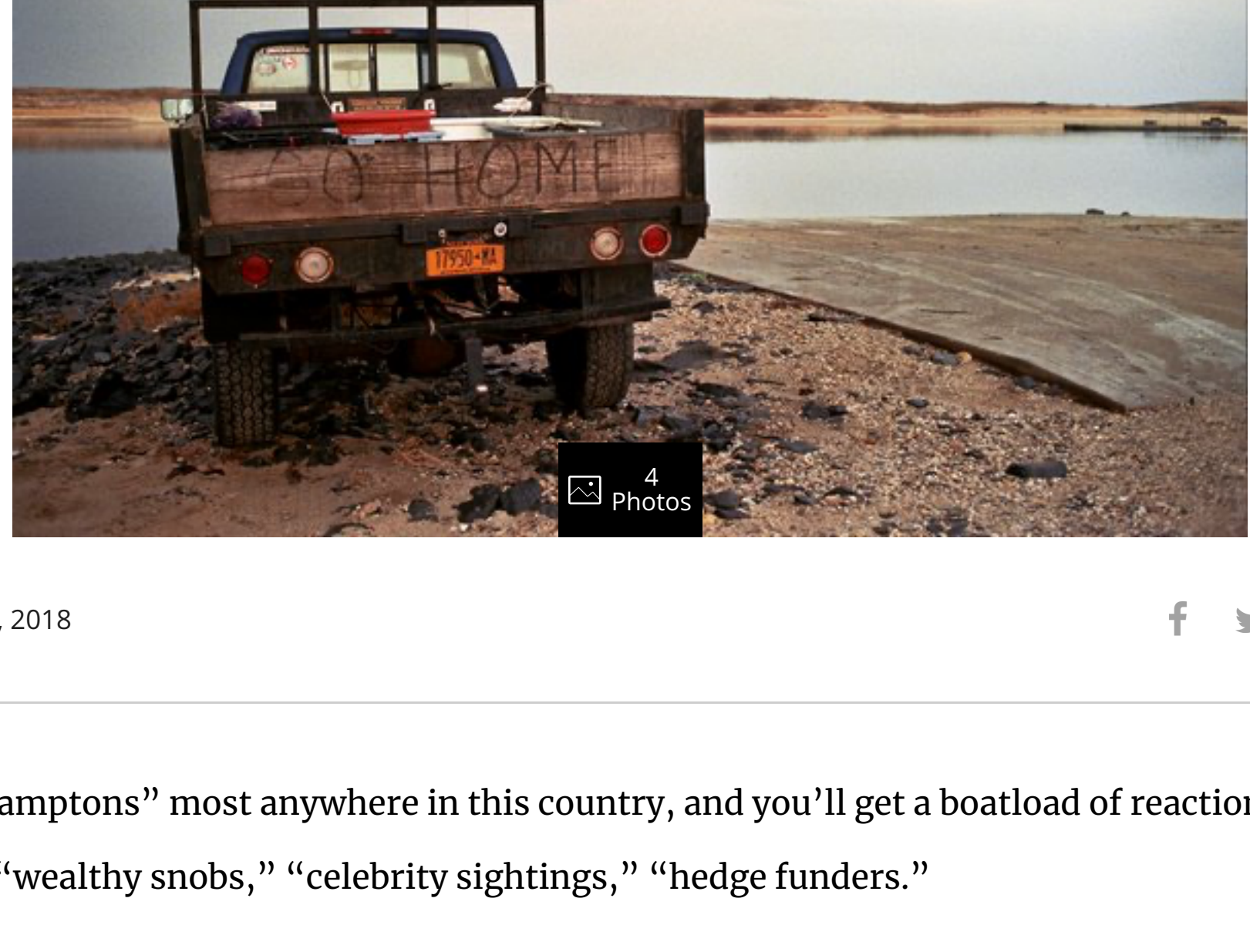


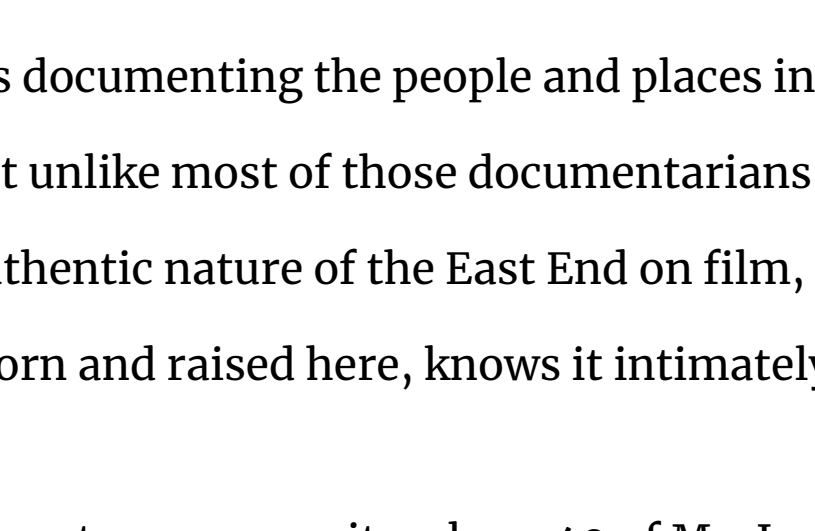
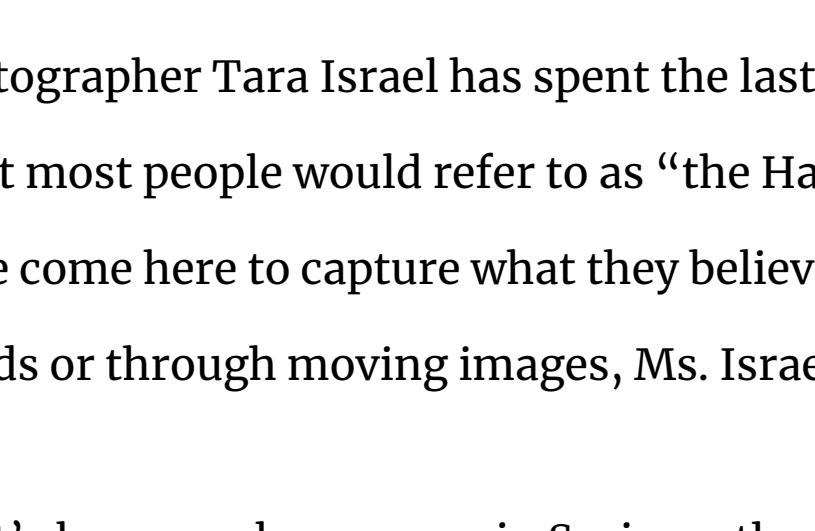
Photographer Explores Small Town Life Through The People And Places She Knew In Her Youth



on Jul 3, 2018 f t in

Say “the Hamptons” most anywhere in this country, and you’ll get a boatload of reactions: “great beaches,” “wealthy snobs,” “celebrity sightings,” “hedge funders.”

But say “the Hamptons” to those who live and work here year-round, and you’re likely to get an entirely different response: “You obviously don’t know anything about this place.”



Photographer Tara Israel has spent the last several years documenting the people and places in what most people would refer to as “the Hamptons.” But unlike most of those documentarians who have come here to capture what they believe to be the authentic nature of the East End on film, in words or through moving images, Ms. Israel, who was born and raised here, knows it intimately.

That’s because she grew up in Springs, the same East Hampton community where 40 of Ms. Israel’s photos are on view in “Bonac: Letters From Home,” an exhibition running through July 22 at the Arts Center at Duck Creek on Squaw Road near Three Mile Harbor.

The project began a number of years ago when Ms. Israel was a student at Sarah Lawrence College. With a photo assignment looming and a lack of subjects to shoot, she did what anyone of her generation would do—she put out a call on Facebook.

“I heard from people from fourth grade,” Ms. Israel said, “One of them was a long-haired guy who was working at the bowling alley. He was running the machines that reset the pins—his grandfather built the building.”

