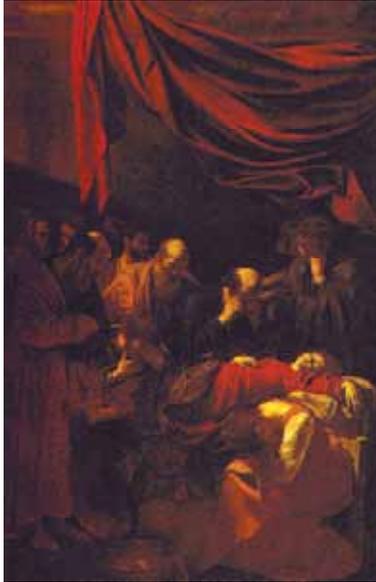


shortly after the fall of the communist state, and so they hint at a similar reality in Israel. However, Nes's gaze differs from Mikhailov's exposure of the homeless in Kharkov, as compassion is not part of the latter's emotional scale. Mikhailov's homeless, wallowing in the horror of their fall, are more freaks than humans, and the fact that we look at them only intensifies their humiliation. Nes, in contrast, takes a more distant stance in the very choice to stage his tableaux and have his characters represented by surrogates, and in this mediation a measure of both dignity and compassion is preserved.

Nonetheless, both Mikhailov and Nes depict people in a state of a theodicean catastrophe. Job, Hagar, Esau, Joseph and Isaac are innocent victims in a drama which they did not generate and cannot influence, and yet the Bible presents them as prominent examples of believers in the power which is the source of their calamity. Nes turns this belief into resignation, giving it visuality by the special way his characters look back at us through the camera lens. I am struck by the impact of the look all of his protagonists have in common, the look of Joseph, David, Job and Hagar, a look such as we encountered in the image of the boy with the raven and in the prisoner images – a look, fathered perhaps by Giorgione's young man, which entails both skepticism and hopelessness. This is the look turned on us by these forsaken, alienated persons, these infamous people defined as Others. And all of them are immersed in terrible beauty, in grace.



Caravaggio, **The Death of the Virgin**,
1605-06, oil on canvas, collection of the
Louvre Museum, Paris

קראוואג'ו, **מות הבתולה**, 1605-06, שמן על
בד, אוסף מוזיאון הלובר, פריז

the idea of freedom is therefore anathema to it. When Nes pairs together the two systems, he exposes them as overlapping and compatible. He uses the oxymoronic aesthetics of fashion magazines ironically, as a weapon that ricochets back to the industry that employs him, for in his photos – to put it mildly – the garments are stripped from their aura, expropriated from their designer's name, and the image they were supposed to provide evaporates. In this, Nes is a step ahead of the tactics that elevate commodities by means of constructed images, for he exposes the image, divests it of its symbolic value, strips the commodity naked. I am tempted to say that in this battle art has won in the very heart of enemy territory. Such is Nes's subversiveness.

I have already mentioned that the people in Nes's works are neither models, nor do they represent their own selves. They are chosen by Nes because their physiognomy suits the total effect of the tableau he envisages. Like Caravaggio (to whom Nes pays more than one homage in his latest, Biblical Stories series), who found his Mary Magdalene, Judith and St. Catherine in the image of the courtesan Fillide Melandroni, the *Madonna of Loreto* in the mysterious Lena, the *Lute Player* in his colleague Mario Minniti, and both *Amor Victorious* and *St. John the Baptist* in his friend Checco – so does Nes find his *Abraham and Isaac*, *Noah*, *Hagar*, *Job*, and *David and Jonathan* in the circle of his acquaintances. Without the works' titles there would be nothing to indicate their biblical roles, and in some of them Greek mythology lurks, weaving parallels of its own: *Cain and Abel* [p. 95], for instance, repeats the Dionysian theme (already identified in the Boys series, in the image of three young people attacking a fourth), while *David and Jonathan* [p. 101] echoes *The Death of Hyacinth* (1801), Apollo's beloved, as depicted by Jean Broc [p. 24]. Other works in the series relate to famous instances in art history: *Ruth and Naomi* [p. 105] evokes Jean-François Millet's *The Gleaners* (1857) [p. 34], and *Abraham and Isaac* [p. 106] paraphrases Duane Hanson's *Supermarket Shopper* from 1970 [p. 33].

Nes's works – their subjects, their narratives, their appearance – almost always focus on society's outcasts, in different stages of decline and decay. In a sense, they remind me of the homeless people Boris Mikhailov photographed



Wilhelm von Gloeden, **Self Portrait as an Arabian Noble**, 1890, albumen print, private collection

וילהלם פון גלדן, **דיוקן עצמי כאציל ערבי**, 1890, הדפס אלבומין, אוסף פרטי

The total visibility of fashion is in complete opposition to the invisibility of the dungeon. Consequently, when Nes impregnates the one with the other he turns the observer into twice a voyeur, looking at the same time at both extremities of visibility – his wet dreams and his nightmares.

