



The Eli Lemberger Museum  
of Photography at Tel-Hai  
Industrial Park

# shuli sadè

PHOTOGRAPHS



# שולי שדה

צילומים

המוזיאון לצילום  
ע"ש אלי למברגר  
בגן התעשייה תל-חי



## light and its opposite BILL ARNING

What is the opposite of light? Not the adjective "light", the answer to that query would be too easy — dark. Rather I am seeking the opposite of the substance of light, those beams we see catching dust particles, those shooting streams of photons with wondrous properties described to us by physicists, the light that travels for millions of years seen as stars. This question can have no one definitive answer as it is not entirely logical as nouns do not often have opposites. There is no opposite of "door" or "dog." Rather the question itself is poetic and the answer to a poetic question is more than likely to be equally metaphorical. Shuli Sadè's works may be understood as obliquely answering this question.

She begins with photography that has historically been, and by and large still is, the artful study of light, how it behaves, how it describes and defines the visible world. Sade's photographs are wonderfully nuanced examples of that craft but we will be ignoring the particulars of her subject-matter choices for now, as we look first at her most conspicuous artistic decision. After printing the photographs they are covered in an obliterating layer of Asphaltum and allowed to rest until the photographic image is nearly unrecoverable and its specifics begin to get hazy in the artist's mind. Then using solvent and digging through the stratum of tar, she partially uncovers the hidden original image.

The effect is immediately and viscerally seductive; the brownish tints that remain give even her harshest images soothing warmth. The swirls and strafing lines that remain on the photographic paper invite the adjective "painterly" that has been alternately both a pejorative term and one of high praise for photographs for all of the 150 year love/hate dialog between those two arts. But the Asphaltum Sadè employs is clearly not merely to seduce the viewer or to make us think of painting but rather for its material metaphor as the opposite of light. When we think of light as a thing, we think of how it startles when reflected off a white surface or tickles our eyes when it hits pink. We think of the thousands of miniature suns moving like fireflies on the surface of a rippling bay. We would never conjure light by considering earth, tar, Asphaltum, or those ubiquitous gray rocks. We know intellectually that because

we can perceive multiple shades of black, gray and brown, light is indeed returning to our eyes after encountering objects in those colors but in a symbolic language they are the greedy devourers of light, absorbing as many photons as they can.

Sadè's images depict uninhabited architectural spaces, abandoned factories, bridges, ruins from the industrial age. She records the perilous play of light on spaces in which the dominant shades are of the light devouring kind. Often the way Sadè chooses to photograph them, such as in the 1929 Sacred Spaces series, and most specifically in Industrial Window, the emphasis is on the windows, the portals through which light enters and is then dramatically swallowed, engulfed in the irresistible murk. In fact we can see each as recording of light on the verge of fading into nothingness. She fixes the subtle dark tones that were recorded on the film before expiring.

As if to reiterate this struggle against the dying of the light by manifesting it in the language of the photograph, the Asphaltum literally covers the image in order to devour a new light, the gallery light that attempts to reveal the shadowy details of Sadè's massive spaces. It is not that Sadè's photographs lack complex variations among the values of gray. Even a summary inspection reveals the startling range of grays that are the object of traditional photographic connoisseurship. Rather when one see these struggles of the light as a primary topic beyond the visual, the photographs' cosmological and philosophical implications begin to fully resonate.

One of the most conceptually and spiritually interesting concepts from astronomy is how every fiber of our beings and most of our environment and cultural artifacts are solar in origin. The heavy metals and complex minerals that are the stuff of life and the earth's rocky crust were all created within the turbulence of the sun, and every bit of food we eat throughout our lives was brought into being through the transformation of solar energy into other forms. And what more quintessential icon of light is there than our sun, the light that is so bright one cannot look at it but which illuminates all.

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In fact if we believe the comforting thought that the earth is an organism, which after billions of years hatched mankind so that it could open her eyes and know herself more complexly. In that case the buildings we erect are also the stuff of the earth - natural in a sense - the shelter or workspace for we humans as components of this creature, and all of this is powered, driven by the heat and light radiating from the sun. These industrial buildings grew out of the earth as surely as a stalk of corn, and in their semi-ruined state will soon disappear like a crab-apple rotting in an overgrown field.

When Sadè forces the combination of photography, the art of light, with the Asphaltum-tar, the negator of light, she engineers a reconciliation of opposites that should annihilate one another. The magic of the photographs is to see such enemies held in stasis. This is why Shuli Sadè's works

function as catalysts for our consideration of the eternal issues of being, the eventual and unavoidable return to nothingness, and the equally inevitable coming into to being yet again. She engages this biggest of big issues with a subtle touch by focusing on the seemingly small issue of darkness and light which we have seen is only small until we meditate on it, which is exactly what these artworks cause us to do.

**Bill Arning** was the director of the New York Alternative Space White Columns from 1986 to 1996, and is currently the director of the List Visual Arts Center at MIT, Cambridge, MA, and a regular contributor to Art in America, World Art and Time Out New York