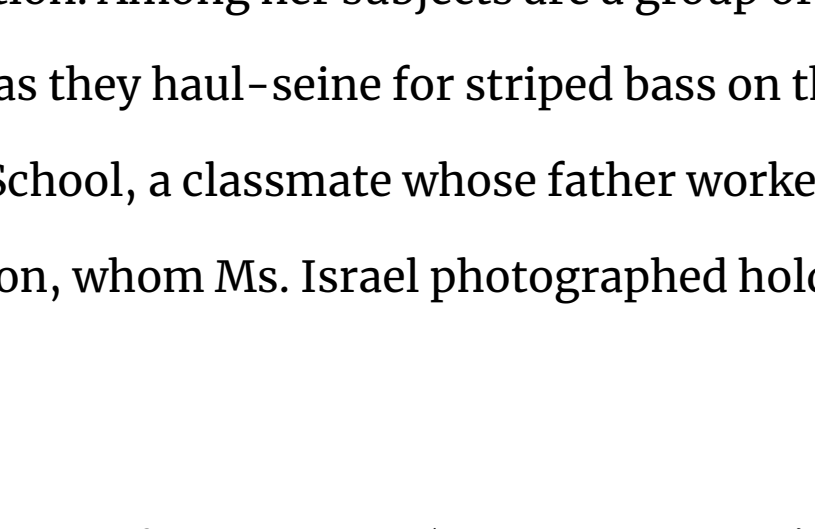
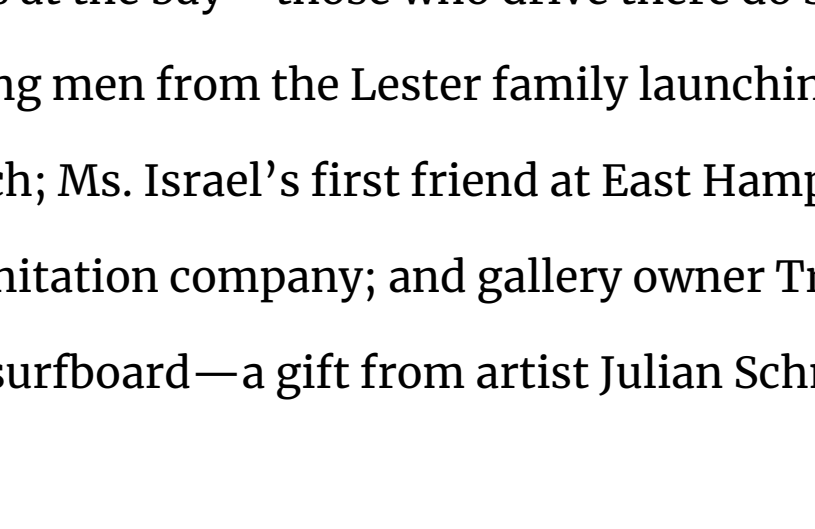
The photographs she took for the project documented regular people doing average things in the course of their everyday lives on the East End, and when she showed the photographs to her professor at Sarah Lawrence, he joked, “That’s not the Hamptons.”

She said, “No ... it’s East Hampton.”

From there, the project grew, with Ms. Israel making contact with and photographing many old friends and their families, documenting their lives as well as the places they hung out when they were students at Springs School and, later, as middle and high schoolers in East Hampton.

Most of the portraits were taken from Wainscott to Montauk. She explains that the local population isn’t composed only of the working class and that her intention with the project is not to focus on just one socioeconomic group, but rather reflect her experience growing up in this very unique place.

“When I was in elementary school, there were two big shifts in population in Springs. In the ’90s, there was one boom, then, after 9/11, everyone moved out here because no one wanted to raise their kids in the city,” said Ms. Israel, the daughter of Dr. Michael Israel, who had a medical practice in East Hampton for many years. “There were 20 kids in the grade, most of them were related. I was odd, because I had no cousins in the school.”



“The way I’ve approached the photos in this project and in general—I wasn’t manipulating anything,” she said. “I feel when you’re a kid, you don’t know about socioeconomic things. There are 20 kids in your grade, and you get along or you have no friends. There wasn’t rich vs. poor kids ... You were friends with the person who sat at the desk next to you.”

Ultimately, she pointed out, Springs is different, because it’s an out-of-the-way community that ends at the bay—those who drive there do so with intention. Among her subjects are a group of young men from the Lester family launching their dory as they haul-seine for striped bass on the beach; Ms. Israel’s first friend at East Hampton Middle School, a classmate whose father worked for a sanitation company; and gallery owner Tripoli Patterson, whom Ms. Israel photographed holding his surfboard—a gift from artist Julian Schnabel.

“The way I shoot everything, I try to avoid visual triggers that feed into that ‘us-versus-them’ mentality. When you grow up in small town, you don’t realize how much your surroundings influence you as a child and how something will completely shape your life,” she said. “I’m treating the work as a portrait of a town. The entire thing becomes a single image.”

Among the influences that Ms. Israel’s cites as formative in her early years were teachers at Springs School who went above and beyond, like Irene Tully, who took her to museums on weekends, or historian Hugh King, who shared his deep knowledge of East Hampton with his students, instilling in them an understanding and love for this place.