Because of their contradictory character, pasting together the world of fashion and the prison system evokes manifold associations. It is tempting to read into it a critique of Israel's mistreatment of the Palestinians, for example in the work depicting a confrontation between a prisoner and a warder [p. 83], or in the image of a row of prisoners walking along a wall [p. 80]. Nes himself had spent some of his military service as a guard in a detention camp for Palestinian political prisoners, so the dynamic ingrained in the warder-prisoner relation – the undercurrents and insinuations that such an encounter produces, the boundaries breached as well as those that become sharply defined – are well known to him. In another image from the series a prisoner stands outside a cell, showing his perfectly chiseled body [p. 82] – perfection which defies the system, for it is an embodied metaphor of physical power, a role robbed from his jailers. This "king of the cell" also suggests another possible reading, to do with homosexuality and the ways it defines power structures within the community of prisoners, and the way these relations correlate with prisoners-warders relations. The strong man is thus linked to the image of a young man in another work in the series [p. 91] – handcuffed, standing with his back to the camera, facing his guards in a gesture of submission, like a candidate for a rape to come.

These associations, gleaned from the images' surface, are well in accord with the insertion of fashion into the brutal surroundings of the jail – like an exercise in oxymoronic relations, such as fashion photographers are keen to use. It is not that Nes believes these contradictions to be especially original in the framework of a glossy lifestyle journal; it becomes clear from his work that the two systems have a lot in common, much more than the parameter of a limited stretch of time. While fashion inscribes slogans of freedom on its banner (the freedom to choose, to buy, to create a self-image, to appear young, attractive and special), in fact it subordinates its participants to a symbolic order that precedes their choices, and

16 I'm referring here mainly to the work of George Quaintance, especially *Egyptian Wrestlers* from 1952; See: Cat. *The Art of George Quaintance* (Berlin: Janssen Gallery, 1989).

many who made the grand tour seeking to quench a desire for that which was unobtainable or forbidden in their native lands. In this homotextual universe, where the oriental Other is given sexual attributes ranging from the effeminate youth to the hypervirile subject, the fantasies of male desire – suppressed by law in Europe – became particularly extreme.¹⁶ But the breaching of the Law of the Father in that far off place also served as proof of its inferiority, which was then projected on all aspects of the mental landscape perceived as the Orient.

In the history of homoerotic photography there are not many valuable examples of specific concern with the orient. Wilhelm von Gloeden dressed his adolescents with oriental garb, as in his portrait series *Ahmed* (1890-1900) [p. 22], but usually preferred to photograph them dressed up as the ancient Greek. On the whole, one might say that while classical art served as the cover story for depictions of naked males engaged in artistic activities, anthropology and medical studies allowed the depiction of oriental males as "naked models." Nes, living in an age that requires no such cover story, removes that decoding from the realm of necessity and turns it into an aesthetic device. He does not need to artify his boys like Mapplethorpe did, to victimize them like Holland Day, or to glorify them like Annie Leibovitz. He avoids their nakedness in order to emphasize the aesthetics of subversiveness – of which his subjects are unaware, their innocence therefore intact and thus extremely erotic. Their Orientalism is that of the odalisque, who remains – to the gaze of the West, of course – aloof and untouchable, as far from the reach of that gaze as she is from reality.

In 2003 Nes was invited by *Vogue Hommes International*, a journal specializing in men's wear, to take fashion photos of the new hot stuff in the clothing industry – and he chose to place the coats and trousers, cardigans and shirts in an imaginary prison, worn by imaginary prisoners. It seems that nothing could be further from the system of fashion than that of incarceration, for fashion seeks to affirm a social order by giving it a visibility through the symbolic order of garments, while penitentiaries are filled with elements of society which threaten that very order. One system's authority lies in identifying and operating objects of desire, while the other system is authorized to restrain and confine those in pursuit of them.

13 See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3.402-510.

14 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting* (1436), Book II, trans. C. Grayson (London: Penguin Books, 1991).



Caravaggio, **Narcissus**, 1598-99, oil on canvas, collection of the National Gallery of Art, Rome

קראוואג'ו, **נרקיס**, 1598-99, שמן על בד, אוסרף הגלריה הלאומית לאמנות, רומא

15 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage, 1979), pp.188-190.

Painting, 1436), replaces the familiar interpretation of the myth as an allegory of hubris with a new one, giving Narcissus a new role: that of the first painter. "I used to tell my friends," writes Alberti, "that the inventor of painting according to the poets was Narcissus, who was turned into a flower. For, as painting is the flower of all the arts, the tale of Narcissus fits our purpose perfectly. What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?"¹⁴

If Narcissus is the Ur-painter – doubled in the primordial Pygmalion, for both fall in love with their own creation, and both manifest what will later be known as the "bachelor machine" syndrome – could it be that in the image of the boy, as in other images, Nes has created a self portrait which is greatly removed from himself? Is this Narcissus, in a place most unlike the beautiful surroundings described in detail by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (and much more similar to André Gide's no-place in *Le Traité du Narcisse*), actually a biographical note on Nes's childhood in Kiryat Gat? Or does Narcissus stand for the problematization of sight that subverts so many of Nes's images, undermining the triumphant act of mythologization?

