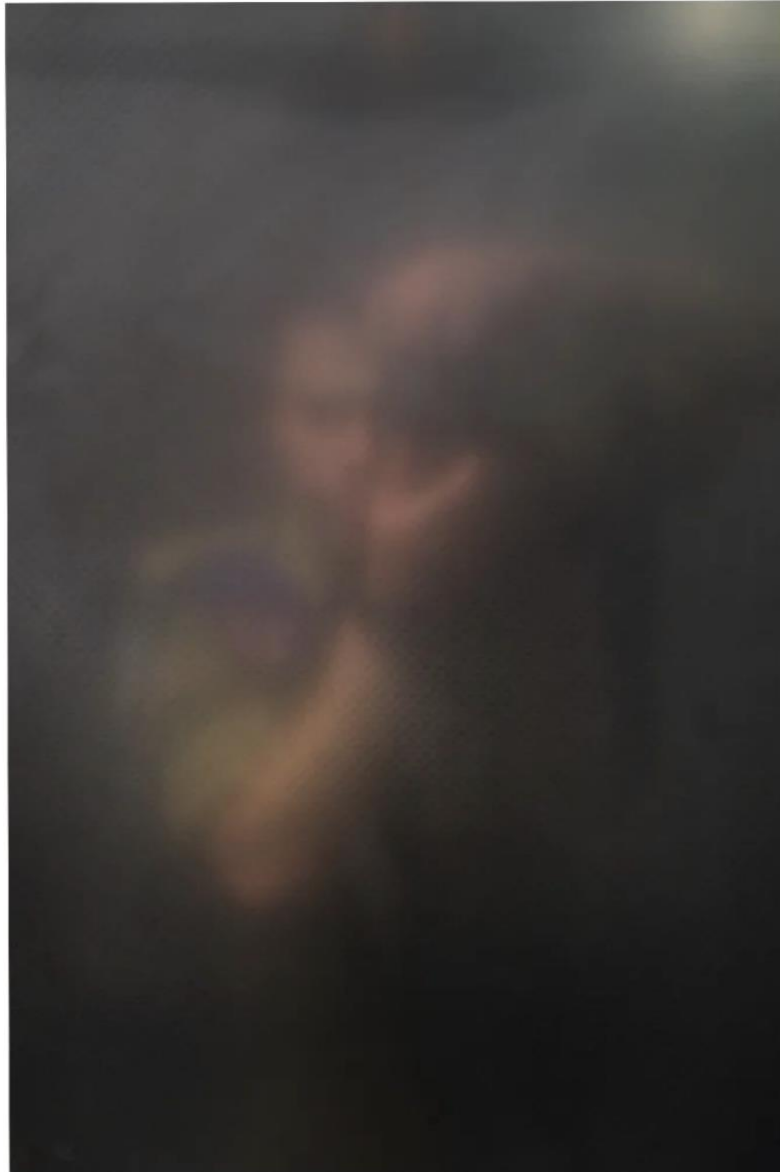


# Portfolio as Obituary: Staff Sgt. Lavi Lipshitz's *Until When* Photo Diary



*Healing Centre. Self-portrait in the Elevator. Lavi Lipshitz. May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023.*

*December 2023*

*Noa Ogilvy*

What happens when art becomes the obituary of its creator? This is the question I have been grappling with ever since November 1<sup>st</sup>, the day I simultaneously discovered Staff Sgt. Lavi Lipshitz's photographs and learned of his death. Lipshitz served in the reconnaissance unit in the *Givati* infantry

brigade of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). On October 31<sup>st</sup>, he was killed in the Gaza Strip as one of the first military casualties of Israel's Operation Swords of Iron. He was twenty years old.

