DIONYSUS IN KIRYAT YAM

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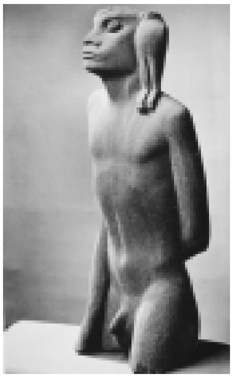
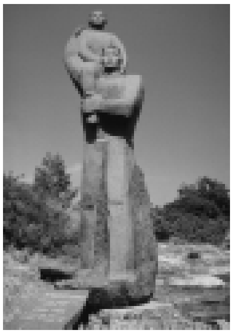
In Adi Nes's recent photographs, younger actors replace the actors/soldiers of the previous works. Only in one case (cat. 5) are women featured as well. Nes's protagonists/actors have "finished the army," "hung up their uniforms"—but in rewind, having gone back to earlier, private phases in the process of identity formation.



1. Yitzhak Danziger, *Nimrod*, 1938-39. Nubian sandstone, h. 90 Collection The Israel Museum, Gift of Dr. David H.Orgler, Jerusalem. Photograph: Y. Zafrir

One of the photographs (cat. 6) portrays a black-haired youth, slightly dark-skinned, with a handsome face and a serious, tense expression—his mouth tightly shut, his eyes looking at and beyond the photographer; towering behind him are tree trunks, through which the glowing wall of a house can be seen. Since the photograph was taken against the light, the tree trunks and the boy's shirt are darkened, while the face is illuminated (perhaps by artificial lighting). A bird is perched on his left shoulder. Yet this is not a portrait of a boy with a bird; the boy has no name, and the bird is a stuffed bird. Moreover, the boy does not represent himself; he is an actor taking part in a staged scene, a play, or better yet—a non-existent movie. A still without a movie. Is this an affirmative-subversive version of Itzhak Danziger's mythological *Nimrod*? Has the *Nimrod* ideal, woven out from a faraway culture, been reincarnated here in the guise of a local boy, and in place of a historical-cultural Otherness is an erotic Otherness (which some say is embodied in *Nimrod* as well) being reconstructed here through the boyish countenance? Or does the photograph bring to mind the boy in Pier Paolo Pasolini's film, *The Hawks and the Sparrows*? Or is it perhaps a modernist version of the mythological scene of Ganymede's abduction, like Rauschenberg's *Canyon* with the stuffed eagle?

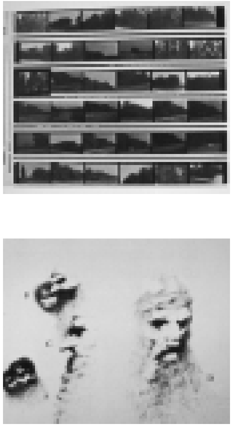


2. Yehiel Shemi, *Father and Son*, 1954. Basalt stone, 300x110x80 Kibbutz Hukkok Photograph: A. Hay

Echoes of "Israeli mythologies," of images that have become rooted in Israeli art, are discernable in two other works by Nes: one (cat. 1) portrays a teenage boy embracing a younger boy, while the other (cat. 9) features the very same adolescent hoisting up the youngster. The relationship between the two conveys homoeroticism—such as that which infiltrates into a father-son relationship, bringing to mind Yehiel Shemi's sculpture *Father and Son*, 1954 (fig. 2), and Menashe Kadishman's paintings of the sacrifice of Isaac—two instances of epic art related to the motif of death. The mythology of heroism, with its national connotations, is restored in Nes's work into the private sphere.

In the columned entrance to a public housing block, in a semi-dark space, three adolescent boys pin a fourth adolescent to the ground, trying to take his clothes off. The artificially illuminated wall in the background is painted with an amateurish sea scene: sailors rolling a barrel on a pier. Taken in Kiryat Yam, an Israeli immigrant town on the Mediterranean shore, the photograph of these boys, depicting a moment in a violent, homoerotic plot—possibly a rape story—is a *tableau vivant*, alluding to one of the mythological stories of Dionysus, the bisexual God of Wine. According to one of the versions, Dionysus was abducted by pirates who expected a hefty ransom, while in another version, which emphasizes Dionysus' homoerotic facet, the pirates tried to rape him. The second version, it is interesting to note, is echoed in Israel Eldad's introduction to his Hebrew translation of Walter Kaufmann's book *Nietzsche*. Eldad relates how on one of Kaufmann's visits to Jerusalem, he had asked the author: "*Wie ist Dionysos in Jerushalaim möglich*?" (How is Dionysus possible in Jerusalem?), and Kaufmann replied: "David dancing in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord."[1] Despite the elevation of the Greek myth, the homoerotic dimension is also present here.

Adi Nes's mythological photographs were not taken in Kirjath-jearim, where according to the biblical story the ark of the covenant was kept temporarily, nor in Jerusalem, where it was later transferred, but rather in Kiryat Yam ("Dionysus," cat. 3), Kiryat Gat ("Narcissus," cat. 8), and other modern, distinctly non-mythological towns.* Thus, the Greek myth, whose protagonists are sons of gods, is enacted in Nes's photographs by "suburban boys"—a lowered mythology of sorts. Unlike the Greek myth, the Christian myth is originally a story of simple folk, but in its artistic manifestations an act of lowering is at times performed just as well; for example, in Caravaggio's paintings and Pasolini's films, who use models and actors, respectively, picked from the margins of society. In both these instances, the act of lowering is linked to homoeroticism.



