

In Israel, these trees all grow in the Golan Heights, once part of Syria. Instead of densely planted orchards, the trees are scattered across the land and are still cared for and picked by hand. “Characterized by thick trunks and a wide spread of branches, these trees bear less fruit and mostly serve the families that live in the area. These characteristics bestow an ancient and primordial atmosphere over the area,” recalled the artist.

The process of making these works brought Shochat near the border between Israel and Lebanon as war was raging in Syria and refugees were crowding the borders. She found the region a “beautiful but dangerous rural environment, with an apocalyptic feeling.” Set against that political and cultural backdrop, *A Lesson in Time* presents instead a dream of long-term peace and plenty.



Her richly colored, fertile, serene images contrast sharply with Balilty’s stark black-and-white view of the prickly, persistent Sabra. Balilty is a realist. He captures his country as it is and through those depictions, suggests its character. Shochat creates an idealized vision, an Edenic Israel that does not exist in real life—at least not yet. One can always hope that the character traits represented by the sabra—persistence and the ability to survive and triumph over obstacles in a difficult climate—can bring about the Paradise Shochat so fervently desires.

- Barbara Tannenbaum, Curator



photo: Andrew McAllister

Barbara Tannenbaum, Curator of Photography at the Cleveland Museum of Art since 2011, has organized well over 100 exhibitions during her three-decade career as a curator and academic. From 1985 through 2011, she was chief curator at the Akron Art Museum. Dr. Tannenbaum earned her M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and B.A. from Reed College. She has authored numerous publications, lectured throughout the U.S. and in Canada and China, and serves on the board of the Fred and Laura Ruth Bidwell Foundation. In 2010 Tannenbaum received the Distinguished Career Award from the Association of Midwest Museums.



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THE DESERT SHALL REJOICE BLOSSOM



Barbara Tannenbaum, Curator

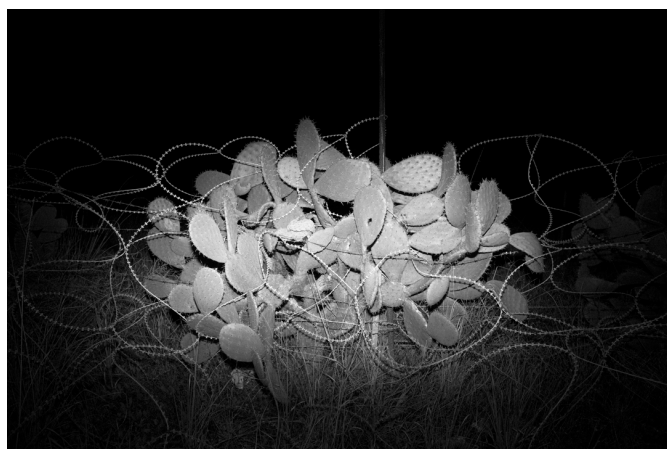
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ODED BALILTY + TAL SHOCHAT

Israeli artists **Oded Balilty** and **Tal Shochat** provide contrasting yet complementary metaphors for the spirit of their native country: the prickly pear and the fruit tree. As a young child I donated money to plant trees in Israel and I learned to associate that country with the miracle of making the desert bloom. The botanical symbolism employed by these two artists resonates with that childhood understanding of Israel, which has since matured, deepened, and become more nuanced and tempered. I had the privilege of visiting there for the first time last year, which helped me better understand the contrasting visions represented by these two artists: that of the pragmatist and of the dreamer.



Oded Balilty describes his photojournalistic work as employing “a dynamic style aiming to commemorate a person or moment.” His personal work, in contrast, focuses on objects and scenes that tend to be emblematic and symbolic which often emphasize the surreal, quixotic, and ironic nature of real life.

His somber black-and-white *Sabra Traces* series, done as personal work, examines the tenacious, thorny, and omnipresent cactus *Opuntia ficus-indica*, known as “sabra” in Hebrew. This plant came to symbolize native-born Israeli Jews before the country itself existed as a geopolitical unit. Balilty captures the plant’s essence in a photograph illuminated only by his car headlights. The cactus’s thorny outline and complexly intertwining leaves are both beautiful and threatening as they arise out of a velvety black background.



“When I shoot personal stories, I am telling my story through many different objects. In photojournalism, I am telling other people’s stories. I don’t think I could choose only one kind of photography. I think they influence each other and one cannot exist without the other.”

Balilty believes the image of Israel as a melting pot, together with its image of the sabra, diminished in the public consciousness beginning in the 1970s and, “has been forgotten and has been excluded from Israel’s public-cultural discourse.” This observation finds visual expression in two of his photographs. One shows a field of the cacti muffled by a dense blanket of cobwebs. In the other, the plants are seen through the window of an apparently deserted house.