I have no clear answer concerning these issues – but, at the same time, I have no doubt as to the certain kind of beauty embedded in Nes's Narcissus, in Nes-Narcissus. Like all the youths in his works, Narcissus has an oriental kind of beauty – and this sends me yet again to art history, this time to the field of photography, in search of colonial desires closeted in reconstructions of the Greek ideal or in pseudo-anthropological research.

Orientalism, according to Edward Said, is a mode of thought based on an ontological distinction between East and West, a discourse that expresses the West's manner of restructuring its own perception of lands and areas and then dominating them by colonial means. Above all, Orientalism constructs a textual universe, in which one of the themes, says Said, is the celebration of an easily available sexuality; a place "where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe."¹⁵ Yet Said is silent about the fact that a good portion of this Oriental attraction is exclusively homosexual, as evident in travelogues dating back to the 18th century. Lord Byron, Gustave Flaubert and André Gide were among the



Bertel Thorvaldsen, **Anacreon and Amor**,
1823, marble, collection of Thorvaldsen
Museum, Copenhagen

ברטל תורוולדסן, **אנקריאון ואמור**, 1823, שיש,
אוסף מוזיאון תורוולדסן, קופנהאגן

researched. This crisis was most strongly felt in Israeli development towns, where the majority of the population had arrived from such countries. It is characteristic of Nes that the local conflict should be expressed through the bypass of a foreign mythology, that it be reintroduced through the back door of a different culture, thus creating a distance which enables contemplation beyond direct criticism.

The subject of erotic relations between an adult and an adolescent appears twice more in the series. One of the works depicts a young man whose hands rest on the boy's shoulders [p. 75], as if replicating the raven of the previous image, and in another work a young man lifts a child up to the sky [p. 71]. In both works the model of *erastes-eromenos* is grounded in the context of a gymnasium – a physical context, emphasized by upper body nakedness. In mythological terms, the two pairs stand for a long list of pederastic relations – Achilles and Patroclus, Hercules and Iolaus, Zeus and Ganymede, Apollo and Hyacinth [p. 24] – that present no clash between virility and desire for young boys; on the contrary, that desire only emphasizes the heroes' potency. These pairs also refer to the father who fails his son and is thus replaced by the mentor figure of the *erastes*. All of these converge beautifully in the image of the boy raised to the sky by his elder, which echoes not only the pederastic relationship but also the failing father, in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac as well as in the Daedalus and Icarus myth. The boy who wants to fly is both helped and held back by the same power, which leaves him helpless and betrayed.

The pederastic motif of the Boys series is accompanied by another motif, that of the *puer aeternus*, the eternal boy. The image depicting a youth contemplating his reflection in a water puddle [p. 74] clearly refers to the story of Narcissus, and with his introduction into the series Nes repeats the pattern which we have come to know in his other series – allegorizing a motif and shifting it into the realm of art in order to refer to the problematics of sight. Narcissus, the most beautiful youth of all, falls in love with his own reflection, a fact that leads him to stasis and death. Ovid relates the story as mirroring that of Oedipus, for both protagonists oscillate between two worlds – one of their own construction and one which is real and will finally destroy them.¹³ Leon Battista Alberti, in his treatise *Della Pittura* (*On*

sleeping in one room [p. 77] is based on a news item on poverty; and that of a child lying on the road with women surrounding him [p. 76] refers to an accident observed by the artist. But these images touch us in a different way once the local place disintegrates and is reassembled into a mythical dimension, a spell of metamorphosis that reintroduces the familiar as a strange landscape. In this new place, the boy lying on the road is Adonis, and the women around him are participants in an ancient ritual.

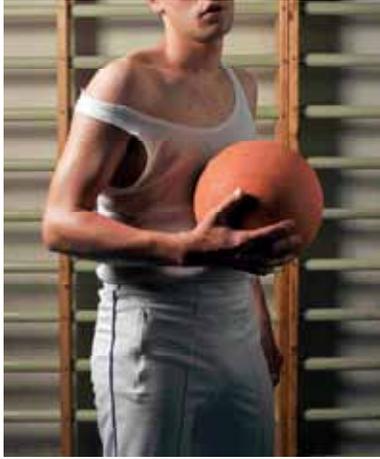
The mutative character of this series can be understood through the following examples: one of the images – a young boy with a raven on his shoulder [p. 72] – has already been compared by Ellen Ginton to Yitzhak Danziger's *Nimrod* [p. 19], a sculptor's dream of the new Hebrew in the image of an ancient king. Indeed, it is in the difference between the two figures that the whole Zionist project, from its glorious beginning to its disillusioned present, can be summed up.¹¹ The boy, whose glance is doubled and intensified in the bird's gaze (reminding me of Giorgione's *Portrait of a Young Man* [*Antonio Broccardo*] of 1506, who like Nes's youth distances himself from the object looked upon in a gesture of doubt and skepticism), is also a carrier of the Ganymede myth – an icon of pederastic love: having fallen in love with Ganymede, Zeus disguises himself as an eagle, abducts and bring him to the Olympus, and later grants him eternal existence by turning him into a celestial constellation.¹²

The Ganymede story catapults Nes's boy, in a further mutation, back to the original reality of the image, that of the development town. If indeed the boy is likened to an *eromenos*, that is, the younger partner in a pederastic relationship ("pederastic" not in its modern sense, but the sort of relationship that was widely accepted in ancient Greek as an educational device), than the raven, Apollo's bird, stands for Apollo, who exemplifies the figure of the *erastes* in Greek mythology – and this on the very shoulder of his protégé. The raven then, standing for the *erastes*, takes over the role of the father, whereas the biological father is relegated to a meaningless position in the boy's life.

