

Artist Questionnaire

IG: Which artists/photographers do you particularly respect?

YI: I have great respect for many photographers. From the late 19th century up to our time. My interests span nearly all genres, not necessarily only the ones directly connected to my photographic practice, so the list is quite long... Anyway, in the last few years I find myself returning to two main figures; August Sander and Eugène Atget. The reason for this fascination is the personal significance of their subject matter. The manner in which they pursued their visual research and the way their images represent the time and place in which they were made, but transcend that time in such a way that they still influence photographers today and are key to the evolution of the medium. It is as if their work has been embedded in the DNA of the medium.

IG: Why do you choose photography as your artistic medium?

YI: From quite an early age I had the urge to do something creative. My father was a writer and journalist and my mother was an English teacher by profession and a keen birdwatcher at heart. So looking back and trying to understand what shaped my interests I can say that I understood the importance of intellectual exploration from both of my parents, and from my mother I also inherited the need to go out into the world and explore it physically. It took quite some time until photography became a main interest. Prior to this there were a few years in which I gave writing a serious try and I even wrote a novel and several short stories in my late teens. But I came to the understanding that I just wasn't good enough at writing and if storytelling was something I was interested in doing then I should find a different medium for it. Following this realization I actually didn't do anything for quite a while, eventually I started experimenting with photography and even then it took me a long time to understand that I was serious about it and started to push myself to learn how to use it in a way that I found satisfying.

IG: What are your main influences and how have they influenced your work?

YI: My main influences would be literature and film, I read obsessively and love cinema.

In both cases I'm very open and try to experience the full spectrum; high literature and cinema all the way through to what would be considered bad taste.

In film I find I keep going back to Fellini, specifically Rome. And in literature it is Italo Calvino, Raymond Carver and recently Haruki Murakami.

IG: Why did you choose to do this project? What was the 'trigger'?

YI: Prior to the 'quest' I was working on an ongoing project called 'South West Jerusalem' in which I was photographing the neighborhoods. A place I know very well, as I grew up there, and still live there today. After working for a few years on a project that was so focused, I decided to expand my visual research of the Israeli society to the country at large. With the American tradition of the great photographic journeys and On the Road by Jack Kerouac in mind, I set out to explore my country and the people living in it. This all came together under my umbrella of social / political interests in relation to the history of photography and considerable literary influences. I was sure of the journey, but had no idea where it would actually lead me.

IG: How do you choose a subject for your images, would you say they are often staged or accidental?

YI: My approach to image making combines the accidental and the staged approach. I define myself as a visual collector. I am always at work, looking at the world and making mental notes of places and things I should further investigate on future trips. But even so, it is quite amazing how many of my images happen by chance encounters with people or places. One can say there is an accidental aspect to the work and this is embedded in the way that I see and work. I travel through the world looking for these accidental encounters, but for me it is not about the quick response to what is happening, it is more like recognizing a certain mood and keeping that mood evident in the image, be it an object, landscape or person. I guess I combine the accidental with a level of staging in my images, this is somehow defined by the format; I use a large format camera mounted on a tripod and I take my time to think about every aspect in the framing/making. But I don't bring people to places in order to photograph them. At the end of the day I am interested in the connection between man & place and I will find the best way to tell that particular story which I encountered.

IG: How do you think your work might affect people's perception of modern Israel?

YI: I believe in experiencing things in person. I'm an Israeli looking at my country through my eyes and with my personal experiences and "baggage". This work is a private exploration of my land, and I guess it is viewed and understood in this manner. I do not consider my work to be documentary, but more a narrative based on documentary style. This definition was born from the idea of building a story that is rooted in my exploration of my reality. Just like it is the writer who decides what to write about, I edit my work to communicate a certain narrative based on reality, one that came to life because of my encounters. Actually modern day Israel doesn't really appear in this body of work, it's more about the fringes of society, religion, myth and history.

IG: This work has been created over a number of years and must carry with it a huge number of stories. Do you have any particular highlights to note, for example a place you've visited or person you have met?

