

Myth Meets Land

Elie Shamir | Adi Nes

This exhibition presents a multi-voiced dialogue between the works of visual artist Elie Shamir and of art photographer Adi Nes, combined with an interpretative perspective. Both artists use elements that echo Greek and Canaanite mythology, the Old and New Testaments, Jewish history and the Zionist ethos. Laid in layers, these myths form almost an archeological stratigraphy of Israel's landscape and of its cultural, national, political and socio-economic state. Both artists are preoccupied with similar themes -personal versus collective identity; norms and human values; preservation of the national ethos versus the moral obligation to one's own conscience.

The paintings of Elie Shamir (b. 1953, Kfar Yehoshua) echo art masterpieces. Being mostly autobiographical, they allude to the Jezreel Valley, which played a central role in the history of Zionism. Shamir's works raise questions about the male pioneer ethos and the collapse of the "Valley" myth, as a metaphor for the erosion of the nation's values.

In the photographs of Adi Nes (b. 1966, Kiryat Gat) reality meets the artist's meticulous and carefully staged working process. Sharp and intense, yet poetic and gentle, his works combine homage to iconic figures. His images undermine central narratives of Israeli culture and advance the formation of new ones. His series from the 2000's - Soldiers, Boys, Prisoners, Bible Stories **and** The Village - deals with complex issues such as Israeli identity, militancy and human compassion. The theme of homoeroticism in Nes' works exposes the duality embedded in the national narrative with its ethos of heroic masculinity.

The works selected for this exhibition belong to different periods of the artists' work. This was done in order to create a common ground for an interpretative reading that may unveil the mythical, artistic and literary layers, both universal and local, and the meeting points between different views and perspectives. By juxtaposing their works, the exhibition reveals the similarities in their mythological frame of mind and their grasp of "grand narratives" as they treat local and contemporary issues. Thus, placing Nes's Untitled (Annunciation), next to Shamir's Like Europe, Daphne, Shira and Lahav in Ami Spring emphasizes a common affinity to iconic mythical themes: Nes's photograph alludes to the Annunciation scene, while Shamir's painting echoes the myth of Actaeon whose chance glimpse of naked Artemis leads him to his death.

Father and son relations might also be interpreted in terms of primeval myths. In a photograph from Nes' **Village** series, an old farmer and a young man stand beneath cypress trees in the cemetery of Tel Adashim. In Shamir's **Dad and I in Retrospect**, portraits of the artist (third generation of founders) and his father (second generation of founders) are seen on a dirt road that splits in two. The founding fore-fathers carried the burden of the Zionist ideal, while their sons experience the falling apart of the myth.

Curator: Nurit Tal-Tenne



צילום: עדי נס



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PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND VISUAL JOURNALISM

Underpinnings of Greek Tragedy in Israel

By JAMES ESTRIN and DAVID FURST

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Adi Nes is an outsider. He is a Sephardic Jewish gay artist.

He is an outsider in Israel, a country that was forged by a people who, during two millennia of diaspora, were outsiders.

Mr. Nes remembers his mother singing to him when he was a child growing up in the Israeli development city Kiryat Gat. Often, the lyrics told idealized tales of the pioneers of modern day Israel.

Even at an early age, it was clear to Mr. Nes that he and his family did not match this ideal. His parents were Sephardic Jews who had emigrated from Iran. He grew up among many darker-skinned children who looked different than the Ashkenazi Jews, of Eastern-European descent, that dominated popular culture.

“When Israel was established, pioneers wanted to create an image of a man that is very different than the weak Jew from the diaspora,” he said. “The kids that lived in the villages that surrounded Kiryat Gat fit the idea of what was Zionist.”

As he grew up, he searched for a place to belong. But as a gay man, he always felt a little like a stranger in a mainstream Israeli culture that he saw as promoting the ideal of the macho Israeli settler or soldier.

“It’s a position that I will always be stuck in, first of all because I’m a photographer and a photographer will always be outside,” Mr. Nes said. “But it comes from my childhood: if you are growing up as the outsider, you will always keep this position in life. The only place where I am not an outsider is in my own family, with my partner and four children.”



Mr. Nes, 47, has explored issues of Israeli identity and masculinity in his photographic work by creating visual tableaux that are often influenced by art history and philosophy. He takes ordinary Israelis, and the occasional actor, and poses them as if he were both cinematographer and screenwriter.

His most recent project, “The Village” is on display at the [Jack Shainman Gallery](#) through July 28. With “The Village,” he returns to the vision of Israel that his mother sang about. But beneath the surface, this version is no longer so ideal.

The village, he says, is like a dream that is bigger and better than life but also has “a layer of fears and horrors and things that are bad.”

“The country started with a dream, and then more and more, we decided to ignore the dreams,” he said. “I’m trying to bring myself back to the dream without forgetting the reality.”



There is an overlay of Greek tragedy in Mr. Nes's village.

"There is a specific routine in every Greek tragedy. Someone is doing something in his life, repeats the sin of pride, of hubris, then he's punished and he suffers. And the moment he suffers, this is the moment that he's changed, or the viewer of the tragedy is changed. "

Mr. Nes's most famous image, "The Last Supper Before Going Out to Battle" (*Slide 13*) from his "Soldier" series, shows young male soldiers arrayed along a table as if they were in Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper." In 2007, a print sold at auction for \$264,000.

The soldier series came out of his time in the Israeli army. He was a "fragile and sensitive child in the periphery," who finally became part of a society when he entered the army. "I felt like I was married together to the men that served with me," he said.

A later experience as a reserve duty guard in a Palestinian detention house made him feel a lot less comfortable and left him disillusioned. It also led to the series "The Prisoners" (*Slides 19 and 20*). As a guard, he befriended one of the prisoners and realized that there was no way he would shoot his friend if he tried to escape.

During a deep recession in Israel, in 2002, Mr. Nes started a series in which he recreated biblical scenes using homeless people.

When he began "Biblical Stories," he had recently ended a long-term relationship and was in the midst of a midlife crisis. He questioned whether he should continue to live and work in Israel. By now, Mr. Nes was successful enough as an artist to have a career in New York or Paris. But he realized that he couldn't move because so much of his art dealt with Israeli identity.

"I can't just take pictures outside of Israel when this is my main subject," he said.

When he looked around him, he noticed that Israel, too, was "having a very deep identity crisis." He wondered why Israeli Jews choose to stay. Was it ethnicity? Religion? A connection to the land or an obligation to each other?

He used the Bible as a sort of spinal cord of Israeli society, creating contemporary representations of Abraham and Isaac, Cain and Abel, Ruth and Naomi, and Job.

After 20 years of creating these fictional visual narratives, Mr. Nes has come to the conclusion that all the strands of his existence form his art — and all the layers that exist in his art — exist inside of him.

After all, he is a Sephardic gay man who grew up in a development town, as well as a photographer and artist.

He is an outsider. And an Israeli — which is sometimes difficult for him to define.

“It’s really hard to tell what is Israeli because there’s not one voice that covers everything,” Mr. Nes said. “If you are looking from the inside, you will see a different thing than you will see from the outside. If you are looking from a political point of view, from the tension between the Palestinians and Israelis, you will find one answer. If you look from the historical point of view, or the Holocaust point of view, from Europe or the U.S., you’ll find different answers.”



“The Village” is on display at [Jack Shainman Gallery](#) through July 28 and [Galérie Praz-Delavallade](#) in Paris through July 21.