Ironically, the sabra plant—the symbol of Israeli rootedness—is not itself native to the region. Believed to have originated in Mexico and introduced to the Middle East in the fifteenth century, it was never part of the ancient Biblical landscape of the region. Nonetheless, it has long been a fixture of the Israeli landscape, growing wild, spreading, and once established, difficult to remove. Sabras are survivors. They thrive despite a lack of irrigation and can even, as depicted in one of the photographs, withstand a sand storm.

Balilty’s photographs demonstrate how the cacti have inculcated themselves into interstitial and marginal urban spaces. Illuminated only by a street lamp, they form a lush, dense border along a road. Above looms a sign on an electric pole warning of danger; that caution could equally well apply to the spiny pads of the plants below. In another image, the cacti occupy the open land that marks the boundary from city to countryside. Balilty juxtaposes the plants, which someone has capped with a basket, with modern Israel, a city of high rises just visible in the distance. *Sabra Traces* is a gritty, sandy, realistic yet also metaphorical portrait of Israel, thorns and all.



While Balilty finds his images, **Tal Shochat** manufactures hers. She applies the idealization found in studio portraits and fashion shoots to create portraits of trees. Staging and photographing a single tree takes several days. Visiting orchards and fields, Shochat identifies the most attractive and characteristic specimen. She then meticulously grooms it, picking off less-than-perfect parts, washing and shining up the leaves, and doing everything she can to make it look its best. She sets up a studio in the field around the tree with backdrops and artificial lighting. “I use the backdrop to separate the tree from its natural habitat, creating an ambivalent perception of inside and outside, and of nature and artifice,” explained Shochat about her most recent series, *A Lesson in Time*.

The results are stunningly beautiful images of nature. “Beauty is a very problematic subject in art,” says Shochat. “I always wanted to confront beauty and to touch beauty.” Yet her work is not just about visual beauty and a perfected vision of nature. It carries a subtext about Israel, where agriculture, and especially growing trees and fruit, plays a critical part in the country’s history, economy, and culture. Each year, Tu B’Shevat or the “New Year of the Trees,” is celebrated; for some it is a religious holiday, for others a day of ecological consciousness. This historical and political symbolism are most clearly expressed in *A Lesson in Time*, represented in this exhibition by a triptych of a plum tree.

Shochat explained that she wanted to “follow the three stages of the growth of trees—the fruit set stage, the exfoliation stage, and the bloom stage.” Needing trees whose appearance changed from season to season, she selected the pomegranate, plum, apple, and persimmon.



“There is something squalid about this reality and our existence,” says Tal Shochat. “I am looking for the beautiful, the sublime, the dreamlike, and if I don’t find it, I simply stage it.”

THE DESERT SHALL REJOICE & BLOSSOM

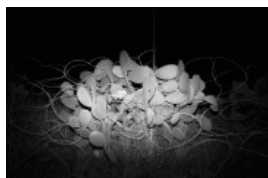
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ODED BALILTY + TAL SHOCHAT

Barbara Tannenbaum, Curator

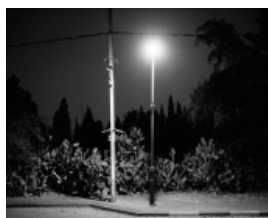
LIST OF WORKS

Oded Balilty

Born Jerusalem, Israel, 1979,
lives Tel Aviv



Untitled 1, 2014 (printed 2015)
Archival pigment print
40 x 57 inches
\$6,000



Untitled 2, 2014 (printed 2015)
Archival pigment print
43.5 x 55 inches
\$6,000



Untitled 3, 2014 (printed 2015)
Archival pigment print
40 x 57 inches
\$6,000



Untitled 6, 2014 (printed 2015)
Archival pigment print
46 x 55 inches
\$6,000



Untitled 7, 2014 (printed 2015)
Archival pigment print
44 x 63 inches
\$6,000



Untitled 8, 2014 (printed 2015)
Archival pigment print
52 x 63 inches
\$6,000

**For more information or to purchase artwork, please contact Debbie Yasinow
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Barbara Tannenbaum, Curator

LIST OF WORKS

Tal Shochat

Born Netanya, Israel, 1974,
lives Tel Aviv



Shaked (Almond), 2011
Chromogenic print
27 x 28 inches (framed)
Cleveland Clinic Art Collection
NFS



Tapuach (Apple), 2011
Chromogenic print
27 x 28 inches (framed)
Cleveland Clinic Art Collection
NFS



A Lesson in Time (Plum)
from **SEASONS**, 2016 (printed 2018)
3 Chromogenic prints
43.3 x 44 inches each
\$26,250



Shesek (Loquat), 2011 (printed 2018)
Chromogenic print
48.5 x 51.25 inches
\$16,000



Afarsemon (Persimmon), 2010 (printed 2018)
Chromogenic print
27x28 inches
Cleveland Clinic Art Collection
NFS



Rimon (Pomegranate), 2004
Chromogenic print
48.25 x 51 inches
NFS