YI: I know that all the images in this project have a large element of luck to them. In a way it feels like I am "given" the images. Through the practice of a discipline of the mind-eye I am sometimes allowed to see certain things. There is a story behind every image but some of the encounters that shaped this project have changed me in some way. This one is one that stayed with me:

I remember it as one of the coldest days in the winter of 2004. It was a crystal clear and sharp early afternoon, and the heavy rains had just ceased. I was sitting with Maya heavily dressed next to the heater trying to decide if it was possible for me to go out that day, the light was fantastic and I was thinking that I shouldn't let the cold stop me. At the time I was experimenting with making panoramic images, trying to establish a method for my work, and I was thinking The Gazelle Valley in Jerusalem would be a good location to continue this experimentation. I managed to get myself out of the apartment wearing so many layers that I could hardly carry the camera bags and tripod. After arriving I walked about till I found the vantage point I was looking for. I set up the camera on the tripod, it was so cold that I could hardly handle the big metal camera, but finally I got the image I had in my mind.

During the exposing of the film I heard someone whisper pseeeee, I looked around, not seeing anybody I continued with my work. A few seconds later I heard this noise again, this time I took a better look around and noticed a man crouching beside one of the olive trees. I looked him over cheerfully, he didn't look dangerous, so leaving the camera on the tripod I approached him and we started to talk. It turned out that he was living in an old deserted Arab house in the Gazelle Valley, he got fired from his job and that same week his wife left him, taking everything and throwing him out the house. He asked if I would like to see were he was sleeping and I said yes, packed my gear and traipsed after him through the mud. When we arrived I was introduced to another homeless man that was sharing the abandoned house, he looked like a stereotype dirty homeless person, I wondered how come the person I met first kept so clean and shaven. He showed me a construction he had built to warm water and wash with (something he had learned to do in his military service). I remember thinking that this person was highly capable and obviously very talented and that bad times could fall on anyone out of the blue. I asked if I could photograph him and he agreed immediately. I positioned the camera in front of him with the dilapidated old house behind him, I didn't need to ask him to do anything and he positioned himself perfectly with this newspaper in his hand.

I returned home and couldn't stop thinking of this man. I went back a week or so later, but he was nowhere to be found and the place looked as if it hadn't been used for days. I never did meet him again, but he is stuck in my mind.



Homeless, The Gazelle Valley, Jerusalem, 2004.

IG: Some of our visitors will be interested in the technical aspects of your project. What equipment did you use? And did it affect the way that you worked and the project outcome?

YI: For this project I was mainly using an 8x10 inch camera and 240mm, 300mm and 360 mm lenses. On some occasions I was using a 4x5 inch camera with a 90mm and 150 mm lenses. It was shot on slide and negative film (depending on availability), images were scanned and printed on Hahnemuhle photo rag pearl fine art paper. I see myself more as an image constructor than an image taker, and this kind of imagery making is a slow process. I use view cameras for a few reasons; I find that I enjoy working slowly; the slower I work the more accurate I become. I'm very interested in generating a photographic moment and a big camera helps to get people's attention. Once I have their attention I may decide to ask one of them to be the subject in one of my images and I find that people are easily convinced to participate in my work, if they understand how important it is to me (and the big camera helps, as people may not really understand what I'm doing but they get the feeling that it's very important). Another reason for using this equipment is to get an image that conveys in it a strong feeling of reality.

IG: Do you have any recommended reading to further contextualise the project?

YI: The books I recommend helped develop my way of thinking; they affected, enriched and created an inner world which I rely on in my work, though it may not always be visible.

Fiction & theory

Italo Calvino: especially Invisible Cities.

Raymond Carver

Jorge Luis Borges: The Aleph and Other Stories.

Georges Perec

Jack Kerouac: On the Road

Barry Holstun Lopez: Winter Count

Photography Books

August Sander

Eugène Atget

Walker Evans: American Photographs

Robert Frank: The Americans

Robert Adams

Stephen Shore: Uncommon Places

Joel Sternfeld: American Prospects

David Goldblatt

This list is far from being conclusive, I tried to narrow it down to the ones that I find myself referring back to and that have inspired me.

IG: What plans do you have for future projects?

YI: As I work on a few projects simultaneously I have decided to finish the two other projects I have been working on; 'South west Jerusalem' and 'The legitimacy of landscape'. I have also started working on a few new projects, but it will take some time before they can be talked about.