

“Gabriel Benaim:Tel Aviv at 100”

By Anna Gripp

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Someone who's never been to Tel Aviv and now discovers it through Gabriel Benaim's photographs can learn a few things. First of all, that the Israeli Metropolis is 100 years old (Tel Aviv was founded a few kilometers from Jaffa by Zionist immigrants in 1909). The city's modernity manifests itself on the one hand in the typical narrowness of the city, and on the other in the open view to the sea. But this modernity never works in these photographs in a cool unapproachable manner. The architectural orderliness (Tel Aviv is famous for its Bauhaus buildings) is broken through again and again by an organic chaos.

But is the photographer merely interested in showing us this city's portrait? Certainly not, at least not primarily. For Gabriel Benaim, born and raised in Panama and educated in the U.S., this work was initially a method for getting to know his chosen homeland; more precisely, with an open view for all the different forms, details and planes. And in an apparently cumbersome manner by today's standards, he works with an 8x10 large format camera, which promotes at the same time this virtue of precise looking.

Benaim selects his camera position very carefully, and requires the same from his viewer. These are not simple, eye-catching photographs with respectively obvious “highpoints”. The photographer strives rather for an equality of visual impressions, and it remains for the viewer to seek his own “highpoints”. In this way, even a profane street corner can become a visual event.

We asked Walter Keller, who's currently showing Gabriel Benaim's series in his Zurich gallery, for a statement. He writes:
“The unpretentious simplicity of Benaim's Tel Aviv images appealed to me from the get go. Somewhat to my own surprise. Why was this? Am I developing a new conservative view of photography, as a consequence of having seen too many fervid large-size C-prints? No. The desire for discovering skillfully composed works, laden both emotionally as well as aesthetically that only the medium of photography can produce, has always been there. I am taken by the alertness, the quiet attention to detail of the images. Strolling, leisurely meandering like a flaneur, Benaim captures this city that was founded 100 years ago. Using a large format camera, Benaim presents us near perfectly produced silver gelatin contact prints. And this in itself is a breath of fresh air given the current confusion within the production of contemporary photography. Almost like a moment of silence in the midst of a noisy performance, Benaim's images are calm, unhurried; photographs that pull the brakes on the race that is our urban life. Why not?!”

The Walter Keller Gallery is showing the exhibit “Gabriel Benaim:Tel Aviv at 100” from April 29 till June 12, 2010.