

ART LIES

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Out of Place

Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin
Kate Green



Oded Hirsch, Halfman, 2009; pigment photograph; 17 x 23¾ inches; courtesy the artist and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin

Out of Place features recent works by six artists whose videos, photographs, drawings and sculptures reflect on the psychological toll wrought by the Israel/Palestine conflict. Inspired by the writings of cultural critic and scholar Edward Said, curator Noah Simblist has assembled a show that considers the profound displacement people feel when forced from the territory that they call home. Simblist, an artist who has engaged in activism in Israel, presents an impressively nuanced exhibition. Though some works are stronger than others, as a whole Out of Place humanizes a highly politicized topic and supports the idea that art can productively address such a divisive issue.

The videos and photographs in the exhibition most immediately evoke what it feels like to be out of place. Perhaps this has to do with their imagery's indexical relationship to lived reality, which can make it easy for us to empathize with what is represented. No matter the reason, Yael Bartana's video *Mur i Wieza (Wall and Tower)* (2009) is a standout at conveying the complexities of exile. Bartana is probably the best-known

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artist in the exhibition, having gained critical acclaim for videos that depict ambiguous human dramas relating to Israel, the country where she was born and sometimes lives. The fifteen-minute video, which is projected in a dark room towards the back of the exhibition, features a group of young Jews building a settlement in a park in present-day Poland. In doing so, the workers belie the efforts of Israel's forefathers, who left Eastern Europe years ago to stake out land in what is now the Jewish state. The video's contemporary settlers appear content but strangely isolated, particularly because of the barbed wire fencing that surrounds them. Their commune calls to mind both a kibbutz and a Holocaust-era concentration camp, and their effort to reintroduce a Jewish community into Poland seems at once hopeful, haunted and doomed.

In the gallery's main room, a video by Algerian-born artist Eric van Hove effectively uses a charged symbol of Judaism to generate an ambiguous comment on Israel. Installed on a flat-screen television, the two-hour-long *Common Ground* (2009) features the artist writing on the floor of an empty synagogue. In the context of this exhibition, the relentless marking on a sacred space becomes a political act, but one without a clear motive. Depending upon how you read the video, van Hove is either defacing a Jewish sanctuary or finding the freedom of expression within it. If the synagogue represents Israel, *Common Ground* suggests that the country is both alienating and a refuge.



Eric van Hove, *Common Ground*, 2008; HD single channel video; 124 minutes; courtesy the artist and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin



Jan Tichy, Dahania (detail), 2006; paper model, sand, inkjet print, text; 47 x 17 x 6 inches (paper model, sand), 79 x 14 inches (inkjet print); courtesy the artist and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin

Several conceptual works in other media make Out of Place visually dynamic but do not address the exile's complex condition with much subtlety or strength. For example, Palestinian Nida Sinnokrot's AKh-48 (2008), which fuses a Kalashnikov rifle with a wooden crutch, is arresting; yet its straightforward comment on the gruesome effects of violence in Israel/Palestine is too didactic for the complicated problem at hand. Across the room, Sinnokrot's West Bank Butterfly #2 (Apharitis Cilissa - Endangered) (2009) is also a less-than-compelling reflection on the hostility of the environment. The multipart project includes a white kite apparently modeled after outlines of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and a now-endangered butterfly native to the region. The relationship between these elements may be formally convenient, but it is not particularly illuminating.

Elsewhere in the main gallery, works from Irishman Tom Molloy's Graven series (2008) don't speak as loudly as they might in other circumstances. To create each framed piece, Molloy downloaded from the Internet a photographic image of the mourning mother of a suicide bomber clutching a framed portrait of her deceased child. He then erased the depicted portrait and redrew it with pencil. Through this alteration, Molloy might be hoping that we will question what it means to toy with such loaded pictures. If so, the attempt to reflect on mediated imagery and artistic agency falls flat in this context, and his treatment doesn't provoke much more than sympathy for the women.

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In a small adjacent room, a pairing of works by two artists highlights the difficulty that several works in this show have holding their own. For Dahania (2006), Jan Tichy, who was born in the Czech Republic and studied in Israel, made a schematic drawing and two paper models of a short-lived Palestinian airport destroyed by Israel in 2000. The airport is minimally rendered once in black and once in white, generating a binary reading of the structure that oversimplifies its complex history and role in the conflict. By contrast, Israeli artist Oded Hirsch's nearby color photographs and video reflect on the paradoxes of life in the region with particular richness. In one photo, people in yellow raincoats stand knee-deep in water and use ropes and pulleys to lift a man in a wheelchair up to a platform for no apparent reason (Halfman, 2009). In another, a group of casually dressed folks gather for a portrait in a boat that seems to be going nowhere (Habaita, 2009). Though the rationales behind these absurd scenarios are not clear, one can identify and empathize with the people in them. Like exiles, these people appear stuck in untenable situations and profoundly out of place.

In *Out of Place*, Simblist has staged a provocative exhibition that manages to personalize an otherwise distant and abstract conflict in Israel/Palestine. With several strong works that capitalize on art's ability to both reference and complicate our world, the show neither takes sides nor suggests easy answers. It makes a convincing argument for why art can and should address politics.

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