

ABOUT THE TIME THE BEARD BEGINS TO GROW

Doron Rabina

As long as your cheek is so smooth, my boy, I won't stop beseeching you . . .
Theognis¹

The above quote from Theognis expresses boundless love, albeit one branded by an upper limit, a boundary line—the boundary of youth, the fine line of the smooth cheek. Reflection upon words denoting delineation—site, arena, territory, boundary—seems called for vis-à-vis Adi Nes's new series of works. It is a series that embraces distinct, clearly defined materials: a group of boys (dark-skinned) in a “peripheral” place (public housing), whose figures oscillate between utter paganism and unawareness on the one hand, and a piercing, straightforward subjectivity on the other. Yet, it is precisely against the absolute concreteness generated by this corpus of photography (as a medium), although underlied by a fictive (staged) foundation, that I am tempted to explore it through what is abstract and vaguely bounded, namely, the age of adolescence. Within a photographic practice which so distinctly leans upon a political, mythological and sociological foundation, I choose to define an arena that is elusive in essence, nearly invisible, thus necessitating words; an arena I will dub “youth.” I would like to shift our gaze to this “youth”—to the hair on cheeks, to the beginnings of a moustache, to the smooth waistline, to the fine down of the armpit, to the raised shoulder blades, to the secret of the crotch; to describe a gaze that encounters a body on its way to sketch desire. Its guide is the hair—the heavy, wondrous blow dealt upon a boy on his way to assuming a mask of masculinity. Bodily hair would be the first marker not only of a strong eroticism, but also of a “temporal arena”—one which is at once charged and quiet, gentle yet overwhelming.

*Those who are inspired by this love turn to the male, and delight in him who is the more valiant and intelligent nature; any one may recognise the pure enthusiasts in the very character of their attachments. For they love not boys, but intelligent beings whose reason is beginning to be developed, much about the time at which their beards begin to grow. And in choosing young men to be their companions, they mean to be faithful to them, and pass their whole life in company with them, not to take them in their inexperience, and deceive them, and play the fool with them, or run away from one to another of them. Plato, *The Symposium*.²*

It is hard to conceive of words more beautiful than these, which fuse body in time. Words that bind wisdom with bodily hair. One of the most piercing portraits in Nes's photographic corpus harnesses the hair as a site of breaking forth, of reason beginning to develop; a portrait—alluding to Danziger's *Nimrod*, the sculpture which, inversely, harnessed smoothness and lessening of the body into youth—portraying a boy who is an expressive catalogue of hair varieties (cat. 6). Thick unkempt eyebrows that grow in five different directions

1. Verse from a poem by Theognis, from *Limb Loosening Desire: Erotic Greek Poetry*, Hebrew trans. Amir Or, Bitan, 1993, p.70.
2. Trans. Benjamin Lewitt, 1982. www.plato.evansville.edu/texts/jowett/symposium.htm

sketch, together with long eyelashes, a piercing gaze of a “knowing” youth. The short black hair that softens upon parting on the forehead renders him worthy of carrying a raven. But above all, this youth epitomizes the downy moustache as the very issue here. It is the genuine, precious jewel he is wearing. It is the most significant site of darkening in the portrait illuminated against a silhouetted setting; a site that signifies not only buds of manhood, but also a yearning for the virginal and nascent—a strip of hair that vests the boy with magic, incriminating the photographer as craving.

To love a man is not only to let myself be excited by some of the details which I call nocturnal because they create within me a darkness wherein I tremble (the hair, the eyes, a smile, the thumb, the thigh, the bush, etc.), but also to make these details render as shadow everything possible, to develop the shadow of the shadow, hence to thicken it, to extend its realm and throng it with darkness. Jean Genet³

The darkening and shading are the “real” drama within the “pseudo-drama” in “Adonis” too (cat. 5). A boy is lying still in a photograph which is all hustle and bustle. A group of women in-mid-run gathers around the boy dressed in summer clothes, lying flat on the road, and the eye fixes on the armpit hair of all things. Within this light-bathed photograph, a dark zone is created, between the arm and the shoulder, which may be conceived either as hair or as shadow. The erotic tension inherent in such ambiguity is a tactic whose course may be traced from Caravaggio all the way to current homoerotic photography (from Duane Michals and Robert Mapplethorpe to Arthur Tress and Peter Hujar)—places where darkening conceals yet generates mystery; optical vagueness yielding clear temptation.

