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 ▶
‘Silva traces a narrative of simultaneous cultivation and dispossession that is shaped by key dates and shifting borders’
West Bank

‘The gardens seem paradoxically to recreate an idea of an ancient “Holy Land” through the use of rocks and olive’