



Active printing – establishing a partition between the image and the print – allows Digi Dekel to express what he calls ‘the cerebral side of photographing, as opposed to the pure photographic aspect which pertains to the actual negative.’

Home away from home

Photographer Digi Dekel shows
Part 2 of his ‘Distance’ art-trilogy

• By BARRY DAVIS

Digi Dekel is on a quest. As an artist, naturally, Dekel is expected to constantly explore new areas of creative pursuit, but the 55-year-old Romanian-born photographer is following an intriguing reverse lifeline path through his current Distance trilogy of exhibitions, the second of which, Tel Aviv, opens at Hakibbutz Israeli Art Gallery in Tel Aviv on Thursday.

Like many olim, Dekel lives with mixed cultural baggage, but his personal and professional world has an added slot to it. He made aliya with his family at the age of six and settled in the Basel area of north Tel Aviv. The youngster went through something of an adjustment until he eventually began to feel at home in the city. Tel Aviv became a comfortable social and cultural milieu, but he opted for a sharp geographical, meteorological and mind-set transition when, at the age of 18, he headed for the Arava to establish Kibbutz Samar as part of a Hashomer Hatza'ir IDF Nahal group. He has been at Samar ever since and works in the kibbutz's large palm-tree

grove, which produces organic dates for export.

Photography has been part of Dekel's life since his teenage years, and he gradually took a professional interest in the field, working for the now defunct *Hadashot* and *Al Hamishmar* national newspapers. In addition to providing compelling news-related images, Dekel continued to develop his artistic ethos and, over the last 25 or so years, has had numerous shows of his work all over the country, as well as in Berlin and New York.

The first part of Distance was shown at the Gal-On Art Space in Tel Aviv in 2012. It comprised large monochrome images based on shots taken at motley events on Kibbutz Samar. But these were far from simple documentary representations. Dekel's creative process is based on what he terms the “active print,” whereby he introduces extraneous elements to the developing printing process, directing liquids across the oversized prints to add another dimension to the final aesthetic product.

The social-cultural base line of the Tel Aviv chapter, of course, contrasts diametrically with the open sandy spaces of the Arava desert. While the Samar show conveyed a sense of ex-



Digi Dekel
(Barry Davis)

pansiveness and rustic calm, beneath the sometimes frenetically energized artistic complements, the items in the new offering often exude a feeling of urban estrangement and social alienation, along with an alluring crystallized beauty.

Curator Yael Kainy feels that Dekel's physical and emotional to-ing and fro-ing between highly contrasting milieus runs parallel to his efforts in his kibbutz laboratory.

"I think his work in the darkroom is an odyssey, in both a physical and a mental context," she says, adding that she also senses input from other realms of creative endeavor. "The large-sized paper he uses, and the musicality of the way he moves in creating the works, add up to a fascinating process. In order to introduce the liquids he has to move in a sort of dance-like way, in something like an ecstatic passage. I find that very exciting."

One 50 cm. x 60 cm. print shows three street cleaners, with their bins and brushes, each in a different unguarded pose. The shot was taken from above, imbuing the scene with a sense of respectful remoteness but also adding a mellifluous element to the seemingly mundane situation. Another work, taken from a simi-



lar trajectory, although from closer quarters, features two young women walking innocently along a sidewalk in opposite directions, each toting a bag. There is a slightly elegiac quality to the image and it appears to have been approached with velvety empathetic intent. The picture has a timeless feel to it, and could have been taken anytime in the last century or so, other than the fact that Dekel has augmented the work with a free-flowing crisscross upper layer, the lower edge of which ends in higgledy-piggledy streaks.

There is also a European aspect to the subject matter, as well as a perceptible sense of gentle tension resulting from the fact that we can never know whether the women's paths will eventually cross.

Although, ostensibly, Dekel was on familiar home ground when he captured the Tel Aviv shots, which were taken over a 12-year period starting from the mid-Nineties, he says he approached the second slot of the trilogy as something of an outsider too. "I took the photographs on visits to Tel Aviv, and I roamed the streets of the city. Yes, I spent my childhood there but I was not looking to connect with that time of my life. I was not looking to resurrect the memories of when I lived in Tel Aviv."

Dekel adopted a professional angle on the subject matter, irrespective of his local history. "I went to Tel Aviv as a photographer, and the images had to meet the criteria of the photographic idiom. I walked around the city streets as a photographer, waiting for something to catch my eye."

One of the most stirring works in the show is a shot of an anemic-looking building under construction, with fence-like streaks in the foreground. While Kainy interprets the aesthetic augmentation as Dekel's way of keeping himself, and the viewer, at a distance from the subject in question, the photographer begs to differ. He says it is all part and parcel of the creative process.

"That is not meant to separate me from the city. It is more a matter of breaking up the shapes [of the photographic subject]. The building seemed monotonous to me, too uniform. I think I managed to establish a partition between the image and what I call 'the active print.' Active printing allows me to express the cerebral side of photographing, as opposed to the pure photographic aspect which pertains to the actual negative."

The proactive approach is also part of Dekel's effort to invest his unfeeling subjects with some warmth. "The method I used to work with the picture of the building, for example, was my way of making the building more active or more human," he says.

Dekel's allegiance dilemma is present throughout both parts of the

trilogy to date. The works taken in Kibbutz Samar were spawned by a dichotomous mix of a feeling of belonging – as befits someone who has lived in the place for over three decades and, indeed, is one of the founding members of the collective community – and of looking in from the outside. The same applies to the Tel Aviv chapter, although the ratio of the associative elements is reversed.

"Factually it is true that I now come to Tel Aviv from the desert, from a very different environment, but I have never said that, deep down, I am a kibbutznik. I don't identify completely with the quiet and the solitude of the desert," notes Dekel. Surprisingly, despite the aspect of cold impersonality exuded by the urban images, he says he feels a strong affinity with the city, its streets and the people who walk them.

"The city gives me a sense of an embrace, of a gentle touch. There is, of course, alienation in the city but that alienation powerfully impacted on me when I was establishing my new home [in Samar], during my first decade on the kibbutz. I gradually also learned to love the city through my visits there. That may have also been due to a sense of missing out on having time in Tel Aviv."

Dekel certainly projects a feeling of affinity with the characters he captures, and with the city in general. His subjects may appear to be lost in the insensitive urban melee but, for example, it is not difficult to feel a soft spot for the three elderly men near a bus stop, or for the woman sitting on her own on a wall waiting for someone or something. Dekel's bonding with his former stomping ground is also imparted through locational references. One image clearly shows the Ben-Yehuda street sign, and there are others with posters that tie the work into a particular time slot.

At the end of the day, Dekel hopes the three-part series will help to lead him to some sort of answer with regard to where he really belongs. "It is a search for my real home, for my homeland," he says, "and to understand what distance does. The distance does not have to be geographic, although the parts of the trilogy are differentiated by geographic distances. This is a sort of geographic autobiography for me."

The final chapter of *Distance* will feature Dekel's hometown of Iasi in Romania, and he hopes to mount the exhibition both here and in the country of his birth. It will be interesting to see whether the trilogy ultimately delivers on the photographer's closure front.

Distance opens at Hakibbutz Israeli Art Gallery in Tel Aviv on Thursday and closes on June 6. For more information: (03) 523-2533 and 050-867-4671.



Like many olim, 55-year-old Romanian-born photographer Digi Dekel lives with mixed cultural baggage.