

...might be good

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A Party To End All Parties



Gilad Efrat

*Tamarisk*

2012

Oil on linen

51 x 86-1/2 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston, Texas

## Long Read: Gilad Efrat: Imagined Histories of an Archaic Past *by Noah Simblist*

The Israeli artist Gilad Efrat has worked with imagery that includes aerial shots of Europe during WWII, desert landscapes, an Israeli prison named Ansar and portraits of apes. His work is currently on view at Inman Gallery in Houston, including paintings that depict salt cedars, moonscapes, and the tattered shells of Bedouin encampments. Much of the imagery relates in some way to the Negev desert in the south of Israel.

Efrat has said, "I'm not a figurative artist, I'm always involved with fragments."<sup>1</sup> His process involves gridding out the source photograph and working slowly, cell by cell, to produce a painted analog. In this sense, the paintings are made like an archaeological site, which is often gridded to keep track of objects and

3901 MAIN STREET HOUSTON, TEXAS 77002 PHONE: 713.526.7800 FAX: 713.526.7803 INFO@INMANGALLERY.COM

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structures found in the dig.<sup>2</sup> If a fragment is found it is mapped and catalogued as a point in a larger system that includes objects and architecture, which serve as the props and the stage in which social histories are acted out.

His use of aerial photographs might promise the pleasures of an omniscient point of view by resisting discrete fragments and instead focusing on the whole. The use of the “big picture” as opposed to individual details could also suggest grand narratives that provide answers to the contradictions found on the ground. Michel de Certeau asks “To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong?...I wonder what is the source of this pleasure in “seeing the whole.”<sup>3</sup> He answers that in the voyeuristic embrace of a totalizing view, we mistakenly believe that we possess the true knowledge about what we are looking at. This sense of power in relation to perception is at the center of Efrat’s aerial images.

“I am looking at something very far in order to see what’s closest to me. I am talking about my own body, processing the same destruction I find in the other,” Efrat has said.<sup>4</sup> In this statement he is comparing the practice of painting and the practice of archaeology as paradoxical exercises. He makes his paintings by starting with a solid color and rubbing away like “rummaging in an open wound.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, archaeological digs begin with a single flat plane of space and are conducted through a process of digging through layers to reveal an image. The difference between the two practices is that archaeology is supposedly objective, while art making is a subjective enterprise.

Efrat explicitly says that he needs to go to something far away in order to get to something close. But what does this spatial analogy refer to? In one sense the scale of the original photographs depicts an image from a considerable distance. These photographs were taken from a plane hundreds of meters in the sky in order to get at an overview image. This seems to give us (and Efrat) a perspective that is more omniscient and less subjective than a viewpoint from the ground. We can see both the grid of the urban plan and the archaeological grid that creates a cognitive distance. But when we look at the paintings in person, like *Avdat* (1998), we see faint traces of the painted grid as well. Contrary to the distance of the aerial photographs, this grid is concurrent with the flatness of the picture plane. It signifies the absence of distance. When we see the subtle gestures left behind from the paint wiped away, we also get a sense of the materiality of paint on the surface of the image.

Efrat has said that “they feel like no place or every place...they belong to us but don’t. They are distant but incredibly close.”<sup>6</sup> What would this statement mean if he wasn’t talking as a painter of archaeological images but rather as an archaeologist working within the Israeli paradigm? Would the dualities of nationalism, historical perspective and ownership apply? The archaeological sites in the Judean desert serve as an example.

In 1993, Israel was scheduled to withdraw from the West Bank in accordance with the Oslo accords. The area around Jericho was to be turned over to the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Antiquities Authority launched “Operation Scroll.” This emergency set of excavations involved sixteen teams of archaeologists who combed a sixty-mile stretch of the Jordanian valley, looking for Jewish scrolls or other remnants of the Second Temple period.<sup>7</sup>

This operation sparked a fierce debate between Israeli and Palestinian archaeologists about who had rightful ownership of archaeological finds in a territory with ambiguous sovereignty. This issue was put on the agenda for peace negotiations regarding the final status of Israel-Palestine after the temporary solution outlined by the Oslo agreements. There was a legal dimension to these negotiations that was raised by the Palestinians. The Hague Convention prohibits an occupying power from transferring cultural artifacts out of an occupied territory. This was to prevent one nation from plundering the cultural property of another. But the Israeli argument was that it is not clear who owns the cultural property from sites like Jericho. If a city or area like Jericho has been governed and inhabited by many cultures then who is its rightful owner? Does Israel have the right to claim any examples of Jewish inhabitants in order to preserve its own cultural history?