**ADI NES
ISRAEL**





Images from the series "The village" 2012

THE VILLAGE

Interview by Silvia Bombardini

Silvia : *We often like to imagine identity in the shape of a diamond, faceted and almost refractive, a precious prism of perspectives and wonder, delicacy and hard edges. It both glistens and hides, like compressed memory in an inviolable shell, and in your work we feel its wise and slightly hurtful beauty, its lucid longing and a faint but lingering, primeval disquiet. How do you manage to unfold and portray your own national, religious or sexual identity, in all its intimate and perilous shades?*

Adi : The creative process is one full of wonder which evolves in the deepest and most intimate parts of the artist's soul. The spark which ignites a creative moment sometimes occurs in a flash of inspiration, while at other times is the product of hard, Sisyphean work. My style of work is akin to film making. Most of the time I begin a new series of photographs by extensively researching numerous sources of visual information such as art history, the history of photography, reservoirs of internet images, textual research of literature, films and more. Yet as with all artistic creations, my creative process begins with some personal experience, in the recent or distant past. My creations reveal multiple layers of myself. Perhaps because I'm a man, I deal with masculinity; as an Israeli, I delve into Israeli identity; I grew up in the periphery, which is apparent when one looks at the backgrounds of my images; I am the son of Sephardic parents so my photographs have many dark-skinned models or relate to ethnic issues; I am an artist who refers to other works of art. During the long work process which includes all the elements of photography including costumes, lighting, position of subjects, composition of the entire frame, angles and lenses, I mix all these elements and ideas to create one picture which, while beginning as a single spark of inspiration, later passes through many filters which distill the essence of the idea on one hand, while abstracting it to metaphorically touch upon human existence on the other. Thus, my works are born from a private moment and are capable of touching numerous audiences.

S : *While so deeply rooted in your personal history in fact, your images shift from artistic introspection to appeal to a much broader, possibly timeless realm of interpretations. They seem to locate, in familiar moments from art history or the Bible, the same recurrent patterns of behavior and values, doubt and dreams and faith, maybe the essence of human beings if we could peel away all the multiple layers of our identities. What do you think we would find behind? Would you describe your art as allegorical?*

A : While a moment ago I described my art as multi-layered, it's difficult to imagine it as an onion, or as an archeological site wherein one layer rests upon another. A more accurate description might be that of a mirror which reflects what is in a kaleidoscope. The elements are always the same no matter how you turn the mirror, yet the image constantly changes. There are many ways to interpret works of art. One way is via the prism of the creator. For example, my creations can be read in the context of art from Israel. Or, perhaps, even as art created by a gay artist – homoerotic art. It's not as if beneath the many layers lies a secret waiting to be discovered, rather, as the kaleidoscope turns, exciting elements are reflected by the mirror. In other words, it's not a pyramid structure in which one layer of identity rests on another, enabling one to peel layers down to some primordial base, rather, I'm suggesting a different way of looking at the world: through a spiral. The point of departure is the moment of inspiration. Energetic motion which is creative flows and propels the idea and grants it substance unbounded by place or time. This motion places the creation in the center while propelling it upwards.

S : *Aside from their precise, highly accurate figurative references, there always is in your photographs a quite pictorial approach of your own, some careful and patient virtuosity in composition, a thoughtful palette of lights and shadows and juxtaposing hues. Would you tell us something more about your creative process, how does an idea slowly take on its incredible, oversized shape?*

A : To render a dramatic moment in most of my creations I combine elements from different worlds. It could be from the life of soldiers in the field with art history as I did in The Last Supper or biblical heroes in the form of the homeless. I also do this through the combination of materials: the warm, naked human body resting on the cold floor (as in the Noah or Abel pictures from the Biblical Stories series); and by contrasting colors: cold fluorescent lights on warmly colored automatic machines (as in Noah from the Biblical Stories series). Since photographers don't have the privilege of choosing a palette for painting, like a painter I dedicate a great deal of attention to costumes, texture, and invest resources and time in auditions, while scrupulously attending to details of composition and lighting. Unlike other photographers, I don't usually work with flash lighting, but rather with constantly shining lamps as used in filming so I can see what's going on and adjust the lights on the set accordingly. I also still photograph using real film and negatives while printing the old fashioned way in a dark room rather than digitally. Usually, this entraps viewers from their initial impression since the photographs are oversized and beautiful, colorful and sexy. Yet from the moment they're trapped, complex ideas begin to appear via the multiple layers buried in the picture, the connections to sources of inspiration and the presentation of pictures beside one another begins to crystallize.

S : *Choosing staged photography to reflect your world seems to add to the documenting intent a very personal, intimist and creative value, akin indeed to a painter's brushwork or the peculiar style of certain filmmakers. What drove you initially towards this fascinating and complex technique?*

A : For many years I earned a living by working in the film and television industry which influenced my style from the outset. Along with this, like all producer/directors my personality tends to be one of a control freak. Staged photography gives the feeling of some sort of control over the photographic elements. Yet even the most precise planning is never perfect and on the set I remove the director's hat and replace it with the hat of the photographer who must always be sensitive to subtle changes in weather, temperament of the models, and the integration of all the necessary photographic components.



Images from the series "The village" 2012

S : If your earlier series Soldiers, Boys and Prisoners focused on the individual -male, handsome, in his untamed homoerotic appeal and full critical potential-, in Biblical Stories your area of interest appeared to widen somehow, to include the scene around him and introduce an element of narrative, clearly unraveling in our collective consciousness. With your new series The Village we assist to a further spatial expansion, a society in itself, with its mute overlapping storylines and invisible struggles. How do you believe your photography evolved over the years, how did you?

A : Your analysis is beautiful and interesting. It's true that there's development from one series to the next in how the hero – or perhaps it's more correct to say 'anti-hero' – is presented. Biblical Stories was influenced by how the bible, specifically Genesis, is written: in the fashion of a character and background, as in theatre. As opposed to Greek mythology which one can read and know exactly what each hero ate, wore and with whom he fell in love, the bible is sparse on details. Cain killed Able. Why? One needs to make many assumptions. My biblical heroes were modern stereotypes of people who live in the streets of scarcity and impoverishment. In street life there's also an element of selfishness and withdrawal.

For the most part, every project is, to a certain extent, the antithesis of the previous one – which is why I created The Village to be the exact opposite of communal living. Of course, as you pointed out, I've also matured. The Soldiers series I began in my twenties, at a time when the reality was that if you were gay, you were treated as odd. Currently, I'm in my forties openly living with my male partner raising our four children together. I've changed and the way I look at the world has changed. When you're young your vision is less deep, extroverted, maybe even provocative. Yet as you age, you begin to be more thoughtful and aware of the space you occupy.

S : In the past few years in fact, you rather rapidly became a father of four: do you think that such a mayor, thrilling change in your life, with the sudden enlargement of your family unit and emotional sphere along with a first-hand experience parenting in Israel could be responsible for the ampler landscape in your new work?

A : No. From my experience personal events seep into one's art after digesting them for a long time. The artist is like a child: he's nourished from the scratches and scars he experienced in childhood. I sense it will take many long years before my parenthood is expressed in my creations. The richness of scenery is a parable for the life of the spirit in my characters. Only where there's a forest and many trees can one find deep shadows; in barren places trees are scarce. I needed these rich landscapes in order to create a large area of shadows for my protagonists/characters in which they can express their fears, trepidations and desires.

S : The land of Israel is a very young, very resolute tangible reality, with a too long, way too harsh lineage of dreams and hopes and expectations to meet. Like a diamond still rough, it was born under pressure, and brims with potential in the eyes of its people. What does The Village stand for in Israeli society, and what does it stand for, for you?

