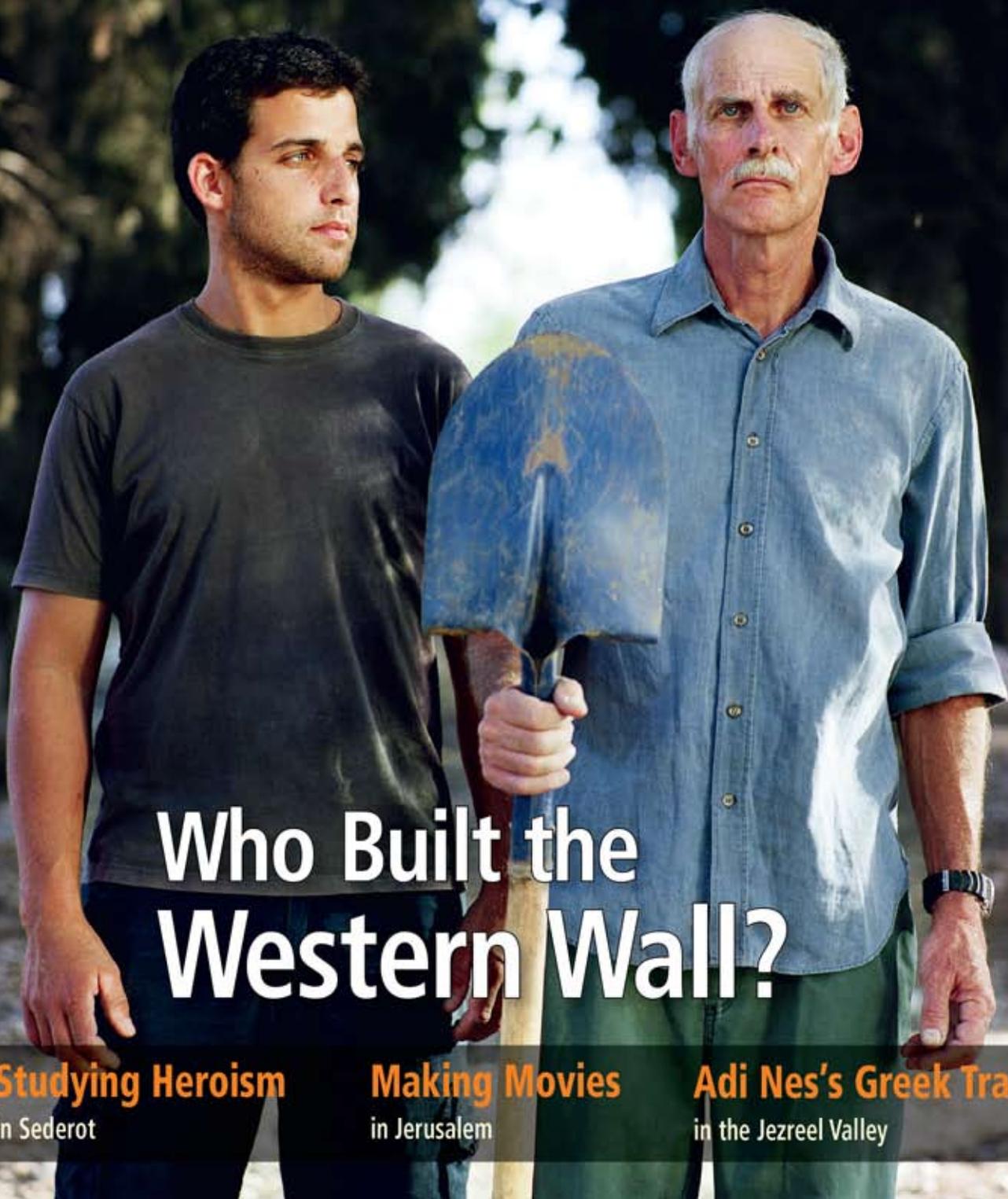


ERETZ

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Who Built the Western Wall?