The trauma experienced by fathers in families originating from Arab speaking countries when immigrating to a secular, western society has been widely

11 Ellen Ginton, "Dionysus in Kiryat Yam," in *Adi Nes: Recent Photographs* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2001), pp. 42-43.

12 The importance of Ganymede as an icon of homoerotic and pederastic relations is discussed in: James M. Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1986).



Adi Nes, **Untitled**, 1992

עדי נס, **ללא כותרת**, 1992

I would like to dwell a bit on these places, in order to explain the nature of the gap in Nes's works. The architects and urban planners who conceived Israel's peripheral development towns (built in the 1950s to house massive waves of immigration to Israel, mostly from Arab speaking countries) envisioned them as garden cities, not taking into account the climate, the lack of water and the mentality of the people who were to populate them. Most of these new towns became nodes of neglect and marginality, where frustration and lack of opportunity prevailed. The immigrants, compelled to settle in these towns, treated them accordingly. (I might add that these desolate places are not special to Israel, but constitute a universal phenomenon, stemming from the minds of well meaning souls who naturally live elsewhere.) Kiryat Gat, where Nes grew up, is one of these marginal towns, where daily survival leaves no room for aesthetics.

So when Nes chooses this locus of his childhood as background to the boys series and charges it with the richness of European aesthetics, in a sense he eradicates the original place – and pours into the remaining skeleton a measure of consolation, if not grace, as if to drive away the original insult embedded in it. In this Pygmalion-like act a certain kind of decorum, of which the place was robbed by its harsh history, is given back to it through the history of art. This allows the adolescents populating the pictures to don diverse roles, all of which are inscribed into that second, alternative history.

While in the Soldiers series there were also hints of a wider range of interpretations, the figures themselves could not wander far from their defining military context and thus all interpretations were subordinated to their proclaimed status as soldiers. The Boys series is different, because there is no coherent frame of reference that can be attributed to them; it is their juvenility, unformed and unfinished, that makes them open and permeable, a mirror of other things.

One level in the works is related to Nes's private history, details of which Nes willingly and generously provides. But Nes also knows that the problem with such anecdotal histories is that they limit the work to a particular time and space. On this level, the picture of boys burning a playground slide [p. 70] refers to the known destiny of such playgrounds in development towns; the picture of six boys



Anne-Louis Girodet, **The Sleep of Endymion**, 1793, oil on canvas, collection of the Louvre Museum, Paris

אן־לואי ז'ירודה, **שנת אנדימיון**, 1793, שמן על בד, אוסף מוזיאון הלובר, פריז

¹⁰ On tenebrism see: Maria Rzepinska and Krystyna Malcharek, "Tenebrism in Baroque Painting and Its Ideological Background," *Artibus et Historiae* 7:13 (1986), pp. 91-112.

Nes's soldiers, when they are not sleeping or playing in the circus, socialize like old ladies at a tea party. Accordingly, and in contrast to the homoerotic visual image par excellence, they are never naked, nor do they conform to the pederasty model of relations [see p. 133]. The homoeroticism they display is based more on the bond between these men as part of the buddy system than on physical qualities. There is a land with no women – and yet it is not a virile place, nor a haven of adolescent innocence. It is almost impossible to situate them, for it is their camaraderie that defines them as a group and not the fact that they belong to an army. In a way, Nes disarms them, artifies them, robs them from their time and place and relocates them in the land of art – and this he does through the use of diffused light, perfect composition, and a careful choice of color scales and tones. To look at the sleeping soldiers is to experience them as a topic in art, akin to Caravaggio's *Sleeping Cupid* (1608) [p. 18], or the less talented and yet extremely alluring *The Sleep of Endymion* (1793) by Anne-Louis Girodet.

No wonder then that Nes's soldiers, despite their typical Israeli looks, seem to assimilate the models of Caravaggio and acquire the aesthetic which developed around the 17th century and came to be known as tenebrism – that is, a rich darkness laced with a chiaroscuro treatment of the picture's surface.¹⁰ This practice of violent contrasts between light and shade, leaving parts of the work in obscurity, corresponds well to Nes's tactic of ambiguity and displacement, for there is no greater difference than that between the realities he constructs and the actual ones. What we see in these works is not the Middle Eastern light, which knows no gradation; it is a European haze that streams through them and metamorphoses 21st century Israel into Rome of the Baroque period. Indeed, the distance of Nes's raw materials – the people and locations he chooses for his creations – from the European dimension he constructs in his tableaux is such that a fracture occurs, attesting that the pictures' documentary component is of secondary importance. This gap is most fully expressed in the Boys series, which followed the Soldiers series and was executed around 2000. This group of photos, whose protagonists are adolescents of oriental or middle-eastern appearance, was taken in the development towns of Israel.