A : On one hand, The Village is a metaphor for Israel. It's a small place established after a tragedy with a charged atmosphere because it's never able to free itself from its past. On the other hand, The Village is also the arena in which psychological tensions exist. The project is built as theatre, or as a dream in which different characters present many voices which resonate within us. In the village, various tensions exist between open and closed spaces; sterile and fertile ones; lit, exposed places and those which are shaded, hidden; public versus private spaces; strict fathers as opposed to soft-hearted sons; or, alternatively by a younger generation estranged from an authoritarian father. It is, among other things, a project about growing up, and about the need to incorporate opposites and contradictions in order to continue existing and surviving. The painting which inspired the entire project – even though I didn't create any specific photograph from it – was Bruegel's Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. In a Sisyphean sort of way, the farmer in Bruegel's painting continues to plow even though dramatic events are taking place around him and Icarus falls into the sea. Like Icarus and other tragic Greek heroes, the characters in my photographs also suffer from the sin of pride; hubris is the element which undermines them.

This is connected to the place in which I feel my society exists today, yet it's also connected to my understanding that the strength of the farmer – who is, in my eyes, a metaphor for human beings – lies in the fact that he continues plowing. To enlarge this idea means that our strength to continue existing is derived from the fact that alongside the Sisyphean struggle of our daily lives we have dreams and beliefs, art and culture – call it what you will.

In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche wrote about two opposing forces in people: the Apollonian and Dionysian forces. Apollo, the sun god, represents restraint, calmness and clear reason. Dionysus, on the other hand, represents ecstasy and human creativity.

I sense that everything is composed of opposites. Art, or faith, is the inspiration for life and death; or the fear of death is frequently the inspiration for faith, or art.

S : In the dignified and wary, almost palpable atmosphere of the place, angelic masculine youths cohabit with older villagers of some subtle, delicately suggestive tragic features: the blind man, the chorus, the goat. Slightly apart, standing by the lemon trees, a young outsider and a pale horse observe their life with curious melancholy. Is there a character in the series who you could identify with, or one that you're particularly fond of?

A : The view of the photographer is usually the view of the outsider – the person who looks at things from the side. This is the way I look at things also by virtue of my biography: as a gay, who grew up in the periphery, from a middle-class Sephardic family. The first picture I photographed in this series was the boy with the horse; I identified with this immediately. In the Zionist ethos, the Ashkenazic, European or native-born image was established, which was a symbol one strove to be like. This person had to represent the complete opposite of the weak Jew who came from the Diaspora after the Holocaust. The new Jew sought to rid himself of the past and to build a new society. Frequently, erasing the past for the sake of unifying society (an idea based, to a certain extent, on socialism) caused the Jewish identity of many new immigrants from all corners of the world to be devalued.



Images from the series "The village" 2012

AT THE STILL POINT OF A TURNING WORLD

In his latest exhibition, photographer Adi Nes has created large-scale images of a fictitious village, as part of his ongoing examination of Israeli myths. News photographer Alex Levac talked with Nes about reality, truth and artistic vision

Adi Nes and Alex Levac are opposites. Nes, 46, graduated from the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, and shows his work in New York and Paris. He is a master of meticulously crafted, staged photographs utilizing actors. The final products, which have undergone lengthy planning, are complex scenes of epic proportions and symbolic meaning. Levac, who is 68 and received the Israel Prize for photography in 2005, has published five books of photos and is primarily a news photographer who focuses on fleeting moments which, once captured on film, are gone forever. On the occasion of Nes' new exhibition, 'The Village' – which consists of 13 large-scale photographs depicting detailed scenes from the life of an imagined quintessential Israeli village – Levac met with Nes for a conversation at the Sommer Gallery of contemporary art in Tel Aviv, where the exhibition runs until July 7. Through their encounter, they enable us to take a closer look not only at the village Nes created, but at the many complex ways in which Israeli photography confronts Israeli reality. (See more about Adi Nes on page 16.)



Adi Nes (left) and Alex Levac at the Sommer Gallery, Tel Aviv. The spontaneous vs. the staged.

Photos by Alon Ron



Untitled (Chorus), 2009. All of Adi Nes' works are untitled; the names in parentheses are given for identification purposes.



Alex Levac: Like me, you photograph moments and situations.

Adi Nes: We actually photograph different moments. You photograph the moment that happens, the decisive moment [an allusion to famed photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson's book "The Decisive Moment"]. But I will always choose the moment before, a split second before the thing happens. You do the same, but with you, moments are real. For me the photograph is conceptual. As in my series about biblical stories. There I always chose to show – not Abraham with the knife, as in Caravaggio, or the moment when the knife falls, as in Rembrandt – but precisely the moment after, when Abraham comes down from the mountain. You, Alex, often show the ridiculous in the high, lofty or dramatic moment. I always looked for "the moment after," the human. For example, in the work titled "Annunciation" [in which a male and a female soldier are seen announcing something to a mother, ostensibly

bly the death of her son], my scene is the moment before the word is spoken. The woman already knows what will happen immediately, but I chose the moment before. My "Annunciation" also connects to the angel's annunciation to Mary.

L: Your works contain quite a few Christian elements.

N: Yes, but they are not so much Christian as they are elements from art. It was not by chance that I chose Leonardo's "The Last Supper" [Nes' well-known "The Last Supper Before Going Out to Battle," from his series of 22 photos of soldiers]. I sought the image, not the Christian element. I also connected "Annunciation" to the notion of a Jobian announcement.

L: I like this photograph very much. How did you manage to arrive at the look of the mother in her bereavement, a look that disturbs and captivates me even when I am far from it?

N: I gave the woman instructions on the set. Nonprofessionals tend to over-

act. I explained to her that she has to look past the messengers, because in her world they have existed from the day her son was drafted. They are always present there. She is always expecting them. They are in her head – not in reality. When I saw that it was hard for her to work with that, I told her, "You are a woman of the valley. The people of the valley are hard and tough, you will not crack." She herself lives in Moshav Talmei Eliezer, near Hadera. In other photographs I worked with professional actors. When I want to generate "electricity" on the set – emotional energy – I use a professional actor who possesses charisma, like Yossi Yizraeli or Asher Sarfati. Someone like that on the set creates energy around him. It's a manipulation I perform on the subjects who are being photographed, but you too are a manipulator.

L: That's totally clear. I have no doubt of it. Because I too choose a particular moment, a particular angle. Every photographer is a manipulator, though he

might not always be aware of it. Even if you have to photograph a simple object – such as an egg, say – every photographer will photograph it differently, and that is particularly true when it comes to frenetic, complex street situations. But at least my manipulation is not staged.

N: That is true, but you know ahead of time what will happen in the arenas you wander around in.

L: It's not quite like that. It's true that there are events which I know in advance possess a higher potential for me to find what I am looking for. But at the center of my photographic work lie wandering, wonderment and discovery in the theater of life – anew each time. I am looking for the surprises within the routine. Sometimes I imagine it as a vast supermarket in which I suddenly spot something I would like to have. Maybe it's a familiar product in new packaging, and sometimes it is within reach and tasty. Sometimes it is too high. Sometimes when I touch it, it breaks. The ele- ▶

◀ ment of surprise always exists. But in your work you create the moment in a way that is astonishingly precise and marvelously aesthetic. I never know exactly what I want until I discern it in a flowing, endless sequence. Accordingly,

form, composition and lighting are less relevant.