3. Douglas Huebler, *Variable Piece # 90*, 1974. Photographs and drawings.

Appearing in the introduction to the *Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit*, which Nes used as reference, is the following motto: "We are sacred because we are queer."[2] The association between Otherness and sacredness is a fundamental component in Nes's mythological images. The archetypal pattern of mythological stories lends form, content and meaning to scenes, to random occurrences, to a chaotic present and unfocused memories from the past. Viewing the everyday or the past through the prism of mythological patterns consecrates, perpetuates that which would have otherwise been lost amidst the differences that are imeasurably smaller in reality. Thus, social Otherness is reinforced by sexual Otherness and sanctified by the myth and the photographic act.

4. *Ha'aretz*, 4.8.2000. Photograph: Alon Ron

In reference to the twins photograph ("Dioscuri," sons of Zeus, cat. 2) taken in Ofakim, Nes told me that prior to staging the photograph, while driving his car, he spotted two teenagers—"twins" in his eyes—and took a snapshot of them. This anecdotal fact touches upon a pivotal aspect of his work: the random encounter. Artist Douglas Huebler, one of the forerunners of conceptual art, employed "non-aesthetic," immediate, random, snapshot photography in his works; in a relatively late work (fig. 3), he photographed, in a random manner, from a moving car, trees along the way to Jerusalem to determine if any signs of our biblical ancestors could be found within the pine tree foliage. This somewhat mystical practice is present, to some extent, in Nes's photography, which is ascribable to the tradition that evolved thanks to the revolution in the art of photography brought about by conceptual art. At least in some of Nes's photographs, the artistic act—the intricate production of these staged *tableaux vivants*—was preceded by random encounters with the "myth": such was the case in the snapshot of the aforementioned "twins," or the photograph of the sleeping boys, which Nes found in the newspaper (fig. 4). The moment at which the mythical pattern is revealed in reality may be seen as fatal randomness, as an encounter with the Real, the *Tuché* in Lacan's terms. It is perhaps the random appearance inherent in Nes’s staged photographs that allows the viewer to return, time and again, to a situation of fateful randomness, to an encounter with the Real, if we may apply the criterion formulated by Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida*, emphasizing the random aspects of the photographic act, without which the photograph cannot be truly intriguing.

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[1] Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Hebrew trans. Dr. Israel Eldad, Schocken, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem 1982, p. 6.

[2] *Cassel's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit*, Cassel, London and New York 1997, p. IX.

5. *Untitled,* 1999

Color photograph, 60x90

The transformation from the real image, from the snapshot or newspaper photograph, to Nes’s staged mythological scene may be perceived to be modelled on Marcel Duchamp’s transformation of readymades whereby a banal, mass-produced object became a work of art through mere designation or nomination. For it was Duchamp whose de-aestheticization of the “art of photography” simultaneously marked the point of departure for the photographic revolution begun three decades ago. The process of transformation in both Duchamp's readymades and Nes's photographs is, essentially, ritualistic, similar to the transubstantiation in the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which the wine and bread symbolically become the blood and body of Christ.

A certain affinity to all these can be found in Georges Bataille’s notion of the “privileged instant” which he borrowed from the study of mysticism. The “privileged instant” denotes an instant which contains some chance encounter. Art, says Bataille—who discusses painting rather than photography, and Nes’s photography is undoubtedly deeply rooted in painting—is unequivocally sacred and must touch upon the “privileged instant” and make it reappear: “The term *privileged instant* is the only one that, with a certain amount of accuracy, accounts for what can be encountered at random in the search . . . . The will to fix such instants, which belong, it is true, to painting . . . is only the way to make them reappear. . . . nothing is more desirable than what will soon disappear. But, as he feels what he loves escaping, the painter . . . trembles from the cold of extreme want; vain efforts are expended to create pathways permitting the endless reattainment of that which flees.”[3]

A mixture of passion and death underlies the meaning in a previous series of works (fig. 5) in which Nes photographed soldiers “sleeping” (while “on the road”). One of the photographs in the present series (cat. 4) depicts six teenage boys “sleeping” in a room; the passivity of sleep may provoke aggressive passion in the other: an intrusive gaze, and even physical violation—sexual abuse. Sleep is also the state closest to death. Nes's “sleepers” evoke the myth of the beautiful Endymion, who fell into eternal sleep to preserve his youth, and at the same time allude to sacredness, based on the association with the soldiers sleeping by Christ’s tomb. In a photograph based on the death of Adonis (cat. 5), Nes portrays a youth lying flat, possibly wounded, on the road, surrounded by a group of agitated women—mature, mother-like women . In Christian myths, the women speak of Christ as a boyfriend, a husband, a lover who has abandoned them, yet, both in these myths and in Nes’s “Adonis,” passion, death and sacredness form the very axis of dynamics. In her essay on the sacred in contemporary art, in reference to the holy women surrounding Christ, Jennifer Blessing writes: “They construct a life that is determined by desire: this is

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3. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1986, p. 241.

the lace I weave as I wait for Him; this is the abject task that I perform, the deprivation that I suffer, which proves my love for Him; this is the self-inflicted pain that I endure in order to make myself worthy of Him; this is the death that I seek so that we may be united."[4] Referring to death in photography, Roland Barthes writes: "For death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life."[5]

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* The Hebrew word *kirya* denotes suburb, borough or town.

[4] Jennifer Blessing, "Notes on the Sacred in Contemporary Art," in Elizabeth Janus (ed.), *Veronica's Revenge: Contemporary Perspectives on Photography*, Scalo, Zurich-Berlin-New York 1998, p. 151.

[5] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York 1981, p. 92.