Studying Heroism
in Sederot

Making Movies
in Jerusalem

Adi Nes's Greek Tragedy
in the Jezreel Valley

A Greek Tragedy in the Jezreel Valley

Artist Adi Nes returns to the cradle of Zionism, the valley where Deborah, Gideon, and Saul fought epic battles, with his new series of photographs, "The Village." > by Heidi J. Gleit

In his latest series of photographs, "The Village," Israeli artist Adi Nes provides viewers with the building blocks to create a story, but leaves it up to them to assemble it. These blocks are strong stuff: dreams and nightmares; heritage and generation gaps; the cradle of Zionism and small, insular agricultural communities; Greek tragedy and long-hidden secrets; and more. The blocks can be combined in any number of ways and there is not one correct way, he emphasizes.

"Each viewer can build a new story each time with elements like the blind man, the goat, and the tragic hero," he says.

For example, one photograph in "The Village" could be interpreted as a reversal of the binding of Isaac, with the victim(s) becoming the assailant(s) when three young men come to take the last goat from an older man and brandish the goat's horn as if it were a sword to stab him in the belly with. While this could be hinting at the privatization of kibbutzim or children paying the price of their father's folly, with the young men intending to sell the goat or the land on which the goat



Images courtesy of Adi Nes







pen stands, “it could be that the older man is the one selling, that he is the one coming to them. Alternatively, they could be the three angels visiting Abraham. I give options, not answers,” Nes says.

That said, his own story is choosing to leave the city of Tel Aviv, where he made his home for much of his adult life and which served as the setting for his previous series of photographs, “Biblical Stories” (2003-6), for one of the villages in the Jezreel Valley, where “The Village” was shot and where his partner grew up.

“After shooting ‘Biblical Stories,’ I wanted a different location, to be out in the open fields and not in the urban dust,” he says.

Of course, there is more to it than that, just as there is more to his photographs than to a snapshot. (See “Multilayered Photographs” in ERETZ 129.)

“We all photograph these days – everyone has a camera on his mobile phone, but that isn’t the same as being a professional photographer,” Nes says. “Some of my pictures look like snapshots at first, but when you are an artist, you add more layers and meaning. There is much more involved in creating these photographs than snapping a picture.

“The idea is to relate to the viewer as if he were watching a film. We are used to going through stuff quickly. The great challenge is to keep viewers’ attention for more than a moment. That is why the



prints of the photographs are so big, like a screen in a movie theater, because it makes a greater impact.”

The main criticism of Nes’ work actually is its resemblance to a slick film or polished propaganda, which is perhaps a reflection of the years that he worked in television.