But let's go back to "Annunciation," which I see as a fantastic photograph. I connect with it first of all from the journalistic side, because never before has a

Bearing witness

We are now at the height of an era in which photography, more than ever before, is considered an integral element of art. Not long ago, graduates of schools of photography aspired to work in the press or in fashion; nowadays almost all of them immediately dream of an exhibition in a gallery or museum of art. There is an ongoing decline in the status of the photographer as an inquisitive fieldworker, an anthropologist, a visual researcher who is ready to take himself to remote places in order to freeze a particular moment in the name of his overriding belief: that the world of objects amid which we live possesses infinite meanings, and that he is duty-bound, as a photographer, to capture them on film and thereby contribute personal impressions to the viewer. He does not purport "to photograph reality as it is," as many mistakenly think. He wants only to add another stone, engraved with his personal imprint, to the mosaic of human memory.

His place is now being taken with dizzying speed by photographers of a different kind. They are practitioners of conceptual photography, who remove themselves from "the concrete" and create reality-like images which stem from the mind. Their goals are radically different. They are artists, and as such are committed to no one but themselves. They try to divert our gaze in a different direction. "Forget about the concrete, it is meaningless," the philosophers of photography teach us. Immersed deeply in analysis, their eyes are shut so that reality (there is such a thing) will not disturb them.

If we read closely the remarks of their high priestess, the late Susan Sontag, in her book "On Photography," we will see that she is perhaps not even all that fond of photography: "Like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive." And she goes much further: "There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time."

I have never felt that I am a sublimating murderer or that I have violated anyone. Sontag is mistaken and misleading, and with the aid of philosophical-psychological arguments, she emasculates the traditional photographer, pulls the rug out from under his feet when she says that "photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects." That is an irrelevant argument.

The classic photographer does not try to touch reality, like the innocent observer without a camera. Both see everything in a different way, personal and manipulative. But the photographer tries to depict for the other what he sees with the help of the camera, which is usually far more accurate than any other means of documentation. He operates within the existent, completely dependent on the concrete, and does not create something from nothing but tries to create from the extant a few more layers of "extancy," in accordance with his cultural, aesthetic, political approach. But he will never touch reality. He uses his hands to hold the camera, his feet to draw closer, move back or circumvent the scene he is photographing. He does not want even to utter a sound. He wants to be the fly on the wall, his presence minimally felt, so that it has no effect on the events. He is bearing witness.

The conceptual photographer derives much encouragement from Sontag's words, from Roland Barthes, and from others. Even when he photographs objects in reality, he will distort them or present them explicitly as his distinctive interpretation. Freed from the intolerably heavy ball and chain that shackle him to the concrete, he creates a world of his own. Although he too uses a camera, he does so mainly in order to lend credibility to his "works," as he styles them.

But if that is indeed so, let us differentiate clearly between the two: one is a photographer, the other an artist. The former looks at his photographs and tries to see how far he has been able to preserve the moment; the latter has created art, a world of his own, and tries to discover how closely his creations are consistent with his inner world.

Curators, collectors, developers of talent and those who set the bon ton are elevating the conceptual photographer, mainly for financial interests. They are the manipulators of our vision. It's only a pity that this is degrading the value and the status of the documenting photographer, and also making it more difficult for him, if only economically, to go on investigating the present. (Alex Levac)

Ilya Melnikov



Alex Levac. Adding to the mosaic.



Untitled (Turkey), 2012

scene like this been photographed with this closeness and intimacy. I can only imagine the moment. At the same time, there is realistic credibility and maybe even something strong and dramatic that transcends reality. But it was all only in your head, because you actually control everything: You think in advance of the conception, the location, the set, the lighting and the staging. You eliminate completely the element of chance in the photographic moment.

N: I too have a great deal of depreciation. Each scene has many rejects. For example, in "Annunciation" I shot six rolls of 6 by 6, which is more than 60 photographs. And there were many more pictures on the days ahead of the shooting on the set. I do all those experiments before the shooting day itself. My lighting is very precise. Never with flashes, only with projectors. Film projectors give me absolute control over light. I soften it, cut it, dim it. I have a professional lighting designer who knows exactly what I want; we have worked together for many years.

L: That reminds me that I read a review in an American journal in which the writer claimed that your work benefits from the soft Mediterranean light. Every photographer knows how harsh our light is, to the point of hurting. It was obvious that the writer had never been to Israel.

Quickness vs. 'slow cooking'

N: "The Village" series is like cinema but in stills. I have always had a cinematic orientation. I start with sketches on



Untitled (Portrait), 2012

paper, which are often lines, something formalistic, void of content – that is added only later – and then add another layer and render the picture concrete. The composition is very dominant and important for me.

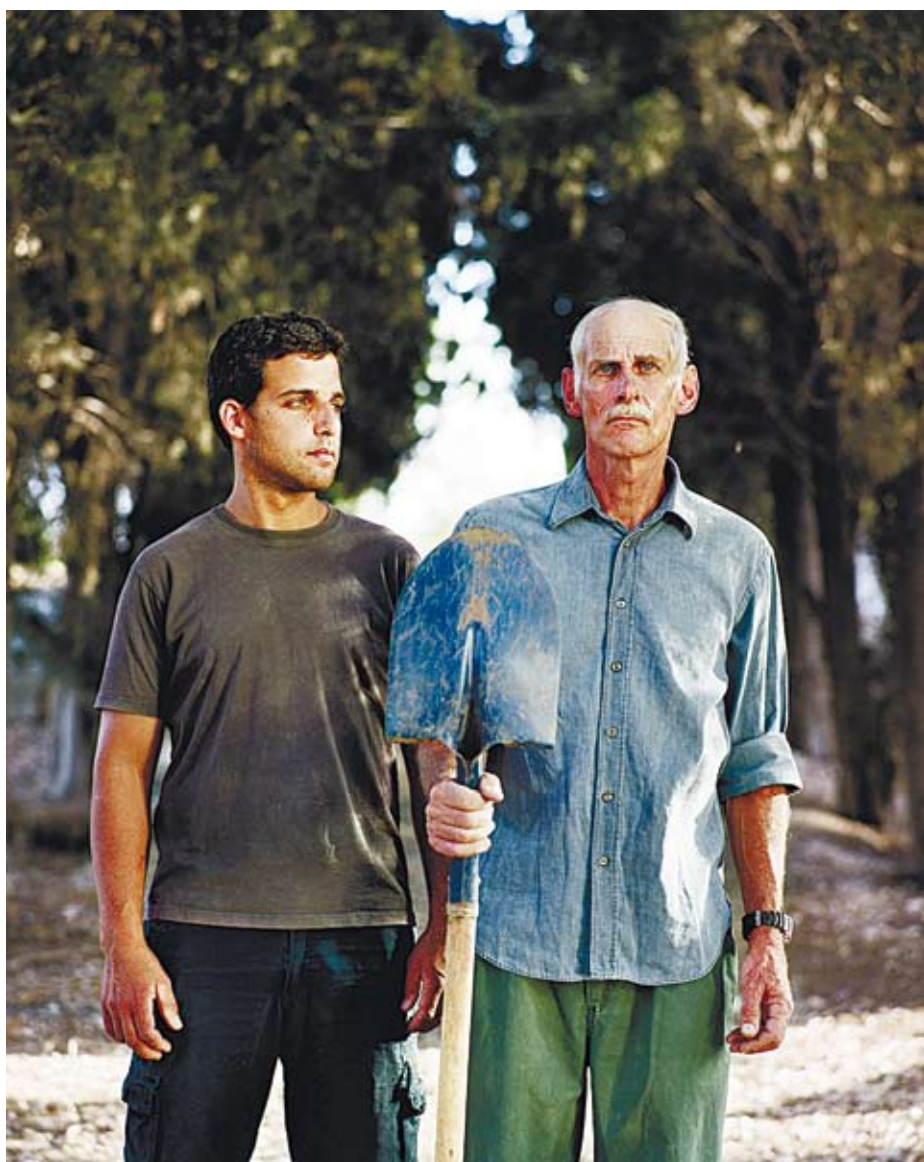
L: You are a film director.

