

'This Place' photo exhibits examine disputed terrain

Images of Israel, West Bank displayed at four venues

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Fazal Sheikh 2011 "Latitude 31 ° 21' 7" N Longitude 34 ° 46' 27" from the series "Desert Bloom (Wellin)

Boasting art market superstars Thomas Struth and Jeff Wall, Magnum photojournalists Josef Koudelka and Gilles Peress, community collaborator Wendy Ewald, and seven other photographers of significance, "This Place" was naturally lauded when it first was first exhibited in Prague in 2014. But there were complaints, too.

Can a dozen famous photographers, commissioned from outside of Israel and the West Bank, create perceptive, pertinent work? As outsiders? And should they? Can an artist, in good conscience, go to the West Bank and make work that is largely apolitical, that perpetuates a personal style and hesitates to comment?

Six million dollars later we can see for ourselves in the latest iteration of "This Place," a single exhibition event spread among four upstate colleges this spring. There is a lot to take in, and some of the photographs are printed really large, so even with the University at Albany's art museum, the Tang at Skidmore, the spacious Wellin Museum at Hamilton College, and the compact Picker Gallery at Colgate University, there is no room to spare.

Start with the big, lone Jeff Wall at the UAlbany's University Art Museum called "Daybreak," showing Bedouin olive pickers still asleep in the open air in the desert. Behind them is a gleaming Israeli prison under the grim dawn air. In this single observation, made with great care and minimal prearrangement, Wall clinically reveals the mismatch of cultures.

A few paces away, Martin Kollar's plain-speaking color documentations of bizarre and sometimes disturbing situations reveal a dry wit and a visual critique of contemporary Israel. If these startling insights appear to be without judgement, they do contribute to a larger picture that builds as you go from artist to artist.

In general, the strongest works in "This Place" manage some political bite. At the Wellin, a long grid of aerial views of human activity in the Negev desert by Fazal Sheikh is graphically stunning. But with a preponderance of topographic evidence, along with careful documentation, Sheikh also silently questions the displacement and "erasure" of Bedouin habitations due to relocations, forestation projects, and other changes since 1948.

Wendy Ewald doesn't actually take pictures but rather hands out cameras to nonphotographers, and the results cover a huge range. Printed small, then showcased neatly on layers of shelves at both the Wellin and the Tang, they elevate the ordinary. These insiders from 14 different communities show their own worlds in their own ways, ranging from Palestinian women in East Jerusalem to Israeli women at a military academy.

Also at the Tang, Gilles Peress' array of large color images provide dry observation without drama, unlike his more famous images of conflict zones. At the Picker, by contrast, the black and white horizontal panoramas by Josef Koudelka are some of his best work ever. He packs every image with a rich visual investment in places laden with hard-edged facts about the border wall: barbed wire, convoluted barriers, and graffiti.

These are hard to appreciate small, in a long glass case. Luckily, one outcome of the larger scope of "This Place" is the many photographic monographs that resulted (from every artist except Wall and Peress). Check out Koudelka's stunning "The Wall." Trenchant, visually condemning stuff. In contrast, the panoramic black and white desert landscapes by Jungjin Lee are shorn of exterior meaning, reveling in brooding, gorgeous desolation. The large, gritty prints are imposing and well represented at Albany, though her book, "Unnamed Road," provides a more tactile sensibility.

At the Picker, detachment from politics gets confusing with Nick Waplington, who made bland, posed snapshots of newly arrived Israeli settlers in the West Bank (in housing, he points out, deemed illegal by the United Nations). Across the gallery, Rosalind Fox Solomon's black and white portraits try for something different and more photographically traditional, capturing diverse types, including many Africans and Christians, with honest, full expressions.

There are several other bodies of work at each venue that overlap in appearance because they all use large format color film and a view camera, a level horizon, and unglamorized information. Stephen Shore's understated, precise land and city views describe and describe. German photographer Thomas Struth's visually similar contributions are tightly composed and ambiguous. A few images by the organizer of the "This Place" project, Frederic Brenner, follow suit, and even Waplington employed a large format camera for his own iterations of detached observation.

In all of these high-res images, most printed large and some quite beautiful, you can stare and study, but the point is often unclear. Is that particular housing actually a row of illegal settlements? Is that desert merely an example of forbidding terrain or is something more implied? Here we can fairly ask whether an artist can or should maintain such apparent secure loftiness—are the photographers fiddling while Rome burns?

Maybe. Some will argue we should have room for art on any terms. There might be lasting truths beyond elusive current events that are mined here. Brenner, in a 2014 interview for Time, said, "We want to look beyond the political narrative." And Peress philosophized, "I am not trying to capture anything."

"This Place" is unique. It's rare to have a privately funded project with so many photographers gathered around a single goal and given generous (though not complete) freedom. One of the project's new goals for 2018 is to create debate and "interdisciplinary inquiry" at the college level, and that is happening at all four institutions, with rafts of special events, course integrations, and guest speakers. Take advantage. Some of the work does filter too easily into an academic zone, laden with potential meaning but also guarded and coded and restrained. But everything here is also terrific, and the more of the shows you can see, the more provocative sense it all makes.

William Jaeger is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.

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