

**Yuval Chen: All the Wooden Horses Running in Circles
Exhibition**

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Curator: Gilad Ophir

Text

In what way is the artist's narrative linked with that of the observer, and in what way does local photography lean on a common Israeli being? Do we have a common visual narrative, a collective reservoir of visual memory, and can the one observing it, construct an alternative narrative around it, that will touch the local living experience in its own.

The exhibited photography series of Yuval Chen – the fruit of vigorous and concentrated work of recent years – characterised by the tension that is between closeness and familiarity; and distancing and alienation. On one plain, they correspond with the term 'photography/chronicle', coined, in his time, by the editor and art critic Adam Baruch. Baruch, who saw in photography a personal creation and a mean by which to get involved in the various dilemmas of Israel society and in its layered relationship with place and time, emphasised the central status of photography in journalism and pointed out the dialectical relationship between it and the text. The second plain in Chen's work focuses on his personal and social circle and examines, with a sensitive gaze, the relationships with his circle of friends, which is, in his eyes, are a part of his family. His works are the product of a planned encounter, artificial and personal with these friends and their families. It occurs every time, in a different place surrounded by a different background and settings, familiar and foreign at once.

His photographs, calls on the observer to wonder over the routinised patterns in his relations with others as well with the environment and over the patterns that have been established in his memory versus the collective memory of which he is a part. The works knowingly aim at a kind of common denominator, that the terms 'land', 'ground', 'landscape', 'tree', 'abandoned structure', 'memorial', 'friendship', and 'family' are a part of. Into this space, Chen brings the personal ground of his life, the sensory course of his childhood and maturity and the people he is close to, from the military unit, the team, and other chapters in his life. Their life stories in many aspects are (also) his own. Of the friends from the army, Chen says they are

family, "flesh and blood", a family of life and death, of moments and memories that evokes kinship but also moments of inevitable disparity because the lives of each one of them have carried them on a different paths.

The project they were summoned to is not a "reunification" or a "class reunion". Each family is photographed in a different background, selected for reasons and contexts that Chen raises to the surface. These meetings are very personal – preceded by conversations, explanations, questions, concerns, and fears of exposure, 'how the kids will react' – and it is not regarded as an opportunity to present unity, but still offers the value of continuation and perseverance. Those photographed are individual humans – men, women, children. The photographs indeed question the theme of individuality within the family and outside of it, the need for intimacy in the face of separating forces, apparent and subliminal tensions, that in feed the pictures. Chen's photography offers an meeting of sensing and grasping of actuality from a simultaneously mature and childlike perspective. Childhood memories, that he mentions, play a meaningful role in his connection to places and to people. Through them, he examines feelings of alienation and closeness between friends, partners and children.

The theme of the nuclear family occupies him a great deal and is at the core of his work process. Chen observes it, dives into it, and investigates his personal experience as well as the way in which the wider circle of his friends experiences it – each and his own personal story.

Chen often mentions cinematic scenes, films that influenced him such as "8½" by Fellini (1963) and "Stardust Memories" by Woody Allen (1980). The point of connection between these movies to the directed scenes of his photographs is the duality or concurrency of realism, memory, fantasy and the feeling/emotions manifested in them.

Contemporary photography is fascinating. Over an extended period questions are raised concerning the changing relationships between reality, technology, virtual or hyper reality, and temporal human experience. Photography expanded fields breach into new circles of materiality, plasticity and poetics. It has the power to direct a critical stance towards the world and influence the global discourse. As such, it literally constructs contemporary experience, yet, re-examines subjects such as alienation and estrangement in the digital age, in a society which has forsaken and given up its privacy in an unprecedented manner. Chen's work points to such feelings of loneliness, the fear of anonymity in the personal virtual space. We live in a political and economic realms that are beyond our control, where

political structures are collapsing and large populations migrate and lose their identities, while and on the other, ultra-nationalism and separatism is on the rise. We witness the tensions and conditions of conflict, violence, cruelty and terror. We are deeply affected by this state of things.

Chen's work, On the contrary, insists on the vitality and conservation of personal and shared memories, on a search that is perhaps romanticist in its essence, for a place, a body, tree trunk which creates a landscape, that which can be understood without words and is the closest to us, that which grants refuge and a certain feeling of roots, continuity and true essence. As a photojournalist he regularly moves between public and private spaces, spheres of communication, information and artificial representations of reality. As such, Chen is well aware of the key terms of the Israeli ethos, such as the military, friendship, work, money, family, the land, the endless wars, the battles and the memorial sites, landscapes from the days of Saul and King David, in Emek Yizra'el. His photographs express, in the most sincere way, the yearning for the view and shade of the tree, the consoling and soothing, which gives sensuality and restfulness, if only temporarily, to nature and to life.