Nes’s earlier soldier photographs were marked by a softer formulation of lighting, combining twilight photography with artificial lighting. In the present series, most of the photographs are bathed in full light, noontime lighting, which constitutes a polar opposite to the intimate zones strewn within them. Areas of darkening within an illuminated realm sustain what I would like to call “mystery under spotlight.” The presence of a secret in a barefaced territory. This structure serves not only Nes’s photography; it underlies homosexuality as a whole—its ability to exist as a “sub-text” within the visibility range of daily conduct: gazes unheeded by strangers; cruising areas within bustling, active public realms, discernible only to those versed in the secrets of courting; the possibility of creating the greatest intimacy in public spheres breached to the outside.

As opposed to Genet’s total dependence on darkness, Thomas Mann signifies sunlight as generating desire for the boy: “The sun . . . dazzles; so bewitching reason and memory that the soul for very pleasure forgets its actual state, to cling with doting on the loveliest of all the objects she shines on.”⁴ And elsewhere: “The ringlets of honey-coloured hair clung to his temples and neck, the fine down along the upper vertebrae was yellow



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self-Portrait*, 1975



Thomas Eakins, *Eakins’ students at the site of “The Swimming Hole,”* 1883

3. Jean Genet, *The Thief’s Journal*, trans. Bernard Fechtman, Grove Press, New York, 1964, p. 199.

4. Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter, Penguin Books, 1955, p. 47.



Wilhelm von Gloeden, *Two Boys before Agave*, 1900

in the sunlight; the thin envelope of flesh covering the torso betrayed the delicate outlines of the ribs and the symmetry of the breast-structure. His armpits were still as smooth as a statue's, smooth the glistening hollows behind the knees, where the blue network of veins suggested that the body was formed of some stuff more transparent than mere flesh. What discipline, what precision of thought were expressed by the tense youthful perfection of this form!"⁵

One of Nes's photographs, which well defines youth as an arena binding time and body, shows a young man raising a younger boy high up in the air, both half-naked (cat. 9). Beyond the acrobatic construction, the photograph derives its force from the heartrending encounter between the hairy armpit and the smooth armpit extending above it. The ripe body is enhanced in all its hairiness and muscularity under the weight of the virginal body of pre-pubescence, rendering, in broad daylight, an erotic cross between two male subjects whose average age would make a youth. A structure of metonymical eroticism is created here: juxtaposing the mature body with the boyish one envelopes the latter with a sexual potential, weaving an image of its future physicality. Like the officer in Jean Genet's *Querelle of Brest*, who watches Querelle who had placed inside the neck of his white shirt sprays covered with tangerines, and fantasizes: "The foliage . . . was doubtless what the sailor grew on his broad chest in the place of hair, and haply attached to each one of these precious and personal branches would be tantalizing testicles, both hard and at the same time yielding to the touch."⁶ The same metonymical structure often emerges in Wilhelm von Gloeden's photographs of nude boys (see fig.), representing smooth-bodied boys depicted against the backdrop of thick vegetation, thus transforming the landscape into metaphorical bodily hair.

In another photograph depicting a fight between four youngsters (cat. 3), Nes portrays the youthful body as a violent territory, as a site of passions. The clenched fist pulling off the shirt of the boy being attacked, while he is lying at the feet of a bare-chested youth standing above him, formulates the occurrence as an act situated in-between a fight and an attempt at stripping. Standing at the top of this tangled, clumsy (darkened) boyish bulb, at the corner of the frame, illuminated with classical lighting, is a fully-developed youthful chest. He is the first candidate competing against the sense of compassion evoked vis-à-vis the occurrence at his feet. In view of this, one can only expect yet another act of stripping. In a violent and disconcerting scene of self-revelation depicted in *The Book of Intimate Grammar*, David Grossman describes a chase taking place between two boys that ends with an aggressive act of stripping, revealing the very pretext for the confrontation—the appearance of pubic hair. The protagonist of the story, a boy whose development is late in coming, stands startled and wounded opposite his best friend who had offered him "a glimpse of that heartrending weft of gloom."⁷ The sensational, earth-shattering discovery brings to a climax a bitter account with the adolescence that his body refuses to assume: "Slowly, as though trying to remember something, he ran a finger up



Luchino Visconti, *Death in Venice*, 1971

7. David Grossman, *The Book of Intimate Grammar*, trans. Betsy Rosenberg, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1994, p. 340.