N: Absolutely. I am also a one-person production company – the driver, the tea server and the costumer, too. Many people join on the shooting day; there will be between 10 and 15 on a set like this. That sometimes affects the intimacy of the subject. To overcome that obstacle, I create intimacy with him beforehand. The first meeting is in his home, in his arena. I try to understand him. Sometimes an assistant will try to get him to talk on

NES: 'WHEN I WANT TO GENERATE "ELECTRICITY" ON THE SET, I USE A PROFESSIONAL ACTOR ... [WHO] CREATES ENERGY AROUND HIM. IT'S A MANIPULATION I PERFORM.'



Untitled (Annunciation), 2010



Untitled (Blind), 2011

your work for more than a fraction of a second.

L: As a classic photographer I have a serious philosophical problem with photography of your kind. In my view there is, and must be, a razor-sharp distinction between classic journalistic photography and conceptual photography, because they document two different worlds. Classic photography does not exist without reality. It is completely reality-dependent. Your photography, though, stems from the mind, from emotion, from fantastic talent, but everything is expected or preplanned. You create that reality; without you, it would not exist. I really am a photographer of the split second that lends the existing concrete reality interpretation, however personal, but I did not create it. And another thing: You rely on the realism and credibility of classic photography to lend your work credibility. I suggest differentiating clearly between the two approaches, even to give them different names.

N: I agree with you about the credibility, because the eye believes pictures. And I use that trick. It wasn't by chance that I added another character to "The Last Supper Before Going Out to Battle" (1999), like some passerby whom the camera happened to catch. But in my view it doesn't really make a difference. As long as the image affects reality, what difference does it make?

Actually, I know only one case that was very dramatic and relevant to what you define as photography, and I am referring to your photograph of the No. 300 bus incident. [Nes is referring to Levac's 1984 photo documenting the hijackers of the No. 300 bus being led away from the scene alive, contrary to the official version; publication of the photograph led to a complex, ramified investigation which resulted in dismissals and resignations of senior figures in the Shin Bet security service.]

The credibility in that case was essential for the changes that followed the photograph's publication. But it is indeed a question of two different mediums of photography, similar to the way we can talk about two different mediums in painting: oils and aquarelles. I come from the place of painting. I wanted to be a painter. I got to photography by mistake. I ignore the philosophy of classic photography. From my point of view, "the decisive moment" has no meaning. I can fabricate it, paint it, duplicate it and imagine it. The camera is a tool through which I express myself, and if I managed to touch the hearts of others or cause them some change – then that is pure gain.

L: Still, conceptual photography has existed for 30 years and still draws its power from the reality of what is photographed.

N: You're right that it's deceptive. The whole "Village" project is built like a ►

the way to the set – [to provide] information that I will use during the shooting. I also tell him about myself. Sometimes I record an interview with the subjects when I meet them for the background talk. Generally they are not aware of this. In some cases I use things they have told me to manipulate them on the set. Most of the subjects are people I got to through Facebook, but in this project there are also professional actors. I have to feel the character I am creating before shooting: I stand or lie in the same pose, dressed in the same clothes. Part of my strength as a photographer comes from the slowness [in this process].

L: With me it's the polar opposite. Quickness constitutes my hold on reality.

N: Yes, I am the slowest in the world. "The Village" is a project of 13 photographs that took five years [to complete]. As a result of the slow cooking, many things become calmer. And in this context of talking about photography: our greatest challenge today as photographers in a world that is packed with images which many people produce in very high quality and with infinite distribution, including mobile phones, is how to seize the viewer and make him look at

LEVAC: 'I NEVER KNOW EXACTLY WHAT I WANT UNTIL I DISCERN IT IN A FLOWING, ENDLESS SEQUENCE. ACCORDINGLY, FORM, COMPOSITION AND LIGHTING ARE LESS RELEVANT.'

The surface – and below

In his two working decades, Adi Nes has distilled his visual language and style to the point of creating a distinctive school of photography in Israeli art. Since graduating from the photography department of Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in 1992, Nes has been exhibiting regularly and taken part in dozens of group shows in Israel and abroad. Nes fuses precise planning and staging of the scenes he wishes to create or reconstruct with technical meticulousness in lighting and composition, evoking classical works and inviting the viewers not just to marvel at the beauty of the execution but also reread Nes himself and add a layer of interpretation to his. By taking a stand as a "creator" of a scene rather than documenting it in real-time and by orchestrating cultural references into his own work of art, Nes takes after the likes of Jeff Wall and Cindy Sherman, though unlike the latter he doesn't participate as a model in his own work. It is a projection of his vision, his touch is more than present, but he himself is removed, even hidden.

Nes' new series of photographs, "The Village," which is being reproduced in these pages courtesy of the artist, is currently on show simultaneously in Tel Aviv at the Sommer Gallery of Contemporary Art; in New York at the Jack Shainman Gallery; and in Paris at the Galerie Praz-Delavallade.

In this series Nes brings to sophisticated perfection the technique and themes which have engaged him in his previous works – "Soldiers" (1994-2000), "Boys" (2001) and "The Biblical Stories" (2007): Masculinity as an aesthetic Zionist ideal, Biblical myths, heroism and sacrifice, Israeli militancy, as contrasted with universal values and the place of mothers in this culture. All take on heightened intensity in the light of the location, the village, which Nes treats like the idyllic "Israeli way of life" but which, viewed close-up and critically, is seen to have lost its way. The photos are rich in content and span from a beautiful portrait of a boy and his horse walking through a field of yellow grapefruit, to an emotionally explosive scene in which soldiers visit the home of a soldier's mother as the bearers of bad tidings. In this photograph Nes gives a bold visual expression to a formative scene that is embedded in the Israeli collective psyche, a dreaded moment that was previously predominantly dealt with in Hebrew literature. Most recently it can be found in the award-winning novel "Prompter Required" by Haggai Linik, who describes the soldiers' visit to his house – and his mother's reaction – as a moment both expected and unexpected that lasts a lifetime.

Nes' works are both local and universal. His "Soldiers" series, including a scene titled "The Last Supper Before Going out to Battle" – an evocation of Leonardo Da Vinci's renowned painting, but with actors dressed as soldiers – has had an enormous impact on the way contemporary Israeli photography looks at this subject matter. It is not that soldiers were not looked at before – they were. But the way photographers see them now has been influenced by Nes' use of models, his ability to display undercurrents, and while linking the image of soldiers to cultural icons of western art, still manages to show how lost soldiers can be. A print of his Last Supper work is on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem; no wonder that it was sold at Sotheby's in 2007 for a record amount for an Israeli work of art (\$264,000). "Nes brings to the surface representatives of rejected and repressed Israeliness," the judges wrote when Nes was awarded the Education, Culture and Sport Minister's Prize for Artists in the Visual Arts in 1998 for this series. "They are embodied in his work by homosexual masculinity. These rejected representations are promoted by Nes from the dark fringes of the stage to its center, where they play the 'lead roles' heretofore reserved for 'standard' Israelis, in the photographic scenes. The result generates a shock which forces the viewer to reexamine his conventional world of conceptions about Israeliness." These words remain poignant and true today, with his new series. (Tal Niv)



Untitled (The Last Supper Before Going out to Battle), 1999



Untitled (Eclipse), 2012

◀ dream from my point of view, and as in a dream you take elements from reality. I created a cinematic story in stills here. The documenting historian-photographer looks for something on the axis of time – factual evidence. The artist, namely me, works on a completely different axis: on the axis of the depth of longings and memories and desires. The camera is my drawing in light. To take dark regions from my soul, expose them, render them visual in order to offer repair to myself. I never take an interest in the historical truth.

