



A still image from The Last Photograph exhibition, courtesy of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (<https://www.tamuseum.org.il/en/exhibition/last-photograph-ran-tal-after-micha-bar-am/>)

## Cameranesia: Ran Tal After Micha Bar-Am

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On September 24<sup>th</sup>, a friend and I made our way to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. It was a quiet Saturday morning, with few visitors. We had come to see the Impressionist collection, as per my friend's request, but were having difficulty locating the gallery. After approaching the information desk for directions, the woman behind the counter turned to us and asked, "Why aren't you asking me how to get to Micha Bar-Am?". She urged us to forget the Impressionists; they could wait. Micha Bar-Am, however, could not. The Bar-Am exhibition, she explained, told a painful but essential story of Israel: a story of war and trauma, but also of life and progress. Micha Bar-Am, she stressed, was, in his photographs, documenting some of the most important and moving stories of Israel. Naturally, we ditched the Impressionists.

There can be no doubt that Micha Bar-Am is one of Israel's most celebrated photographers. The current exhibition of his work at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, titled "The

Last Photograph: Ran Tal after Micha Bar-Am”, reminds the Israeli public of Bar-Am’s place among Israel’s great artists. The exhibition is actually a video installation, one that invites viewers to move freely around a darkened room full of screens showing a deconstructed version of Israeli filmmaker Ran Tal’s critically acclaimed 2022 documentary, *1341 Frames of Love and War*. Ran Tal has excised nine segments of his documentary representing a cross-section of Bar-Am’s work and covering major events between the 1950s and the 1980s in Israel. In their original form, Bar-Am’s photographs are riveting, brilliantly executed both at the conceptual and technical level. They are images so familiar to Israelis that they require no fanfare to draw a crowd. Ran Tal’s reimagining of the work, however, in his combination of photography and video, breathes new life and meaning into these iconic and familiar images. Stark black and white images appear while the viewer listens to a continuous background dialogue between Bar-Am and his wife Orna discussing the context of each photograph, and by extension, each chapter of Israeli history. Broadly, Bar-Am’s portfolio encapsulates the story of Israel itself. The work addresses themes such as the relationship between public and private history, the complicated dual identity of Israelis as both soldiers and civilians, and the ethical debates surrounding war and peace. These themes represent just some of the ways one could analyze Bar-Am’s images. They are fascinating and allow for a deep exploration of his life’s work. They are, however, no match for the viewers’ fascination with the relationship between the photographs and the artist himself.

While the photographs may physically dominate the exhibition, it is the artist’s *presence* which is so overwhelmingly palpable as viewers engage with the various clips. There is no way to watch the fragments of the documentary without forging an intimate connection with Bar-Am. Viewers cannot help but be captivated his personal struggles as a photographer. One of the main issues he faces, made evident within a few minutes of the first video clip, is his relationship with memory. He opens a debate around the details of an operation in Lebanon by insisting to Orna that he “remembers everything”. As viewers move through the subsequent video clips, however, this claim shifts to “we adapt memory to the photographs”. Still further along, after the Yom Kippur War, Bar-Am admits that his memory is “a mess”, he forgets quickly, and that he “tries not to remember painful experiences, not everything is worth remembering”. Although he tries to pass off this memory loss as being part of his photographic process, maintaining that “[he takes] pictures to remember,

catalogue, and move on”, the viewer suspects that this *cameranesia*, Bar-Am’s ability to remember only through the photographs he takes, leads to something deeper and darker. In his role as record-keeper of the national memory of Israel, Bar-Am the artist seems to have lost the ability to remember or perhaps lost the *desire* to remember.



From the exhibition The Last Photograph: Ran Tal after Micha Bar-Am

Bar-Am’s shifting roles between passionate photographer and record-keeper of Israeli history, over the course of his career, was a heavy a burden which seems to have made him either incapable of holding or unwilling to hold in his own memory many of the things he photographed. The majority of Bar-Am’s images deal with war and trauma, and his explanations of these images serve as abridged obituaries of the individuals pictured. In discussing the devastation, loss, and sorrow present in his work, the artist states that “one’s success is another’s tragedy”. This reality of the life of a war photographer weighs on him, and it becomes ever more apparent as viewers move through the exhibition that Bar-Am is struggling behind the lens. The nature of the work, which calls for total dedication and which has, unquestionably, eclipsed Bar-Am’s commercial career and personal life, creates hardships for him. One of his sons remarks that Bar-Am was not a good father by modern standards, and that it was difficult to grow up in such an ‘intense’ house which had the news on full volume every half-hour. Orna, keeper of the archive and functioning as the external

memory drive of the events contained within her husband's images, eventually sacrifices her own art career and dedicates herself to Bar-Am's work full time. Bar-Am is not just struggling in his personal life. As viewers move through the exhibition, hit with image after image of war, destruction, and pain, Bar-Am becomes more and more opposed to his role of record-keeper, ultimately arguing that it is unethical to take photographs in war.



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The final video clip of the exhibition, segregated from the rest in its own room, shows the very last photographs Bar-Am took. It is in this room that the viewer experiences the full magnitude of Bar-Am's struggle. A handful of images of the Sabra and Shatila massacre are on display. Bar-Am describes the images as the last atrocity he ever photographed and quietly says that "you don't have to photograph everything, all the blood". In the background, Orna describes how Bar-Am stopped photography completely, even personal family photography. In the closing moments of the film, Bar-Am recalls how when he began taking photographs, he hoped that he could make the world a better place. But now, he says, he does not believe that photography can make the world a better place anymore.

In the opening line of the film, Bar-Am tells viewers that “no photograph will avert the next war”. His work is a testament to this; no matter how many times his photographs are shared within Israel and with the world, war and tragedy continue to pose for Bar-Am’s camera. The softer, optimistic moments of life that he documents, such as the birth of his son, are overshadowed by the images of brutality and blood in the archive. His camera always pointed in the direction of the most noise, Bar-Am never can predict what will happen in front of the lens – but, over the course of his career, the noise shows itself to be most often a bad omen. It is understandable therefore, that after decades of building a career on the documentation of some of the worst moments in Israeli history, such as the Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem and the Yom Kippur War, Bar-Am’s memory of these events has collapsed, perhaps as a self-defence mechanism.

After viewing the exhibition, my friend and I returned to the museum information desk and spoke again to the woman. We discussed the exhibition, and how important and moving the work was. This time, she pointed us in the direction of the Impressionists, but she insisted that we first go to look at Shira Zelwer’s “Gathering of the Birds”, a fun sculpture installation of four hundred wax birds. The birds would make us feel better, she said, after the heaviness of Bar-Am. It was important for us to go and take a breather before continuing our day at the museum. And she was right, we did feel better after. But I did have the thought that if I needed a break after only spending around an hour with Bar-Am’s work, then it is no surprise that he needed a break after living with it for the better part of a lifetime.

*“The Last Photograph: Ran Tal After Micha Bar-Am” is showing at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art until December 20, 2022.*