6. Jean Genet, *Querelle of Brest*, Panther Books, London 1969, p. 118.

5. Mann 1955, p. 46.

his body, from his feet to his neck and shoulders. Detached from all emotion, he investigated his flesh, tracing the geography of the unfamiliar zone of hell.”⁸ The fight scene wounds the gaze lingering upon the youthful beauty and fixates it in a place of danger. This is where adolescence holds its head up high, but at the same time makes a muscle; where it entwines self-assertion and humiliation, Eros and violence.

Vis-à-vis the frenzied drama introduced by the fight photograph, the photograph of the boys sleeping in close proximity to one another (cat. 4) emerges as a site of immobility—a static state which allows a close, concentrated, calm gaze at the youthful body. Furthermore, it clearly exposes the boys as objects of observation; objects that fail to read the true, craving, meaning of our gaze—they are unaware of the specific erotic type of this gaze. The room is invested with the spirit of Hypnos, the god of sleep, yet this only reinforces the vulnerability and ephemerality of youth, conjuring up Endymion who cast sleep upon himself in order to preserve his youth. Endymion belongs in the group of beautiful youths mythology “kills” in order to keep eternally youthful. “In his dread of degradation, that is to say, of growing old,” writes Marguerite Yourcenar, “he must have promised himself long ago to die at the first sign of decline, or even before But it was still essential that this departure should have no air of revolt, and should contain no complaint.”⁹ In *Death in Venice* too, the death wish fulfills the fantasy to preserve the boy in his youthful beauty, when Aschenbach, noticing the translucent teeth of the boy who so enchants him, his habit of “drawing himself up and taking a deep sighing breath,” says to himself while observing the youth: “He will never live to grow up.”¹⁰ Nes’s photography is harnessed to endow his objects with eternal life, to fixate the age arena which addresses everything short-lived and fleeting. At the same time, however, it exposes in the boys, each lying on his own bed in the room, different phases along the axis of adolescence. The time range whose fixation we so desire is characterized by ceaseless stirring of the body: “This tender body,” writes Yourcenar in *Memoirs of Hadrian*, “varied all the time, like a plant, and some of its alterations were those of growth. The boy changed; he grew tall. A week of indolence sufficed to soften him completely; a single afternoon at the hunt made the young athlete firm again, and fleet; an hour’s sun would turn him from jasmine to the color of honey. The boyish limbs lengthened out; the face lost its delicate childish round and hollowed slightly under the high cheekbones; the full chest of the young runner took on the smooth, gleaming curves of a Bacchante’s breast; the brooding lips bespoke a bitter ardor, a sad satiety. In truth this visage changed as if I had molded it night and day.”¹¹

This stirring movement generates Eros. The body constantly demands to be the center of occurrence. Its transition from change to change, from one image to another, demands constant observation, alertness to its silent activity: he who had noticed the beginnings of a moustache in the evening, will the next day newly detect armpit fluff, before the mirror or in a reflection in a puddle along the sidewalk in a development town.



Joaquín Sorolla, *Children on the Beach*, 1923



F. Holland Day, *St. Sebastian*, 1906

8. Grossman 1994, p. 341.

9. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York 1981, pp. 183-4.

10. Mann 1955, p. 66.

11. Yourcenar 1981, pp. 155-6.

The storm of emotion is associated with the magic accompanying any kind of creation, magic at once exalting and overpowering.

Querelle raised his arm to smooth back with the flat of his hand the lock of hair that had fallen over and behind his ear. His gesture was so beautiful, disclosing as it did an armpit as pale and dappled as the belly of a trout, that the officer could not help his eyes betraying the fact that he could scarcely hold out any longer. His eyes begged for mercy. The look in them displayed greater humility than if he had gone down on his knees.¹²