'Encounters of opposites'

L: I am starting to understand and to think, and through you to get to myself. It seems to me that the picture I most connect with, mainly emotionally, is

"Annunciation," maybe because it is also a document of a particular moment that is so quintessentially Israeli – documentation of our greatest nightmare, which sometimes unfortunately takes on flesh and bones.

N: I want to talk about manipulation and temptation. I tempt the viewer, throw him a line with the 'bait' of a large, sharp, colorful picture, mostly based on a classical composition, fascinating at the first moment, a kind of sweet honey trap – for some people even too sweet. There are many levels to which not every viewer connects. But neither is it relevant what the photographer wanted to say and not what reality wanted to say. What is relevant is what it does to the viewer.

L: A honey trap – my work has that, too. But from the opposite angle. I sometimes think of my Haaretz column as a sort of sweet trap. [For the past 15 years Levac has published a weekly column

NES: 'I'VE ALWAYS HAD A CINEMATIC ORIENTATION. I START WITH SKETCHES, WHICH ARE OFTEN VOID OF CONTENT AND THEN ADD ANOTHER LAYER AND RENDER THE PICTURE CONCRETE.'



Untitled (Nude), 2011

titled "Framed" in Haaretz Magazine, which captures moments, some of them comic, that he sees in the street.] I know what people expect and I deliver the goods. True, I derive great pleasure from it. Still, the column has a certain format in which I am imprisoned and through which I see things. I think that because of the growing gap in favor of photography of your kind, reality is not something that people hang in their living room. Maybe I am actually a cartoonist, but the layers in the photograph are important. I photograph a great many other things, which no one sees: different projects, faces in the street, the city at night, the Dead Sea, and many more for which I cannot find a platform. And I am not alone among my excellent colleagues. These days conceptual photography hangs in living rooms.

N: I want to say something more about "The Village." This whole project is about encounters of opposites. The dra-

matic moment in every work of art is the meeting of opposites, not only in terms of content but even in the type of photo. Mine ... is presented in larger than life-size. This village works on opposites in the most extreme way. On the surface, the people have the blue skies and the green fields, while in the cellars and the attics, all the demons are liberated.

L: I agree completely about opposites. They are definitely the base and also exist in many of my shots. But in contrast to you, my photographs require a hold in the everyday reality that passes by me relentlessly and vanishes just as rapidly. I have to capture it, because I believe in documentation.

I have another question that bothers me about your "Village." No one is happy. Everyone looks like they know something that we are not aware of. I see in it a kind of eulogy to the village and to us in general.



Untitled (Shooting), 2010

N: That is heavy if it is indeed our reality.

L: One last question. Let's say that after the world is destroyed, the last surviving thing will be a photo archive without any explanations. How will historians from another galaxy be able to tell which is

the documentary photograph and which is the conceptualist art creation that was staged with great precision, like yours?

N: In any event, they will write their interpretation and try to understand the totality, so the distinction is meaningless. ■

LEVAC: 'CLASSIC PHOTOGRAPHY DOES NOT EXIST WITHOUT REALITY. YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY, THOUGH, STEMS FROM THE MIND, FROM EMOTION, FROM FANTASTIC TALENT, BUT EVERYTHING IS EXPECTED.'

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Israeli Artist Adi Nes's 'The Village' Series at Jack Shainman Gallery

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*Adi Nes is a gay Israeli artist concerned with representations of masculinity and power. In 2003, Richard Goldstein at the Village voice wrote, "No young artist has so vividly captured the hidden cost of victory, the fine line between power and fragility, the interplay of arrogance and despair that shapes wartime identity." With this in mind, we asked Nes about his art, his country, and his philosophy on life. **Scroll down for images** from his latest work, "The Village," which debuts simultaneously in Paris, New York, and Tel Aviv this month.*



"Shooting" by Adi Nes.

HP: How did you conceive of this series?

AN: Usually, when I begin working on a new series of photographs, I think of some theme which inspires me, along with central characters. That's how it was with the most recent series -- the central characters were street people whom I directed, inspired by heroes from the Bible. When I finished the previous project, I wanted a change of atmosphere and I wanted to free myself from all those city images, sparse locations and engagement with life in the sewers. So I decided to seek the open country. That's how I arrived at the idea to situate this series of photographs in a village surrounded by green fields, wide vistas, trees full of fruit and springs of water. The village I built was dreamlike, yet I didn't want to avoid expressing other feelings which frequently arise in dreams and in our souls: fears, terror, and difficulties dealing with existence.

One of the central themes of my art is masculinity. Consequently, I chose that some of the characters would be "salt of the earth" -- men who look you straight in the eyes with their blue eyes, even though their lives are strewn with tragedy. In my work I often refer to images from the history of art and culture. Here I decided to base the village on elements of Greek tragedy. The painting which inspired the entire project -- even though I didn't create any specific photograph from it -- was Breugel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus."

In a Sisyphean sort of way, the farmer in the Breugel's painting continues to plow even though dramatic events are taking place around him and Icarus falls into the sea. Like Icarus and other tragic Greek heroes, the characters in my photographs also suffer from the sin of pride; hubris is the element which undermines them.

HP: Nietzsche once wrote, "We have art so that we do not die of reality." (Incidentally, J.M. Coetzee quoted this when he received the Jerusalem prize.) How does this idea play into your work?

AN: Unfortunately, in the places I live and work, people die from reality. Artists, and art never succeeded at stopping politicians or generals, or at opening their eyes. Yet if we hold on to Breugel's image for a moment -- the strength of the farmer to continue plowing, or enlarge this to include our strength to continue existing -- we can only do this because we know that alongside the Sisyphean struggle of our daily lives we have a dream or beliefs, art or culture -- call it what you will.

Yet as long as you're quoting Nietzsche, let's look at something else he said which fits my current work more aptly. In "The Birth of Tragedy," Nietzsche wrote about two opposing forces in people: the Apollonian and Dionysian forces. Apollo, the sun god, represents restraint, calmness and clear reason. Dionysus, on the other hand, represents ecstasy and human creativity. I sense that everything is composed of opposites. Art is the inspiration for life and death; or the fear of death is frequently the inspiration for art.



"Bats" by Adi Nes.

HP: Your hometown, Kiryat Gat, lies in between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. What was your feeling growing up between these two Palestinian communities?

AN: Kiryat Gat received its name from the adjacent archeological site of Gat where it was thought the biblical Philistines lived. When I was growing up, my friends and I called that site "Mt. Goliath". We used to ride our bikes through the city dump to get to that spot and thought it was where David and Goliath fought each other. As time passed, it became clear that this was a case of mistaken identity; the ancient city of Gat is actually located elsewhere, and the nearby archeological site, though an ancient city in its own right, does not date back to biblical times.

I was born about a year before the Six Day War and the occupation of the territories, and grew up during a time when many Israelis believed that the occupation would bring some sort of redemption to Israelis (by virtue of regaining control of the biblical land of our ancestors) and peace to the surrounding Palestinian villages. Even now, after many years, it's clear that the dream is one thing, and reality another, and that the occupation bore fruits of despair for both sides.

