Look me straight in the eye

Itamar Levy

The question that arises again and again when looking at Orit Bertini Shavit's photographs is the issue of the correct distance. There is a momentary sense that the photograph is close, too close, inviting us into the home, into the family, the dining room, bathroom, and double bed. We see the figures, their age and build, standing facing the camera, exposing themselves to the gaze.

Nevertheless, parallel to the feeling of "too close," the "distant" and the "very distant" increasingly take on form and texture: the foreground remains empty, the figures are located at the far edge of the room, there is almost no movement and almost no speech. Expressions have a slight touch of serious concentration facing the camera. Often it seems that a photograph has been taken in an anonymous hotel, while even in the domestic ease there is painstaking restraint and color balance, as if through a membrane of self-awareness. Despite the nearness, something remains impenetrable and inaccessible.

The gaze is trapped as if caught between two contradictory movements, one expressive and one anti-expressive, one drawing closer and one of avoidance: intimacy encounters an internality that cannot be shared.

When does the private become secret? How shall we distinguish between alone and lone? There are no clear distinctions, and all of the levels infiltrate each other.

In one of the intimate and more mysterious photographs, Orit is seen in her greenish undershirt holding a green plastic sieve, turning it towards the sun so that spots of light fall on her face. To some extent, the sieve is also the camera – the opening enabling light to enter the *camera obscura.* The face, the imprint of the spots dispersed on it, is the film, the photographic surface. But what takes place beyond the closed eyes? We do not know. The face may be a kind of stop sign, but perhaps not. Perhaps the dream-catcher hanging in the back, between the face and the sieve, enables us to take one more step closer into the dream beyond the photograph, into several fragments of light captured together to create a picture?

Another photograph shows four people in the distance, wearing coats, standing on a wintery beach. The photograph is so different from the spirit of the rest of the series: the domestic space was replaced by open space, warmth changed into cold, closeness became distance between the figures and the viewer and between the figures themselves. Similar to the cluster of light spots in the photograph of the sieve, here a cluster of black dots is revealed, wrapped up

well, each one separate. Unlike the other photographs in the series, this exposes the distance and the quiet between the figures comprising a group of lone individuals.

Between these two extremes, between Orit the introspective observer and the exposed loneliness on the seacoast, an entire world gradually reveals itself: an open closed space, with different and precise doses of cold and warmth, with embrace and separateness, being inside and outside the home. What creates a family, and what is the unifying force transforming it into a shared dream? How does each individual continue to dream one’s own dream within the family? Perhaps there is a need to forget for a moment that this is about a family and to be swallowed up in the enveloping light, to wonder about the nearness of the color spots, to listen carefully to the quiet so as to feel the world in the photograph from within.

,