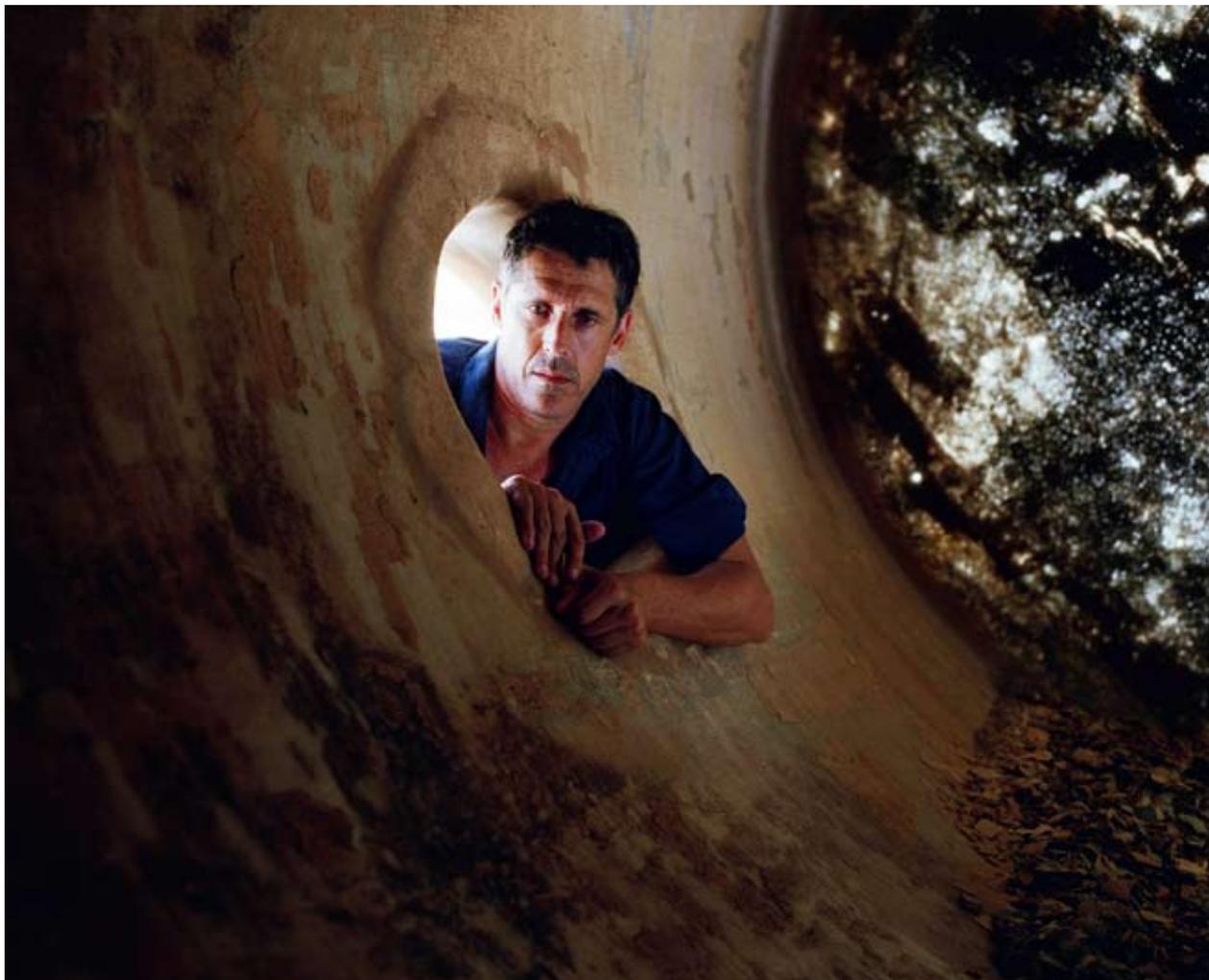
“They are not propaganda, but relating my reality,” Nes says.

As a gay, first-generation Israeli of Iranian descent who grew up in a development town in the south, Nes’ reality is complex. His previous work has addressed issues of individual, ethnic, national, and sexual identity. “Biblical Stories” addressed social issues by setting selected biblical scenes in

the gritty streets of south Tel Aviv.

“Watching the protests last summer, I realized that art can affect society and culture. I had thought beforehand that change was in the hands of politicians,” he says. “In the gay community, for example, change began with artists who create and identify cultural life. Their actions help people create their own identity and recognize the identity of others and this slowly filters throughout society.”

With hindsight, he realizes that “Biblical Stories” helped create the background for the protests, along with works of art like the films *Revolution 101* by Doron Tsabari and *The Shakshuka System* by Miki Rosenthal. Together they increased awareness about



disparities in the distribution of wealth and power in Israel and influenced public opinion.

“The Village,” which is being displayed simultaneously in June and July at the Sommer Contemporary Art gallery in Tel Aviv, the Praz-Delavallade gallery in Paris, and the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, tackles a different set of issues by setting contemporary adaptations of classical tragedies in the heartland of Zionism, an anonymous kibbutz or moshav in the pastoral Jezreel Valley. This is not only where the ideals of the labor Zionist movement evolved into the kibbutz and moshav and were idealized in the songs of Naomi Shemer and the poems of Nathan Alterman in the

first half of the twentieth century, but also the setting for some of the more tragic events related in the biblical books of Judges, Kings I, and Kings II.

“This project is like a dream – and yes, a dream also includes a nightmare. It can be optimistic, but also have a degree of fear and anxiety,” Nes says. “It talks about the dream of the first generation of Zionists, who created settlements with great values and idealism and wanted to create a society and write history.”

The series is built on the concept that Friedrich Nietzsche presents in his book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, that art is created from the conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian forces. Apollo,

the sun god, represents reason, restraint, and calmness. Dionysus, the wine god, symbolizes ecstasy and creativity. The photographs portray this conflict as well as the tension between the rational and safe and the hidden and unconscious, the passion of the young and the weariness of the old, protected interior spaces and open outdoor expanses, and the extraordinary tragedy and routine daily life.