In the last few years Kiryat Gat, the city of my childhood, where my mother lives to this day, is under attack by missiles fired from Gaza at the citizens of the city. In the nearby West Bank, the situation is also tense. To my sorrow, both sides -- the Israelis and the Palestinians -- haven't awakened from their dreams. They want to throw us into the sea, and many Israelis think that it's somehow possible to hold on to occupied lands. By looking at the archeological site near the city of my childhood one can uncover the shattered dreams of many cultures which existed there since just after biblical times, through the Crusades, up until now. I think it's worthwhile for both sides to wake up from useless dreams. David and Goliath belong to a different time. Rather than ascribe one side or the other as being like David, the underdog and victim, who struck the aggressive giant, it would be much more productive to work together to make the blood-soaked land bloom again.

HP: Sephardim are depicted as outsiders in your works (e.g., the boy in the first picture of "The Village"). Why is this the case? What is the relationship between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews at this point in time? What are the fissures between them and how do these play out in your artwork?

AN: The view of the photographer is usually the view of the outsider -- the person who looks at things from the side. This is the way I look at things also by virtue of my biography: as a homosexual, who grew up in the periphery, from a middle-class Sephardic family. The central theme of my work is that of identity. While Sephardic Jews are not a minority in Israel, for many years they were thought of as such. Minority groups usually deal with their identities. By the way, adolescent boys and soldiers are at the age when a lot of questions of identity are asked which is why I chose them as subjects in previous series.

In the Zionist ethos, the Ashkenazic, European or native-born image was established which was a symbol one strove to be like. This person had to represent the complete opposite of the weak Jew who came from the diaspora after the Holocaust. The new Jew sought to rid himself of the past and to build a new society. Frequently, erasing the past for the sake of unifying society (an idea based, to a certain extent, on socialism) caused the Jewish identity of many new immigrants from all corners of the world to be devalued.

The dark-skinned boy photographed with the horse doesn't, in my eyes, only represent Sephardic Jews, but rather, he represents all those viewed as an "other". He could be the Arab in Jewish society, or Sephardic Jewish immigrants as opposed to native-born Israelis.

This boy represents the fantasy of the person who isn't part of any group yet who yearns to belong. He represents the Sephardic fantasy in the eyes of the group, their desire to connect to the Mediterranean culture, to ride horses bare-back, to tan their complexions since "Black is Beautiful." To a certain extent, everyone wants some aspect of the other.

In the "Boys" series of photographs I did in 2000, I chose to cast dark-skinned boys for two reasons. I wanted them to have a Mediterranean skin color since the project was based on

Greek mythology, and I also wanted to raise issues of ethnic origins. From the outset the project was created as a museum piece; I wanted the museum walls to display portraits of people who otherwise would never be granted the privilege of appearing there.

But you must keep in mind, that my photographs are always metaphors. On the surface they appear as if they deal with local matters connected to conflicts or social tensions from the place in which I come. Yet, actually, as with all art, they can be read a number of ways: philosophically, psychologically, influenced by many cultural sources... Take, for example, my photograph of the boy with the horse. It's based on Picasso's "Boy Leading a Horse" (1906). And if one looks at this in the context of the blind seer of this series, one can easily see the connection between this and the 1973 play by Peter Shaffer, "Equus," (horse in Latin) in which a disturbed young stable hand blinds horses.

One could look at "The Village" as a real village in which the photographer lives (despite the fact that all the photographs are staged and the locations are sets I arranged) but aging farmers look somewhat alike all over the world. The village is an image. It's an arena in which I grant my characters life. Unlike movies, the entire project gives viewers the foundations upon which a script could be written, but does not provide the script itself. Each person, with each viewing, builds his or her own script -- his or her own story.

"The Village" will be held at the end of May at the Galerie Praz Delavallade in Paris from June 2 – July 21, 2012, at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York from May 31 – July 28, 2012, and at Sommer Contemporary Art Gallery in Tel Aviv from May 17 – June 28, 2012.

VISUAL ARTS

But what is there after the gasp?



R.M. VAUGHAN
THE EXHIBITIONIST
rvaughan@globeandmail.com

Adi Nes, Koffler Off-Site
at Olga Korper Gallery
Until June 2, 17 Morrow Ave.,
Toronto; kofflerarts.org

I am of two minds about the work of Israeli photographer Adi Nes. Part of me finds his carefully staged, highly theatrical photographs engagingly performative and an undiluted pleasure to look at (the impossibly beautiful models he employs don't hurt either).

The other half of me parses out the amount of artificiality purposely generated in the works and finds it ultimately not nearly as dramatic as it wants to be — sometimes, it feels like Nes is loading his stage with too many props, prop-like actors and pretty gels. For each moment of sheer gorgeousness, there are several more moments of potted melodrama. Nes needs a dramaturge.

Take, for instance, his recreation of *The Last Supper*. Instead of actors dressed in biblical costume, Nes uses Israeli soldiers, dressed in green fatigues. Of course, one's first reaction is to consider the socio-political context. Israel is nothing if not a loaded place, and its role in the world nothing if not controversial. To recontextualize a pivotal moment in the Christ narrative by employing Israeli soldiers is a bold, clever, brassy stunt.

But is it anything more than a Benetton ad-style shock image? Does the photograph resonate after the gasp is inhaled?

Given that Nes is famous for his fussy, Hitchcockian approach to de-naturalized image staging, shouldn't this controversial image have had a bit more care in its use of, for instance, props (the meal, such as it is, and the serving vessels, are decidedly underwhelming, even cheap-look-



The shock value of recasting *The Last Supper* with Israeli soldiers is minimized by a lack of attention to detail. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

ing). And why do some of the soldiers appear to be in on the acting game while others do not?

It's as if Nes wants it both ways: highly controlled imagery with a fashion-magazine glamour but also imagery that seems, in its kineticism, to be almost journalistic, found or accidental.

Case in point: Nes's staging of Old Testament stories as narratives of contemporary Jerusalem and inner-city poverty. They fooled me on first glance. I thought the destitute folks populating these images were perhaps Palestinians in the occupied territories, actual poor people going about their unhappy lives. I read the photographs as shaming political artifacts. Turns out the people in the photos are all hired performers, some of them well-known Jerusalemites.

Ouch. But, is Nes giving us a series of valuable jolts or of merely calculated, and ultimately therefore palatable, risks?

I am certainly not arguing that an artist has an obligation to create clear or immediately readable images. The best thing about

Nes's work is how many cryptic layers are in play. But when one spends more time unpacking the various enfolded texts in a work than actually enjoying the work, I figure the spectacle has overwhelmed the story. The costumes, lights, pretty faces and elaborate makeup are sucking the oxygen out of the theatre.

Looking at a Nes photograph is akin to watching Cirque Du Soleil do *Hamlet*. You appreciate the elaborate effort, and are perhaps enthralled by Ophelia's underwater ballet, but by the end you still aren't sure what the unhappy prince is so worked up about.

Luke Painter
at LE Gallery
Until May 27, 1183 Dundas St. W.,
Toronto; le-gallery.ca

Where to begin with mid-career artist/teacher Luke Painter's alarming ink-on-paper wonders?

With his abundant inter-genre references, or with the insanity-inspiring level of sheer physical labour and detail obsession evi-

dent in each drawing, or with Painter's advanced use of 3-D software to map out his intricate dreamscapes?