These debates about the ownership of both territory and cultural artifacts haunt images such as Efrat’s *Jericho Winter Palaces* (1999). This black and white painting is once again an aerial shot of archaeological sites in Jericho. We can see a light gray ground with rectangular dark gray shadowed indentations. It seems as if the excavations are not complete and as a result we see only a glimpse of a city plan. It’s as if a city were slowly rising from the earth, pushing against the upper membrane of the earth’s crust.

This particular area of Jericho depicted in the painting references the Winter Palaces of the Hasmonean Kingdom (140-37 BCE), the last Jewish sovereign power until the modern State of Israel. Thus, the painting frames and highlights the Jewish historical presence in the Jericho area. In that sense, it acts as a document of the Israeli position behind “Operation Scroll” as well as any other claims to Jewish rights to

the land of Israel. But on the other hand, the painting could also highlight Israel's ideological investment in linking archaeology with nationalism. Or perhaps the painting presents the archaeological site as an example of the fragility of sovereignty. Efrat painted this image while Jericho was within the Palestinian Authority's control. As the civilizational layers can attest, no one culture can maintain power forever. After all, it took two thousand years for Jews to reclaim sovereignty in the area and if we follow this line of thinking, they will inevitably have to relinquish it one day.

Another painting of Efrat's, *Tel Sheva* (1998) reinstates this point. It is again, a black and white image, with a city plan that is based on concentric circles that radiate from the canvas's center. A Tel is a plateau created through centuries of cycles of cities being destroyed and rebuilt on top of its own ruins. This Tel is in the south of Israel, not far from the Israeli city Be'er Sheva. The earliest evidence of inhabitants dates back to the fourth millennium BCE with a continuous presence through the eighth century CE. It contains layers of civilizations that include Persian, Hellenistic, Herodian, Roman and Early Arab remains.

Tel Sheva (officially Tel Be'er Sheva) is also at the entrance to a Bedouin town of the same name. This Tel Sheva was established in 1967 as a part of a project by the Israeli government to sedentarize the traditionally semi-nomadic Bedouins of the Negev desert.<sup>8</sup> These Bedouin are Israeli citizens but they are socially quite separate. Their first language is Arabic and they are relatively poor. This is in stark contrast to the wealthy Jewish suburb of Omer that is adjacent to Tel Sheva, whose red terra-cotta roofs and verdant green lawns stand in stark contrast to the dilapidated look of its neighbor. Tel Sheva has a high crime rate and in recent years, some members of the community have increasingly identified themselves as Palestinian.

There are two competing narratives that Tel Sheva represents. On the one hand it can be seen as an enclave of an ancient tribal Bedouin culture that is timeless.<sup>9</sup> But on the other hand, its present conditions reflect the complex political, social, and economic situation of a community that has been deeply affected by the State of Israel.

So what does this dialectic in Tel Sheva tell us about Tel Be'er Sheva? Both are examples of physical spaces that simultaneously represent a tension between the past and the present. Tel Be'er Sheva is used by Israel as proof of biblical "facts on the ground" that justify Jewish claims to the land. While at the same time, it represents thousands of years of history that contain multiple claims to sovereignty. Tel Sheva is a present condition that is also framed by the needs of the Israeli state. Bedouins from the Negev desert were sedentarized in order to control desert space for many reasons, most importantly military purposes. But the result of this rupture of tradition and forced form of modern living has been a social rupture, creating a wound that still festers. Israelis like to think of the romantic cliché of the Bedouin as an image of their biblical past. In this sense, Tel Sheva might seem to be a living example of the archaeological site down the road. But the city is also a living example of the price that is paid by this kind of Orientalist imperialism. In an essay for Gilad Efrat's mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Art, Ein Harod, the curator Michelle White speaks about Efrat's relationship to history. She reminds us of Walter Benjamin's discussion of Paul Klee's 1920 drawing *Angelus Novus*. She quotes Benjamin saying, "The Storm drives [the angel] irresistibly toward the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble heap before him grows sky high. That which we call progress is this storm."<sup>10</sup> White says that Efrat often cites this text in relation to his work. He knows the Klee drawing well since it is in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. He is determined to make work that exists in a similar interstitial space, caught between past and present. But the image also speaks powerfully to the multiple ways in which time restlessly clashes against itself in a living monument such as Tel (Be'er) Sheva.

