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VISUAL ARTS: REVIEW

GARY MICHAEL DAULT

GALLERY GOING

ELLE FLANDERS AT AKAU INC.

Elle Flanders's ambitious and, even within the confines of this tiny exhibition, stunningly realized project, *What Isn't There*, involves the Toronto-based filmmaker and photographer's tracing down and documenting the sites of Palestinian villages in Israel that, of course, no longer exist. "The process of photographing *What Isn't There*," writes Flanders, "is as much a part of the work as the images that result from it."

The images – which are presented as panoramic Duratrans photographs, backlit on microthin light panels – are exquisite. But what engages Flanders is the task of "contemporary archeology" she has taken on in her search for these now-vanished settlements, now completely "erased from history."

As Flanders points out, finding these former villages – a project in which she has been engaged for many years – involves her recording oral histories, studying maps of Palestine predating 1948, tracing those maps onto maps of contemporary Israel and then setting out with cameras and compass, "walking through forests planted by the National Jewish Fund ... to find the traces of what might have been a village." The work is painstaking and requires cunning and tenacity. The clues to the presence of a now-vanished village are subtle and hard to interpret: One, she explains, is the Sabra cactus, "not a plant that grows without having been placed specifically."

There are only three photographs in Flanders's exhibition. And each of them looks like a landscape. Until, with Flanders's guidance, you look at them for a long time.

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