed by thickets of leaves, with only a few snippets of the outside gaping like escape hatches. The gaze, which has previously centered on the focal point of the photograph, pulling the outside into the interior of the box and the lens, has changed now into scattered, aimless wandering, sensing at times solid ground, and sometimes what appears to be the eye of the storm.

The image of the grove has often been explored in recent Israeli art, as has the image of the forest, harking back with false nostalgia to cool Western regions, drawing upon German folk legends of the Black Forest, among other sources.² In the Drawing Biennale in Jerusalem, at the end of 2010, the grove as articulated through the medium of drawing was seen as an emotionally tangled web, mostly expressive, while in the photographed images a more romantic and distanced approach prevailed, an admiration for the photogenic beauty of the tangled botanical image.³ Alongside Ganor's show one could

² A major exhibition on the subject, “The Forest,” was presented at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art between January and April of 2006.

³ Tamar Manor-Friedman, *Traces IV - Caught in the Thicket, The Fourth Biennale for Drawing in Israel*, Jerusalem Artists' House, 2010.

In addition to Sharon Ya'ari and Gilad Ophir who are discussed in the catalog, other **works come to mind in this context, such as the series** “Liquidation” and the film “The Forest” (both from 2005) by Ori Gersht, and the series of photographs by Efrat Shvily, “100 Years” (2008).

see photographs of underbrush by Omri Shapira, memorializing the blood of murder victims which has drenched the forest ground at Babi Yar, in the Ukraine, and Kobi Israel's photographs, of cruising spots in Hempstead Heath Park, with only vague references to the sexual activity which goes on there at night. However, while all these images observe the wooded, tangled area from a distance, trying to contain the tense, mysterious sense of the location, Ganor steps into the grove and digs deep into it, blending into the foliage, like an animal taking a break from the hunt.

In a wider context, the spirit of the forest paintings of Caspar-David Friedrich, the German romantic painter, a contemporary of Goethe, rings clearly in the mysteries of Ganor's photographs, though they do not share the magnificence of the forces of nature and the religious sense of the sublime imbued in Friedrich's paintings. Also worth noting is the German photographer Thomas Struth, whose "Paradise" series explore rain forests and woods in Australia, China, and Japan, as well as the United States and Germany. Struth has described them as images both specific and abstract, full of information but also incomprehensible, intended to serve as a reflexive and meditative mirror for the viewer, and as an eternal representation exploring the primordial roots of our world and of Heaven.⁴ The mythical, sublime dimension in the work of these two German artists is transformed by Ganor into deconstruction and close inspection of the grove's interior.

Two atypical photographs seem to bind the beginning and the end of Ganor's wanderings through the maze – in one, an ancient, thick-trunked olive tree stands in the middle of the composition, its bound and numbered body makes it the head of the group, perhaps designated as the first to be uprooted and thus signaling the fate of the others. This photograph echoes "Scarred Tree" by Sally Mann (1998), also placed in the center of the composition, free-standing in a defined space, with a bleeding gash in its belly. Comparison of the two images by Mann and Ganor asserts their mutual awareness of death and oblivion, but also the dimension of communality and progressive striving in Ganor's work versus the isolation and nostalgia in Mann's. In another Ganor photograph, a family is seen sitting at a picnic table at the end of a woody path, signifying a clinging to life, following long meanderings under the shadow of a past lost. It seems this family, framed by foliage, reminiscent of the long views of bathers from the previous series, serves as an anchor for a real hold, a milestone, a momentary ending to the artist's long quest.

⁴ Thomas Struth, "Paradise - A Thousand Words", *Art Forum*, May 2002