Susan Buck Morse has pointed out that this angel is a great example of the ways that truth and collective memory work and the inextricable relation between knowledge and power. "History is layered. But the layers are not stacked neatly. The disrupting force of the present puts pressure on the past, scattering pieces of it forward into unanticipated locations."<sup>11</sup> Buck Morse unravels the story of Benjamin's comments about the Klee painting of an angel, noting that the caption of his words has overtaken the image itself. She notes that the painting hangs in the Israel Museum as a testament to this famous Jew who committed suicide rather than be captured by the Nazis. But Buck Morse suggests that this gesture to pin down the meaning of *Angelus Novus*, can be disrupted by looking more deeply at both Benjamin's and Klee's attitudes towards angels. Citing the Talmud, Benjamin was interested in the idea of an angel that was created only to utter praise to God and in that very instant would cease to exist. Buck Morse states, "This is how he understood the relationship between image and caption. The latter was erasable, replaceable and ephemeral, like the songs of Talmudic angels."<sup>12</sup>

Buck Morse reminds us that archives, museums, libraries and archaeological sites are the mechanisms with which we store the past and construct a collective memory. Those in power construct the systems of this achieve to reflect their ideology.<sup>13</sup>

*'When legends are appropriated by power and fixed to objects, lifting these objects out of history and preserving them within a nimbus of absoluteness – good and evil, right and wrong, redeemed and damned – legends become orthodoxy, setting the parameters of right belief.*

*Such legends are formed out of irreducible, unchanging elements that refer to mythic constructs: “the nation,” “the West,” “the terrorist,” the Muslim,” “the Jew.” These constructs reassembled in various ways police how the past is to be read.<sup>14</sup>*

If we turn now to Efrat's current work in the Inman exhibition, we can see that the Bedouin encampment in images such as *Negev (Bedouin)* (2012) is much more politically loaded than we might think. In fact, the Netanyahu administration has recently accelerated efforts to demolish all temporary Bedouin encampments and move them to sedentarized cities like Tel Sheva.<sup>15</sup> The once romanticized desert dweller is now a pariah in an increasingly Judaized and militarized nation.

But more importantly, there is another notable shift from the images of archaeological sites and Ansaar prison. Those works were dominated by geometry, a perceived sense of order. The newer works like *Tamarinsk (salt cedar)* (2012) or *Negev II* (2012) are roiling with disorder. They don't have the distance of an aerial shot or the careful grid of an urban plan. Like the Tamarinsk trees that he looks at, the paintings depict chaotic intersecting networks in which light and shadow are shattered.

Perhaps this imagery reflects an attitude in line with Buck Morse's reading of the angel's view on an ever-increasing heap of history and the fleeting power of interpretation. Despite our best efforts to categorize and archive, through archaeology, photography and even painting, our grasp on history is contingent and ephemeral. The desert landscape and even the moonscape has had flags planted on it in an attempt to nationalize a territory whose very geology is older than humanity itself. These attempts to name, and by naming to own, a space are in vain. We all fall into the rubble of history. But Efrat has given us angel eyes, and the ability to gain a new perspective on the colliding politics of a collective past that is always already our present.

*Noah Simblist is Associate Professor of Art at SMU, Meadows School of the Arts. He is currently working on a dissertation about art and politics in Israel-Palestine.*

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<sup>1</sup> Michal Lando, “Perpetual Perspective: In the Studio with Gilad Efrat” *The Jerusalem Post* Jan 1, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> This comparison has been made by Efrat himself, as noted by Galia Bar On in *Gilad Efrat: Ape Scape* (Ein Harod: Museum of Art Ein Harod, 2010)

<sup>3</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: The University of California, 1984) p92

<sup>4</sup> Lando, 2009

<sup>5</sup> Lando, 2009

<sup>6</sup> Lando, 2009

<sup>7</sup> Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) p240

<sup>8</sup> Smadar Lavie, *The Poetics of Military Occupation* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990)

<sup>9</sup> See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979)

<sup>10</sup> Michelle White, “Neither Here Nor There” *Gilad Efrat: Ape Scape* (Ein Harod: Museum of Art Ein Harod, 2010), p87

<sup>11</sup> Susan Buck Morse, “*No. 004: Emily Jacir & Susan Buck Morse* (Hatje Cantz, 2012), p32 - published in conjunction with Documenta 13

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p37

<sup>13</sup> Buck Morse was meditating on Benjamin's text as a way to respond to the Palestinian-American artist Emily Jacir's photographic project for Documenta 13. Jacir photographed a former Benedictine monastery near Kassel that had been a prison camp under the Nazi era and a girl's reformatory school after World War II. The images were combined with selections from Jacir's diary entries, which become captions to the images. Many of the images question the construction of collective memory through the archive.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p44