

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,

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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.

ISRAEL REPORT

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.

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." 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

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."