Described as a lifelong lover of art and cinema, beginning on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Lipshitz launched a photography project on Instagram to document his daily life as a soldier. The project, under the handle [@till when photo diary](#), or *Until When*, features 120 of his daily images. After the news of his death broke in Israel, Israelis quickly discovered his project and shared his works on social media. Calling to mind Israeli photographers such as Adi Nes and Micha Bar-Am, Lipshitz's works can be described as both anonymous *and* highly personal images of life as a soldier in the IDF. Having been introduced to *Until When* only after Lipshitz's death, I am unable to separate his work from that fact that he is no longer here with us. Even the title of his project, *Until When*, feels loaded. Looking at his photographs, I ask myself what he intended by the title of his work: *Until when* will I be a soldier? *Until when* will I take photographs? *Until when* before we have peace? As I highlight some of Lipshitz's images here, I urge readers to both view his portfolio in its entirety for themselves and engage with his work as a photographic obituary.



*Karmi Tzur Outpost. Dogs and Building.* Lavi Lipshitz. October 6, 2023.

I begin with the end, that is, the last image of the series. Two dogs lie in an open area somewhere in the Karmi Tzur outpost, near northern Hebron in the West Bank. The photograph, affectionately titled in English *Karmi Tzur Outpost. Dogs and Building* appears peaceful, until viewers

note the date of the photograph: October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023. The date of the photograph instantly transforms it; I immediately think of Lipshitz, sitting and photographing the dogs, completely oblivious to what is to come on October 7<sup>th</sup>, events which will change not only the State of Israel, but also his life, forever. The photograph, on its face lighthearted, becomes infused with anxiety. Due to the technical layout of Instagram, each viewer who visits Lipshitz's page also begins with the end of his project, as it is the most recent image he shared. The process of having to 'move backward' in time, sets a new tone for the entire body of work; viewers scroll past each image, entering an archive of Israeli images and experiences which now take on a much larger symbolism of capturing the Israel we knew before October 7<sup>th</sup>, a physical and figurative place we can never return to.



*Zikim Beach. Good Fighters at Sea. Lavi Lipshitz. September 28, 2023.*

In most of Lipshitz's images of soldiers, he disguises their identities by obscuring their faces, or shooting from a distance. The resulting effect is a photograph which at once offers a personal and anonymous image. One such image, one of my favourite works from *Until When*, is *Zikim Beach. Good Fighters at Sea*. In the photograph, taken at Zikim Beach, located near Kibbutz Zikim in the Gaza Envelope, soldiers enjoy a break in the ocean. In the foreground, Lipshitz's shadow can be seen as he takes the image. We see the back of one soldier as he runs into the water, seemingly in his underwear. A group of seven more soldiers await him in the waves, their faces hard to make out from a distance.

I look at this image and I begin to surgically transplant the faces of soldiers I know onto their bodies, because this is a practice of Israel at war – in every photo of soldiers, we search for a familiar face. For me, this photograph symbolizes Lipshitz’s youth. It is playful and joyful. In another cruel twist of fate, nine days after this photograph was taken, Zikim Beach also became the scene of a massacre and tragedy after Hamas terrorists infiltrated the beach and killed over two dozen civilians and soldiers. Another scene, another place, which now exists only in the archive.



*Route 6. Fighter’s Rest.* Lavi Lipshitz. August 17, 2023. (left)  
Two untitled images from the *Soldiers* series. Adi Nes. 1994 – 2000. (right)

When I saw Lipshitz’s work *Route 6. Fighter’s Rest*, I immediately thought of Adi Nes’ iconic images of soldiers sleeping as part of his *Soldiers* series. Legs splayed across bus seats haphazardly, one face blurred in the back of the bus and a loose tobacco pack gripped tightly in the foreground, Lipshitz succeeds in creating a technically dynamic and conceptually interesting image. Adi Nes, when asked about why he only shot images of soldiers out of combat, answered that “before starting work on the *Soldiers* series, I decided my subjects would never be in combat. They would always be in between. They eat, sleep, take a piss, but they never fight. Still, death is always present,

lingering...”.<sup>1</sup> This practice of photographing the “in-between” moments of a soldier’s service, a practice shared by Nes and Lipshitz, results in deeper, more complex, and lifelike images. In the case of Lipshitz, the effect is magnified by the fact that he is creating these images in real-time during his own military service. As a viewer of Lipshitz’s images, his documentation of the “in-between” moments of his own military service is, for me, what transforms *Until When* from a simple series of military photographs into a personal visual obituary to view after his death.