Many of these conflicts are evident in his photograph of two men – one young, one old, perhaps a father and son – standing in front of two parallel rows of cypresses. This photograph was shot in the cemetery of Moshav Tel Adashim, home of the late Rafael Eitan, the IDF chief of staff who went on to establish the Tsomet political party. The moshav's cemetery is not located on its grounds but at nearby Moshav Balfouriyya because its founders apparently had not planned on dying and so they omitted a cemetery from their plans for the community. That their idea to build a new Jew did not include the idea of death might say something about their approach and ideas, but also could just be an indication of their youth.

This photograph also calls to mind Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*, provoking contemplation on the similarity of farmers everywhere as well as the absence of the church-like roof, which is evoked in the empty space between the cypresses. Nes often hints at canonic works of art in his work. His photograph of Hagar in "Bible Stories" is reminiscent of Dorothea Lange's photograph *Migrant Mother*. In another famous photograph, he posed IDF soldiers like Jesus and his disciples in Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*.

This series also was influenced by Pieter Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, in which a farmer plows indifferent to the death of Icarus, who plunges into the sea before him. Nes was struck by the way the drama and the art are

happening alongside the daily life and Sisyphean work in this painting. He refers to it in "The Village" in a photograph of a boy holding a turkey aloft. While the photograph is based on Icarus, the fallen angel, it also is inspired by the kaparot ritual that some traditional Jews perform prior to Yom Kippur and by Hamlet holding up the skull while asking, "To be or not to be?"

Another photograph shows the blind seer of Greek tragedy sitting at a table in a yard surrounded by a group of men, each of whom responds differently to the truth the seer reveals. The idea occurred to Nes while making a condolence call on the family of a friend from a kibbutz during the seven-day mourning period.

Nes has given women a greater role in his works over the years, perhaps as a reflection of the greater role women are playing in his life as the surrogates of his and his partner's four children, he says. They did not appear at all in his first series, "Soldiers" (1994-2000). In "Boys" (2000), the few women in the photographs basically served as props to the boys. In "Biblical Stories," he could not ignore the women of the Bible, so he created a few photographs of them, but they did not have the same status as the men. In "The Village," the women are equal characters. This is particularly evident in the photograph that is a reversal of the annunciation. Instead of an angel informing Mary that she will give birth to Jesus, a young female soldier informs a mother of the death of her son, the soldier, while a male soldier and doctor look on.

On the other hand, twins, which appeared in previous series as an expression of the struggle with the self, are absent from "The Village." Nes' twin sons were born last year, which led him to think about the burden twins carry into the world and the questions they must grapple with regarding their place in the world.

"I did not want to saddle them with issues of art as well," he says, adding that despite that, one of the twins is the baby held by one of the woman in the photograph of an eclipse.

That photograph shows four villagers holding up pieces of dark glass as if to protect themselves from an eclipse, a gesture that reveals their impotence, fear, and steadfastness. In another photograph, four villagers protect themselves from an unseen threat by taking aim at the dense, lush greenery that sur-

The unease comes not only from fear of the outside, but also from a secret within the village. When the source of unease is brought out into the light, however, it begins to heal, Nes notes, adding that photography technically is writing with light.



rounds the village.

“They are shooting at nothing. It is as if they drew a line around the village and are threatened by all outside it,” Nes says, noting, “Whether for good reason or not, we in Israel have gotten used to being on the defensive against all. We too have a border around us and the threats from outside it builds us as a community, but sometimes the threats are not real. And sometimes the world changes, like in the photograph of the eclipse, and there is no defense against that.”

The unease in his photographs comes not only from fear of the outside, but also from a secret or tragedy or some sort of unfinished business within

the village that the villagers do not discuss. When the source of unease is brought out into the light, however, it begins to heal, Nes notes, adding that photography technically is writing with light.

“There is no correct story to put together with the building blocks, but my story is that I moved to live there. To move there as a gay couple raising four children is putting the secrets outside in the sun,” he concludes, acknowledging that while part of the reason his family is accepted by their neighbors is because his partner grew up there, Israeli society has advanced on this issue, even if it still is very closed. But then, closure is a response to the past and is necessary to a certain extent, as are borders and rules for children. ■