- 7 Allen Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photography: Male Images from Durieu/ Delacroix to Mapplethorpe* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992).
- 8 Emmanuel Cooper, *Fully Exposed: The Male Nude in Photography* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 9 James M. Saslow, *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts* (London: Penguin, 1999).



Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, **Water Rats**, 1886, photogravure, collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

פרנק מדואו סטקליף, **עברושי מים**, 1886, תצריב צילומי, אוסף מוזיאון סן פרנסיסקו לאמנות מודרנית

more as an area of inquiry – equates the homoerotic with a feeling of desire;⁷ Emmanuel Cooper, in his book *Fully Exposed*, defines it as repressed sexual desire;⁸ and both address solely representations related to the naked male body. (A third scholar to write about art and homosexuality, James Saslow in his book *Pictures and Passions*, does not use the term "homoerotic" at all.)⁹

Nakedness is very rare in Nes's work, yet the homoerotic context is clearly there. I believe that Nes understands the homoerotic neither as a display of repression nor as encoded nakedness, but rather as a potential. In this sense he is closer to Thomas Eakins in paintings such as *Wrestlers* (1899), *The Swimming Hole* (1885) [p. 17], and *Salutat* (1898), or to Frank Sutcliffe in a photograph like *The Water Rats* (1886) than to Frederick Holland Day [p. 22] or Wilhelm von Gloeden [p. 15] – who hid their desires behind the Greek idea of youth, a misalliance between the nature cults that flourished in early 20th century and the classical Greek motifs that endowed their desire with the legitimacy of art. Eakins still needed to justify his attraction to such subject matter in terms of scientific realism, but Nes, a child of more enlightened times, does not need the ambiguity as a cover but rather as a strategy – that is, he knows how to turn it into an aesthetic tool.

The Soldiers series is a fine example of this unique strategy. In employing this topic, Nes relies on a long tradition of bonds of military friendship among the ancient Greek, like the Sacred Band of Thebes, where ideas of friendship topped with homoerotic relations consolidated solidarity among the soldiers, making them better fighters for their city-states. In Plato and Xenophon we find a wealth of material about the subject of militaristic uses of male sexual bonds, from which it becomes clear that such relations were built into the system of pederasty between *erastes* (elder male mentor) and *eromenos* (boy student) and that it was encouraged as a means of enhancing solidarity between soldiers – an echo of which is to be found in the stories about Achilles and Patroclus, and about Aristogeiton and Harmodius. In later times, as the idea of nations and nationalism developed, those relations solidified into the idea of camaraderie which, laced with homoerotic undertones, was to harness the solidarity of soldiers to the service of the concept of the nation for which they fought.

soldiers sit along a table, grouped as similarly as possible to Leonardo's scenario, so that the composition is like an immediate trigger to recalling the original image. In the fresco, all the apostles address Jesus (Matthew and Jude Thaddeus look away from him towards Simon, but their hands move in his direction, in a wide gesture). Jesus is the central figure, as well as the focus of the picture or its vanishing point. However, it is Jesus himself who breaks the movement from the fresco's sides towards the center, opening his hands and thus seeming to invite the spectators into the work – or to step out of its frame to join the friars in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie.

In Nes's variation, the soldier representing Jesus is not the focus of attention, and none of his fellow soldiers look at him; while he is the formal center of the picture, he is not the focus of its narrative. Around him is a vacuum, and unlike the Leonardo picture there is no gesture inviting us to participate in the scene. What then are we to make of this interpretation? Several answers come to mind. Jesus left alone, Jesus noticed by no one, is a soldier predestined to die who, as has been forecast, is already becoming eradicated from the memory of the people surrounding him; or, knowing Nes's elaborate relations with art history, the vanishing point is endowed with a literary meaning, and the initial image is symbolically vanishing because too many eyes have watched its materiality, leaving behind only its auratic fame, much like the case of the *Mona Lisa*. Is this not a study of blindness in the very heart of a visual icon?

This turning to ambiguity is a mechanism and a trademark evident in every work and image Nes produces. It is present in the images of soldiers, prisoners and boys as well as in the Biblical Stories series, and it involves different contents – but mainly Nes's private history as a gay man. Indeed, it is the ambiguity of the homoerotic moment which is most dominant in his work.

Ambiguities related to homoerotic messages fluctuating in an image have a long tradition, central to which are representations of the male body throughout art history – but scholars seem to have some difficulty in differentiating the homosexual from the homoerotic: in his book *The Homoerotic Photography*, Allen Ellenzweig – who regards homoerotic photography less as a category and



Nicolas Poussin, **The Last Supper**, 1640, oil on canvas, collection of the Louvre Museum, Paris

ניקולא פוסון, **הסעודה האחרונה**, 1640, שמן על בד, אוסף מוזיאון הלובר, פריז

of "new historians" around the 1990s, when criticism and condemnation were fracturing founding Israeli myths.