*Hatmar Shomron. Self-portrait with Vest in a Hummer.* Lavi Lipshitz. July 3, 2023.

It is rare to see an image of Lipshitz himself in *Until When*. In fact, out of 120 images, only two of them are self-portraits, and neither show his face clearly in its entirety. The second such image, *Hatmar Shomron. Self-portrait with Vest in a Hummer* features almost half of Lipshitz’s face captured in the mirror of a hummer. The scenery beyond the mirror is out of focus, only the image in the mirror is sharpened. Lipshitz does not smile, and his pupil is just out of frame, denying eye contact with the

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom Seymour, “Adi Nes on ‘challenging stereotypical masculine imagery’ and ‘allowing my subjects to be sensitive’”, *British Journal of Photography*, May 3, 2020. <https://www.1854.photography/2020/05/adi-nes-israeli-soldiers-challenging-masculine-stereotypes/>

viewer. It feels as though he is looking at something beyond the lens, beyond the mirror. He is dressed in his uniform, complete with helmet and vest. The sombre look on Lipshitz's face reminds me of an interview with his parents conducted shortly after his death, where his father noted that, "he (Lipshitz) had a profound sensitivity. He was a very sensitive person, his dream was not to be a soldier, he wanted to be a photographer"<sup>2</sup> This sensitivity is evident to me in this self-portrait; I see the look on his face, and I wonder if we so rarely see him in his work because he prefers to be 'seen' in his dream role of photographer, rather than be seen as a soldier.



*Shavei Samaria. Shirt Hanging in the Shower.* Lavi Lipshitz. May 30, 2023.

Lipshitz's photograph, *Shavei Samaria. Shirt Hanging in the Shower* is one of the most emotional images of *Until When* in the portfolio. A military shirt hangs, alone, against a backdrop of a white shower wall. Taken just over two weeks after he began his series, the image is simple, and, in different times, I may have only considered it a straightforward still-life piece. But, after scrolling backwards through so many other photographs, the image feels much heavier. When I first saw this

---

<sup>2</sup> "Staff Sgt. Lavi Lipshitz, 20: Soldier who saw life through a camera lens", Times of Israel, November 19, 2023. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/staff-sgt-lavi-lipshitz-20-soldier-who-saw-life-through-a-camera-lens/>

image, my knee-jerk reaction was a feeling of emptiness. Interestingly, some of the comments left on the work by Israeli viewers echo the same sentiment; individuals write that the jacket will remain hung up forever, and others say it is a sad image which has taken on new meaning after Lipshitz's death. Perhaps originally taken as a quick snapshot, now the image feels like a reminder that Lipshitz is no longer able to remove the shirt from the hanger – the shirt will remain there, forever waiting for him, a devastating symbol of loss.

Freed from the constraints of traditional military images, which limit the photographic record of soldiers to high-stakes, tense, life or death battle-focused imagery, Lipshitz's images not only re-humanize and re-complicate the lives of his subjects, but, also, his own life as a soldier. His images are too human, too full of life. Perhaps this is why I am inclined to view his portfolio as an obituary, a record of his life, rather than as a simple collection of military photographs. Though we rarely see the photographer himself, I find myself searching for evidence of him in his images; trying to find a shadow, a hand, or a footprint in the dirt. *Until When* captures so many scenes, so many emotions, and so many different subjects which, when assembled, are able to create a pieced together image of the life of their creator, Lipshitz. But a feeling of incompleteness remains, and, especially in the aftermath of October 7<sup>th</sup> and Lipshitz's death in the Gaza Strip, this incompleteness becomes inescapable and devastating. There is an overwhelming urge to see *more*, to get just one more photograph, one more glimpse of him.

Readers can see the complete *Until When* project here:  
[https://www.instagram.com/till\\_when\\_photo\\_diary/](https://www.instagram.com/till_when_photo_diary/)