Any one of these factors is worth a monograph, but I prefer a more primal approach — to acknowledge that, yes, Painter's work is labour-intensive and meta-art smart, but more importantly acknowledges the maximum kick-to-the-head impact of his drawings. Beginning with hair-thin applications of clean, black India ink, Painter draws towers, mansions, petrified forests and manicured hedges in crisp, but never cold, animated outlines. Then he fills in the outlines with coloured inks, inks that create depth but remain steadfastly illustrative, even hard, avoiding any hint of painting, of a brush stroke or liquidity.

Some find Painter's process results in a kind of coldness, but I find the tension in Painter's drawings, the anxiety over precision, moving and more than a little nerve-wracking — precisely because they don't signal an immediate emotional subtext.

Unless, that is, you approach a Painter work as one sweeping expression/enacting of control and performance neuroses. Then, the details and detailing very soon overwhelm and you find yourself in the middle of a horror-vacui panic attack.

From there, you begin to see duels being fought on the paper. The desire to create perfect replicas (or at least perfectly and consistently stylized replicas) of well-known architectural forms vs. the desire to create alienated, post-Surreal dreamscapes, impossible places. The fear of empty space, vs. a kind of dark resignation, generated and cued by the mountain of black, delineating ink, that said space can never be filled, that there is always room for one more line. The always-fraught stylistic balancing act between magic realism, with its fondness for the nightmarish, and twee whimsicality. And, above all, a push-pull between the minute and the epic.

Underneath all Painter's tight, measured and flawless surfaces, messy battles rumble.

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CONTACT PHOTOGRAPHY FESTIVAL

Adi Nes

TEL AVIV-BASED ARTIST'S SHOW COMBINES HOMOEROTICISM, SOCIAL COMMENTARY AND RIFFS ON CLASSICAL ART.

BY FRAN SCHECHTER

Though his photographs are obviously staged, Adi Nes still reveals a lot about little-seen sides of Israeli life.

The Tel Aviv-based artist's show, curated by the Koffler Gallery at Olga Korper, is selected from three recent series – Boys, Soldiers and Biblical Stories – that combine homoeroticism, social commentary and riffs on classical art.

In Boys, swarthy adolescents, like the Narcissus who gazes into a dirty puddle, strike classical poses in a grotty modern suburb similar to the one where Nes, whose family immigrated from Iraq, grew up. Soldiers includes homoerotic images of handsome models shinnying up a pole or frolicking in a pond in a fantasy of military leisure; sleeping or wounded guys who evoke the dead Christ; and a mess hall recreation of Leonardo's Last Supper.

Nes casts the urban homeless as pro-tagonists of his Biblical Stories. Abraham pushes Isaac in a grocery cart, Elijah sleeps on a park bench, Ruth and Naomi glean produce from the garbage. The existence of homelessness in Israel is not highly publicized, and the fact that these Bible stories are part of the nation's claim on the land adds another layer to the mix.

Nes brings a queer Sephardic voice to the critical dialogue on Israel.

art@nowtoronto.com

May 14, 2012 at 12:32 PM

THE HOMELAND WITHIN

Israel's younger artists acknowledge their national identity, even as they view it—and themselves—with new eyes.

BY LILLY WEI

WHAT CAN WE LEARN about Israel through the eyes of its visual artists, particularly the 30- and 40-somethings who were born after the landmark 1967 Six Day War? Quite a bit, of late, as Israeli practitioners have become increasingly prominent on the international scene. Their work—especially installation, photography and video—is some of the most exciting around. And it has aroused widespread critical interest, spurred both by a general fascination with contemporary art from beyond Europe and the United States, and by the geopolitical crisis in the Middle East.

Many of the talented younger Israeli artists I've talked to—people who once would have relocated to New York, London or Berlin—remain centered on their homeland, treating it as their primary (if not exclusive) residence, since Israel's volatile, conflicted history is what nourishes their art. Adi Nes, Eliezer Sonnenschein and Sigalit Landau seem firmly rooted. Yael Bartana claims multiple cities (Tel Aviv, Amsterdam, Berlin, Warsaw) as home, yet she is still preoccupied with Israeliness and its critique. Keren Cyttter's choice to reside in Berlin represents another side of the diasporic story. She denies that Israel is her subject, but her work's stylized violence, passion and absurdity obliquely reflect, in my view, the schizophrenia of her native land.

One way or another, these artists focus sharply on the specifics of place, politics and culture. Their creations sometimes present a gloss of normalcy, however fragile, to the casual viewer;



Adi Nes: *Abraham and Isaac*, 2006, from the "Biblical Stories" series, C-print, 56 inches square. Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

yet just beneath that smooth surface lurks the reality of a society caught up in a constant, devastating cycle of threat and counter-threat, attack and reprisal.

ADI NES (b. 1966), one of Israel's best-known contemporary photographers, graduated in 1992 from the country's preeminent art school, the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, and has since shown in every major art institution in Israel, including the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, where he had one-person shows in 2003 and 2007. His works have appeared in the U.S. at

venues such as the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio; the Legion of Honor in San Francisco; the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego; and P.S.1 and the Jewish Museum in New York. Institutions displaying his work elsewhere abroad include Kunst-Werke and Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin; the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Vigo, Spain; the Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna, Rome; and the National Gallery of Canada,

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

A solo show by Eliezer Sonnenschein at the Kingzinger Projekte, Vienna, through Mar. 20. Karen Cyttter videos and drawings at Schau Ort, Zurich, through Apr. 10. Adi Nes's photo series "Biblical Stories," opening Mar. 23, at the Gliptoteka Museum, Zagreb.

**BENEATH THE SURFACE OF NEW ISRAELI WORK
LURKS THE REALITY OF A SOCIETY CAUGHT
UP IN A DEVASTATING CYCLE OF THREAT AND
COUNTER-THREAT, ATTACK AND REPRISAL.**



Nes: Untitled, 1995, from the "Soldiers" series, C-print, 39 inches square. Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery.

Ottawa.

Nes made his mark early with the glossy homoerotic series "Soldiers" (1994-2000), which investigates stereotypes of Israeli masculinity, especially the myth of the heroic New Jew, so unlike the timid Old Jew of the ghetto and shtetl. One striking image shows a muscular, olive-skinned, bare-chested young trooper wearing a yarmulke and flexing his bicep in front of a field tent. Another, set in a barracks, offers a version of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, its themes of devotion and betrayal now sexually charged.

For the series "Narcissus, Castor and Pollux" (2000), based on Classical mythology, Nes used dark-skinned, often sultry teenage boys, many of them twins from public housing blocks or outlying towns, to explore issues of ethnicity, sexual identity and doubleness.

populated areas). "The physical place of my abode is not very important," he contends, "because my personality developed long ago. I live and work in Israel because my house and family are here, because I was born here, because the Hebrew language, culture and history are vehicles of my speaking and thinking. All my creations have been photographed here."

Treating the Other as Baudelairean *semblable*, he has focused on such Israeli groups as Arab Jews, European Ashkenazim and Mediterranean Sephardim. "Biblical Stories" (2006) features street people as actors in familiar scriptural scenes, thus lending a literary identity to people who have lost their own. Nes's works, staged like film productions, recall the elaborate contrivances of Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman, Gregory Crewdson and others. The artist invents the scenarios, scouts the locations, selects the costumes, recruits and photographs the nonprofessional performers, consistently emphasizing the artifice of his project.

"As one who lives and creates in Israel," Nes says, "I am, of course, an Israeli artist."¹ Yet he is also an outsider on many levels: gay, of Eastern descent (his Kurdish and Iranian parents immigrated to Israel from Iran) and raised in Kiryat Gat, a peripheral "development town" (one of the settlements built to increase Israeli presence in sparsely