



## Botanical conflict

In her work photographing gardens across Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Corinne Silva explores what they tell us about national ambition. *Shela Sheikh* on a story of plants and power

**The relationship between landscape and politics** has long been a concern of Corinne Silva's photographic work. Earlier projects such as *Badlands* (2008-11) investigated the role of intensive agricultural development and real-estate speculation in shaping the frontier territory of Almería in south-east Spain. And in *Imported Landscapes* (2010), she used advertising billboards as a space through which to create geographical *mise en abymes*, inserting her own photographs taken along the north Moroccan coast into the Spanish border landscape of Murcia, emphasising the regions' shared histories and natural features and the difficulties in identifying what is "native" across geographical and geopolitical borders.

In 2010, Silva's interest in contested territories turned towards Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Her resulting series, *Garden State*, examines the inherent links between cultivation and colonisation, between nature and nation, in particular through the seemingly benign and apolitical act of gardening. Over the course of two years, starting in 2011, Silva travelled to 22 sites in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories to photograph Israeli public and private gardens. Her aim was "to explore the ways in which gardens and gardening may represent the Israeli state's ongoing expansionist ambitions in the historic land of Palestine". Silva's proposition is that the ►



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◀ act of gardening, often conceived as one of care and nurturing, can in fact be appropriated by the state as a means of making claims towards property and belonging. This logic mirrors Israel’s afforestation programmes, which, behind a façade of conservation and environmentalism, serve to stake claims to confiscated territory and plant over the remains of destroyed Palestinian villages (explored by Silva in her 2013 photographic and sound work *Wounded*).

Informed by Eyal Weizman’s 2007 *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation*, Silva’s research and her resulting photographs reveal the ways in which the civilian and military occupation overlap. In Silva’s words:

“You plant a garden when you intend to stay. And in this case, the Israeli state’s strategy for erasing memory from the landscape involves harnessing individuals, civilians, and their personal investment in a place.”

By creating her own visual map, in three stages, of gardens across Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Silva traces a narrative of simultaneous cultivation and dispossession that is shaped by key dates and shifting borders in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The series begins with the standardised public and communal gardens of the “New Towns” built in the 1950s and 1960s along the Mediterranean coastline surrounding Tel Aviv

after the formation of Israel in 1948. Influenced by British town planning, these were designed with the aim of transplanting Israelis beyond the centre of Tel Aviv on to land formerly populated by Palestinians, most of whom fled, or were forced to flee, during the 1947-49 war. With little investment from the state, these spaces suffer from a relative lack of upkeep.

The second group of images is located along the Green Line - which, following the Armistice Agreements of 1949, delineates the borders between Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and served as the de facto borders of Israel until the 1967 Six-Day War - and Route 6, a north-south highway. Unlike in ▶



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◀ the New Towns, here subsidies are provided by the state to encourage Israelis to settle in these suburban, contested zones. Classified as “quality of life” settlements, they are often gated, enjoying ornately landscaped private gardens and a variety of plants.

The West Bank, lying east of the Green Line, is the location of the third group of images. These settlements - which are considered illegal by most of the international community - are policed by private security forces, are accessible only by private roads and benefit from water sources diverted away from Palestinian communities and agriculture. However, the quietness of Silva’s photographs appears far from the global

images of conflict. Her focus on the settlement gardens reveals that, though relatively recent, they seem paradoxically to recreate an idea of an ancient “Holy Land”, through the use of rocks for landscaping and the cultivation of Mediterranean cypress and olive trees (a symbol of Palestinian identity, summoning up ideas of authenticity, rootedness and belonging).

As Silva notes, analogies can be drawn between the construction of the photographs as a façade - “remaining on the surface, keeping the framing very tight and the depth very shallow” - and the construction of the garden as a façade for the state. “Here, the practice of gardening and landscaping,

planting and transplanting, seeding and reshaping, accessing and restricting, is linked to the construction of power, used to reinforce political, social and cultural ideologies.” **FT**

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*Shela Sheikh is a lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London, where she leads the MA in Postcolonial Culture and Global Policy. Corinne Silva’s publication “Garden State” is available to buy through the artist’s website (corinnesilva.com); her work is included in “Habitar el Mediterráneo” at the Institut Valencià d’Art Modern, Spain, until April 14, and “Metageography” at the Zarya Center for Contemporary Art, Vladivostok, Russia, until January 13*