Nes begins by making his soldiers participants in a circus. All the characters are there: the fire-eater, the muscle man, the freak, the tightrope walker. As participants in a side show, his soldiers are objects of both ridicule and compassion – and as such, they are a far cry from representing the armored body of the state. They are neither heroes nor fascist images that hide the mortal truth – impending aging and withering – under cyborgian aesthetics. Nes's soldiers – sleeping, laughing, communicating – are more dainty nymphs than machos, which makes their rendering surrealistic, for the truth of their reality is well known: soldiers behave differently in real life, especially when meeting Arabs and Palestinian. Nes's soldiers, cut off from their actual surroundings, are a phantasma of erotic joy remodeled into the history of art through a long succession of manifestations of the eternal youth motif. In the Soldiers series, as in his other series, Nes demonstrates his ability to build a picture within a picture without turning the primary "source" images – which maintain a measure of independence – into illustrations. Sometimes the pictures hidden in his works require iconological knowledge, but often he chooses commonly familiar icons, like Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* [p. 16].

The *Last Supper* image has already been used in numerous art works. Andy Warhol, Andres Serrano, Annie Leibovitz, Sam Taylor-Wood and Rauf Mamedov, to name but a few, manipulated it through the medium of contemporary photography. Usually, it is the da Vinci famous version that is used, rather than those of Rubens, Poussin or Lorenzetti. In this process of appropriation there is always a danger of banalizing the source or enhancing its commodified character. Conscious of this danger, Nes avoids it by stressing the ambiguous characteristics of the Leonardo masterpiece – its problematic scale, space and topic – all of which lead to the question put forward by Leo Steinberg in his book about the *Last Supper*: what is it in Leonardo's representation that allows this plurality of interpretations?⁶

It is this ambiguous quality, diffusing the coherence of the first glance, which is the starting point of Nes's treatment of the *Last Supper* [p. 51]. In his rendering, the

⁶ Leo Steinberg, *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

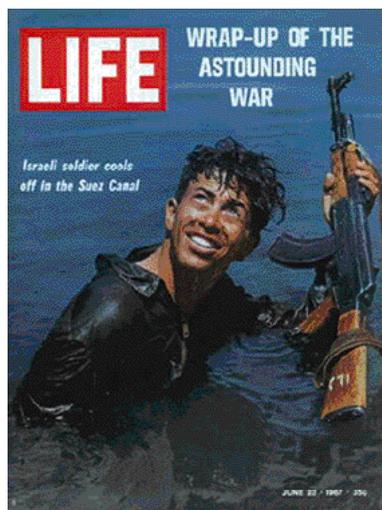
Nes casts the soldiers in different poses: as circus players, as mythological echoes of the Greek story, as participants in the Christian saga. But in the context of Israeli society, these narratives pale in view of the reflected image the soldiers put up to this society's real desire: they are what Israeli society must see when it looks in the mirror.

At this point, I would like to speak about George Mosse's groundbreaking research concerning nationality, the male body and respectability. Mosse found out that the male stereotype crystallized around the end of the 18th century, a time when rapid industrial growth and budding formations of national identities challenged old hierarchies.⁵ Looking for stabilizing symbols that would assuage their fear of change in these chaotic times, people found in the idealized male body a coexistence of power and restraint in one form, standing for ideals unchallenged by the forces of modernism. The male body became the visual icon of a righteous society and gave nationalism a face; the male body turned into a symbol of the healthy nation.

Of course, this ideal was erected from already existing building-blocks, but at this constitutive moment these were systematically arranged within the framework of the stereotype. The genealogy of the ideal male body goes back to Greek sculpture of classic and pre-classic times – a lineage that extends from the *kouroi* of the archaic Greek, through Classical and Hellenistic models, and up to the Arno Breker Third Reich monstrosities. Bodies that contradicted the ethos of this aesthetics were condemned – Jewish physiognomy being a case in point, since its negation of the ideal contributed, according to Mosse, to the outbreak of modern antisemitism. No wonder then that when Zionism looked for a model for the new man it envisaged, it had to be the perfect negation of the image of the diasporic Jew. It adopted the renewed ideal of the western body in order to dream up the features of the new Hebrew, which was later to be transformed into the image of the Israeli and condensed in the figure of the soldier.

I am expanding on this matter because in the Soldiers series Nes took upon himself a much more complicated project than appears at first glance. It is almost a deconstruction of an old ideal, akin to the ventures initiated in Israel by the wave

5 George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996); "Nationalism and Respectability: Normal and Abnormal Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Contemporary History* 17:2 (April 1982), pp. 221-246.



Cover of *Life* magazine, 23 June 1967, photo by Denis Cameron, **Israeli Soldier Cools off in the Suez Canal**

שער מגזין לייף, 23.6.1967, עם תצלום של דניס קמרון, חייל ישראלי מתרענן במימי תעלת סואץ

- 4 Michael Goddard's paper was presented at the annual conference of the Australian Society for Continental Philosophy, 22-24 November 2000, at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

indicated by the term – referring to qualities of superficiality, flatness and similar calamities – since it takes part in the effect pictures have on us by magnifying and framing emotional states. The spectacle in pictures is equivalent to what would be called an epiphany in religious terms – but unlike the religious case, the spectacle here is not a consequence but is rooted in the very modus of the work.

