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Work

Texts

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[Roi Kuper](#) born 1956

Short Text

Untitled 1999

This text discusses eight untitled photographs by Roi Kuper (P11736-43) from the *Necropolis Series*, a collective work by Israeli artists Kuper and Gilad Ophir (born 1957). Tate also owns a number of other photographs from this series by Ophir, five titled *Shooting Targets*, 1997 (P11747-55), and four *Yerucham*, 1999 (P11752-11755).



Four of Kuper's photographs depict Syrian military storage shelters which were captured by the Israelis during the Six-Day War of June 1967 (in which Israel annexed the Sinai Desert, the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, the West Bank of the Jordan and the Golan Heights from neighbouring Arab countries). Each of the structures is built to take advantage of the lie of the land which has been terraced using traditional dry stone techniques found in peasant cultures, though here sometimes supplemented by cement. The structures all bear the scars of war and have strong anthropomorphic qualities. They are a brooding presence in the desert where traditionally archaeologists have searched for evidence of past cultures. The shelters are themselves the finds of a new archaeology with different layers of meaning supplied by their construction and the graffiti they bear. At least one of them indicates previous occupation by both Arabs and Israelis. The staining of the concrete endows the shelters with a painterly quality and relieves the starkness of the architecture itself. Kuper's photographs also testify to the slightly varying architectural characteristics of the design of each shelter in a manner reminiscent of the serial concerns of Bernhard (born 1931) and Hilla Becher (born 1934).

The other four photographs depicts mounds built by the British army during the Second World War when the territory then known as Palestine was a British Mandate (1922-1948). The mounds were built to lift tanks above the desert floor so that soldiers could see further into the distance and so that they would occupy a higher ground than any potential German invaders. The mounds have long since been abandoned for military use but instead of being flattened they have been left. They are surrounded now by agricultural land, fields which press up against the contours of the mound but do not subsume them. In some cases the mounds are grassed over, evidence of nature reclaiming the land from culture. The mounds are not marked on the map but are testaments to the past.

Kuper has explained that after religion, the army has hitherto been the holiest institution in Israel, but that respect for the army is now breaking down. Military emplacements such as those photographed by Ophir and Kuper used to be hidden and unquestioned; however, as the army's role comes under continuing scrutiny, so its past is being uncovered.

The archaeology of the Holy Land is a revered subject with a sense of romance attached. Kuper and Ophir are stripping away that romance and manifest a new approach to the archaeology of the desert. The title of their work, *Necropolis Series*, is telling: the necropolis is literally a 'city of the dead'. It also harks back to the ancient past and archaeology of Israel, when the Jews buried their dead in carved sarcophagi resembling Roman ones, which were placed in catacombs or burial chambers (a notable example in Israel is the huge necropolis of Bet She'Arim, 1-4 century AD). Like these eight untitled photographs, other works in their *Necropolis Series* deal with Israel's recent past through the portrayal of what its wars and their protagonists left behind, whether they be Jordanian jeeps, abandoned military camps, derelict shelters or man-made mounds. Kuper and Ophir's photographs map the geography of an Israel blighted by war, chronicling neither losses nor successes, but the eerie impact of Israel's wartime relics on its landscape.

Further reading:

Roi Kuper: Citrus Necropolis, exhibition catalogue, Noga Gallery of Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv 2001

Jeremy Lewison
September 2000
Revised by Giorgia Bottinelli
April 2002