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ESSAY

The Destruction and Afterlife of an Israeli Art Gallery

A kibbutz's historic art building, burned to the ground during the Oct. 7 attack, has become a national emblem of hope.

By Frances Brent

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On Oct. 7, 2023, the historic and beautifully preserved art gallery of Kibbutz Be'eri, in southern Israel, burned to the ground. The structure, dating from 1956, was made with wood brought from Germany, and it originally served as the young kibbutz's dining hall. The conflagration was part of the horror starting in the early hours of that morning, when Hamas terrorists rampaged through the community, murdering over 100 and kidnapping some 25 others. Videos of the wreckage show charred rubble with an occasional clump of bedding, a brightly painted bicycle or some children's clothes spilling from a drawer.

Lost that day along with the art gallery building were its fixtures, equipment, library and archive, and a pristine exhibit of still lifes by the Israeli photographer Osnat Ben Dov. The exhibit had been installed in September and had a poetic name: "Shadow of a Passing Bird." The wistfulness of the title was meant to acknowledge the fleeting nature of beauty recorded in meticulous images of ordinary life, such as the artist's picture of an enamel bowl filled with ripening apricots, or her photo of a sprig of lisianthus leaning in water in a cut-glass jar. "It was very strange because the curator and I talked about this, that life's not forever, even a still life," the artist told me. "Like the passing bird, life is passing. I wanted to talk about this, that shadow of a passing bird, one second here, one second no."

The gallery was started in 1986 by kibbutz members Alon Kislev and Orit Svirsky. Svirsky, who was also a peace activist, a member of Women Wage Peace, was murdered on Oct. 7 and so was her husband. One of their sons, Itay Svirsky, was taken hostage and later died in Gaza.



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'Earth Diver,' an exhibition by Nivi Alroy and Atar Geva, was on display at the Be'eri gallery in early 2023.

PHOTO: DANIEL HANOCH

The founders' original declaration of intent cited the need for bread for the soul, that is, for not devoting our lives to material things alone. With that in mind, they placed the gallery next to the communal dining hall, in the heart of the community, where it was intended to feed the spirit by bringing contemporary Israeli art to the kibbutz.

In 1994, when the artist Ziva Jelin became curator and director, the gallery started to be more professionalized, and in 1996, the year of the kibbutz's jubilee, it moved into the space of the old dining quarters. The acoustic ceiling was removed, exposing wooden support beams and creating an open area with a large perimeter wall and adaptable space for exhibits, artist talks, poetry readings and musical performances. From surviving photographs, you see how welcoming it was, with large planters positioned at the shaded entrance by an open screen door.

Thirteen years ago, the photographer Sofie Berzon MacKie joined the gallery and became a partner with Jelin. Together they achieved recognition for the gallery and turned it into a public institution. As they received more funding, they built a national reputation, presenting shows in all media and encouraging site-specific work. Situated in the south of Israel, they found they were able to do things that couldn't be done in Tel Aviv, where the art world is more commercial.

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'Apricots and Plums,' a photograph by Osnat Ben Dov, was on display at the Kibbutz Be'eri gallery when it was destroyed on Oct. 7, 2023. PHOTO: OSNAT BEN DOV



Works by Daniel Tchetchik on display at the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv. The exhibition was originally planned for the Be'eri gallery but was relocated following the Oct. 7 attack. PHOTO: DANIEL TCHETCHIK

“The first day after, I forgot about the exhibition, you know we were so shocked because what happened was such a violation of life, of art,” Ben Dov said, when we talked about the devastation at Be’eri. “And after that, people began asking, ‘What about the gallery? What about the exhibition?’ It took a few days to understand the gallery was destroyed and the exhibition went with it. But there was some kind of luck, that it was photography and could be reproduced. That’s in the essence of a photograph, there’s not only one. And so we made the exhibition again.”

When people understood the scope of what happened at Be’eri, the fate of the gallery became an emblem of hope. Ben Dov’s photographs were reprinted and the exhibition reinstalled at the Janco-Dada Museum in Ein Hod, near Haifa in the country’s north. Plans were made for the rest of Kibbutz Be’eri’s scheduled exhibits to be shown in Tel Aviv over

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In January an exhibit originally intended for Be’eri opened at the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv. “Days Before Darkness” by Daniel Tchetchik was tragically prescient. Tchetchik is a staff photographer at the newspaper Haaretz and the chief editor of its photography blog. Working with an analog camera, he creates complex images that are personal and enigmatic.

The photographs, several as large as 4’ x 5’, are installed in darkened gallery space illuminated by two light boxes, creating a sense of shimmering disorientation. In one photo, you see headlights of an oncoming car pierce through bluish haze on a seemingly abandoned road. Where is it coming from and where is it going? Will something terrible or transcendent emerge from the layers of beautifully colored light? The viewer simply doesn’t know.

MacKie, the curator of the show, described Tchetchik’s art as a mixture of pain, crisis and hope: “There’s a deep space that is broken and very painful, and you are welcome inside,” she said. “He’s not only speaking about himself. I think you could say he believes there is salvation in other people, in love, in connection.”



A saxophone lies amid debris inside a house in Kibbutz Be’eri, Oct. 14, 2023. PHOTO: THOMAS COEX/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Now Kibbutz Be’eri and its gallery are living through what might be called the days after darkness. MacKie observed that art, like the human spirit, is fragile yet strong. “When you think of it, what is art?” MacKie said. “I think it’s really the ability to dream something. You can think higher than reality. You can imagine. You can use your imagination and see beyond reality, and that is a very powerful tool that we have as human beings and that is really something to hold on to.”

Frances Prout is the author of “The Last Collos of Lou Aronson”

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