Nes's understanding of the spectacle as the production of a phantasm brings me back to the aesthetics of the tableaux vivants employed in staging his works. Usually, such tableaux reconstruct a scene that had already "happened" on canvas, or an historical moment that was already given its visual expression in pictures. In this sense, the tableau does not imitate reality – but it does not solely imitate art, either; in the words of Michael Goddard, it frames "life giving itself as a spectacle to life, life hanging in suspense..."⁴ Nes, employing the aesthetics of the tableau, is less interested in delivering an actual state, a fragment of reality, and is much more concerned with the perception of that reality as a codified system of signs and signifiers. While the point of origin may be anchored in reality, as in the case of the soldiers in the water (*Untitled*, 1999) [p. 53] – a work done after an iconic image on the cover of *Life* magazine, depicting a soldier celebrating Israel's victory in the 1967 war – it is not a documentation of that reality, not even a criticism of it, but a reworking of a loaded moment, already mythologized, into a much larger net of cultural receptors. This capacity is best illustrated by the *Soldiers* series, executed between 1994-2000, a project in which Nes conducted an inquiry into a core symbol of quintessential Israeliness – the soldier figure, which combines old dreams of eternal youth with the idea of the New Jew, the very personification of messianic Zionism.

The soldier is an oxymoronic figure, frozen into a state of eternal youth which is conditioned by his death – whether in fact or as a possibility looming on his horizon. Therefore, like the Homeric gods, he is immortal and unaging, and in this sense can be likened to the mythological Adonis – eternally young in his death – rather than the lovely Tithonus, whose beloved Eos, the goddess of the dawn, requested Zeus to grant immortality, forgetting to ask that he remain eternally youthful as well.



Eugène Delacroix, **Liberty Leading the People**, 1830, oil on canvas, collection of the Louvre Museum, Paris

אז'ן דלקרווא, **חירות מובילה את העם**, 1830, שמן על בד, אוסף מוזיאון הלובר, פריז

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002).

The search for the lost picture, poetic as it may sound, is not a search for an object but a way to acknowledge that we have lost the capacity to see and grasp pictures as people could before the world was drowned in an avalanche of visual images, when pictures – not yet commodities – were a rarity, charged with a moral stance. This, I suspect, is where Nes's melancholy stems from, and it is due to his perceiving the loss and as homage to it that his photos are actually constructed as pictures. He builds the space in his works as a picture space – that is, a space which does not represent a real territory but is rather an imagined, psychological one. The figures populating his works are not actual individuals but personifications, chosen and recreated as representatives of ideas and situations – the living dead of art history in its role as myth maker. This constant reference to art's arsenal of topics and iconology – which (according to Bourdieu) keeps high art defined as such and differentiates it from lower forms of expression³ – is characteristic of Nes's work; were it not for the painter's travail, one could compare the process by which his pictures are created in the studio – less a style and more a somatic perception sipping through the canvas – to the long and meticulous production process which Nes's photos undergo on their way to become pictures.

In this context, it is tempting to remember Delacroix's obsession with the new medium of photography around the middle of the 19th century, as he helped his friend Eugène Durieu to arrange the models for his photographs and later used these photos for work on his own paintings. It seems that Nes employs the documentary character of his medium as a tool to handle the repository of art from which he culls images for preservation. In a sense, Nes is a treasurer, the museum his grotto, art's paraphernalia his Domesday Book.

But in order to turn the photo into a picture, Nes needs more than narratives and gestures. He must generate an aura such as paintings have – that is, he must reconstitute a certain spectacle which, unlike the spectacles of lesser media, maintains a dimension of depth that conveys the value of an "art work." My use of the term spectacle is not in the sense given to it by Guy Debord, but in its direct meaning – as that which is framed and separated in order to be displayed. Indeed, we must set aside for a moment our prejudice concerning the abuse

beauty and horror in the figure of Medusa, who seemed to know, better than all the mythological creatures of the Greek, that visibility has its price. Art can kill, says Medusa, unless you cover the source of horror; and Adi Nes listens carefully to her lesson and heeds her counsel.

Let me look again at the image I call *The Wounded Soldier*. He is neither a soldier nor wounded. Rather than a uniform, his attire is decorum, and his pose is a codified gesture. Nothing of the horror of war enters the scene, but beyond this great beauty lurks something more terrible than the real, something that Nes stresses in most of his work – the feeling of the grotesque. It is the grotesque element that enables his work to perform a twist and defend itself from over-perfection.

The grotto, from which the grotesque derives its name, was a contemplation cave favored by the Romans, which culminated in the fantasy gardens of the 17th century – a culture that imitated nature by constructing artificial gardens filled with false ruins and caves, a cult of nature expressed through objects that were far from natural. In the grotto, nature turned into a petrified version of itself – a customized universe which oscillates between life and death, containing the animated in unanimated form. This fossilized state involving the fabrication of nature is also in the core of the *tableaux vivant* aesthetics which underlies Nes's works. In their original form, *tableaux vivant* were staged mimics of situations originating in art, that is, the opposite of the grotto, but both forms contain the wish to imitate and thus freeze and preserve.