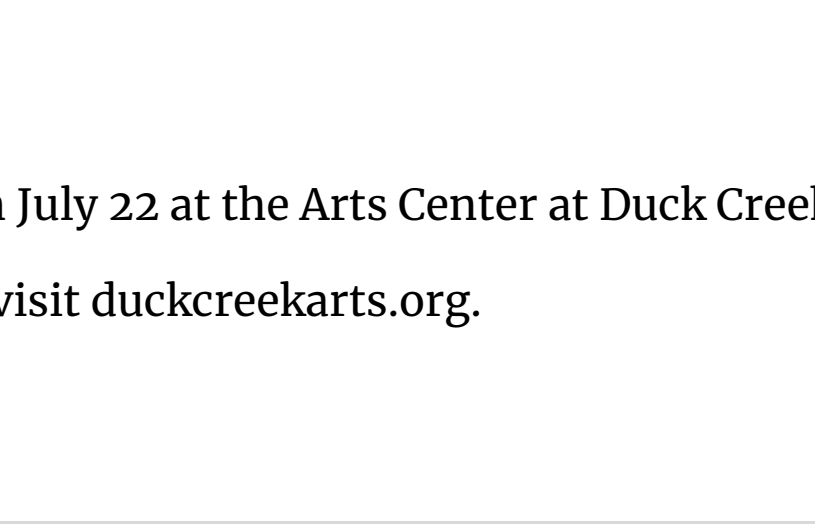
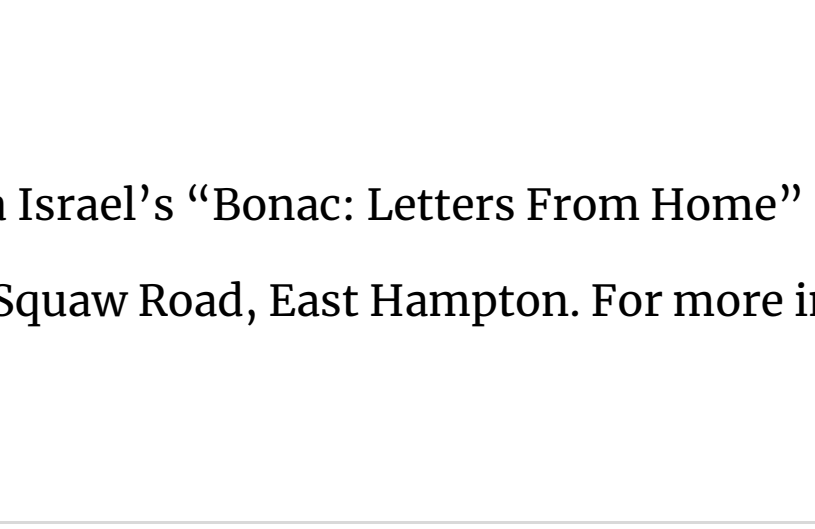
The work is also about Ms. Israel’s deeply personal memories of everyday life hitchhiking around town as a kid when she couldn’t find a ride, or calling the phone booth in front of London Jewelers to ask whoever answered if her friends were in town. This is the East Hampton that Ms. Israel grew up in and the quiet aspects of private life that she her work evokes.

Which is why, in addition to portraits of old friends and neighbors, in “Bonac: Letters From Home,” Ms. Israel also presents images of specific places that were meaningful in her life—the Fish Factory in the Promised Land, or Camp Hero in Montauk, for example—offered without comment or explanation.

“I touch on the human condition without blowing up anyone’s lives,” she explained. “You don’t need to know why the spot is significant—it just is. It’s not just a sunset, it’s meaningful to me in some way.”

On view concurrently with Ms. Israel’s photographs at the Arts Center at Duck Creek are a collection of zines and drawings created by her friends, including Victor Giannini, the subject of one of her photographs and author of “Counselor,” a novel offering an apocalyptic vision of Long Island.

“It’s things created with a photocopier, like we did in high school—weird drawings, Victor’s art and dark stuff,” she said. “It was important for me to have somebody else with a project in tandem with mine so at no point would anyone would think I’m an authority on the town. I’m very clear: This is my perspective.”



But it’s a perspective that is always under assault as time marches on. If there’s one constant in life, it’s that change is inevitable, and Ms. Israel notes that her hometown has changed in many ways.

“I feel when you have a real connection to the place you grew up, it has to be the same. But the town that was here in the ’80s doesn’t exist. It’s a chapter that was and it’s over,” she said. “There’s a racist classism that didn’t exist the way it does now. It’s like gentrification: You move somewhere for a certain vibe, then when you get there, you change it.

“People buy houses along the quaint part of Gerard Drive and then bitch about the people fishing on the street,” she added. “That’s what they liked about it in the first place—and now they can’t stand it.”

Tara Israel’s “Bonac: Letters From Home” runs through July 22 at the Arts Center at Duck Creek, 127 Squaw Road, East Hampton. For more information, visit duckcreekarts.org.

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