It is therefore no accident that Nes uses both the *tableau vivant* and the aesthetics of the grotto, although the grotto in his works is not a place but rather an emotional impact. With the medium of photography the *tableau's* desire to eradicate the element of time is doubled. Now the frozen gesture that had relied on the will of its actors is freed to stay frozen for all eternity, and is therefore released to become a cultural asset and perfected as an object of observation; and since this idea of eternity which has always pursued art entails more than grotesque characteristics, it becomes clear why Nes implants it in the wider framework of pictorial tradition.

of productions, styles borrowed and mutated, and yet: this multi-layered construction, this rebus of reminiscence, calls for explanation. When there are so many geologies involved, when the final image looks like its own archeology, this begs the question: what is insulated in it and what in it is forbidden to be seen. I am tempted to enter the Lacanian domain of the real; was he not the one who said (in his notorious "Kant with Sade") that the function of beauty is to be an ultimate barrier, preventing access to a fundamental horror?¹

Indeed, in many of Nes's works beauty covers horror. This is evident in the Soldiers as well as in the Boys series, and later in the Biblical Stories series. The beginning of this procedure can be traced to a work from 1996, where a group of soldiers clap hands but one of them has only one hand [p. 45], and it continues in a work from 2000, where a group of boys attack a child [p. 69], and later still in the cadaver-like body of the biblical Noah in one of the Bible images [p. 107]. While these works are executed according to classical principles of harmony and composition, their array of frozen poses, serene and untouched by the violence their contents express, a horror to which it is essentially impossible to give form and words – a universal horror, if you like – competes with all that beauty.

This forbidden glare into what constitutes horror makes me wonder why is it that St. Veronica got to be the patron of photography, whereas Medusa, with her fossilizing gaze, would have better served to represent the unrepresentable, the real which resists the embrace of art. Medusa, whose head is encoded in Caravaggio's shield (1596-98) [p. 10], guiding his fellow artists to the secret of his profession, is not present in Nes's works – but her lesson certainly is. Her gaze, which turns humans into stone, is translated into the tableaux vivants he constructs, turning life into a spectacle in stasis.

It is here that I remember Shelley's poem "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" – a work attributed to Leonardo (but most probably belonging to the Flemish school around 1600), depicting a Medusa even more mortifying than the Rubens painting in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Shelley, romantic to the bone, writes: "Yet it is less the horror than the grace which turns the gazer's spirit into stone,"² thus locating the misalliance of

1 Jacques Lacan, "Kant avec Sade," *Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 765-790.



Flemish Painter (attributed to Leonardo da Vinci), **Medusa's Head**, 1600, oil on canvas, collection of Galleria Uffizi, Florence

צייר פלמי (מיוחס לליאונרדו דא וינצ'י),
ראש מדוזה, 1600, שמן על בד, אוסף גלריה
אופיצי, פירנצה

2 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci," *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Mary W. Shelley (London: John & Henry L. Hunt, 1824), pp. 139-140.

“Less the Horror than the Grace”

Doreet LeVitte Harten



Giovanni Bellini, **Pietà**, 1505, tempera on panel, collection of Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice

ג'ובאני בליני, **פייטה**, 1505, טמפרה על לוח עץ, אוסף גלריה דל'אקדמיה, ונציה

Among the works Adi Nes created in 1995, which came to be known as the Soldiers series, there is one which depicts a paramedic taking care of a wounded soldier – either applying make-up to his wounds or actually creating them with his palette [p. 55]. I find this work emblematic of Nes's oeuvre, achieving as it does a condensed melancholy by spectacularly laying bare the discrepancies between an image and the tactics it employs to cover up the depicted reality.

Indeed, the wounded soldier (*Untitled*, as are most of Nes's works) contains both all the images in the world and none of them. It may be seen as a plateau on which effigies and symbols, icons and paradigms are projected, an encyclopedic repository of images – but fluctuating ones, which cannot be trusted. As far as trust goes, Nes prefers to construct the visible himself, and he harvests the paraphernalia of things imagined and visualized from diverse histories, ideologies and strategies.

The image I call The Wounded Soldier holds many collective projections. It echoes the Pietà, and as such is a religious work; it refers to the Sleeping Beauty narrative (more to the version in Giambattista Basile's *Pentamerone* of 1634 than to Charles Perrault's later version); it echoes Anne-Louis Girodet's *The Sleep of Endymion* (1793) [p. 136] and thus carries on its wings the aesthetics of the homoerotic; and on top of these there are layers gleaned from the local Israeli ethos, related to codes of militaristic behavior. But above all, this is an allegory of art. And while it is truly different from familiar allegories such as Frans van Mieris the elder's *Allegory of Painting* (1661), or Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1638-39) and Vermeer's *The art of Painting* (1660), where art is a woman – the paramedic curing Adonis-Endymion-Narcissus's wounds of ego, vanity and hubris speaks the same language as these allegories.

I am focusing for the moment on narratives only, trying to avoid modes