

Mordechai Omer

Foreword

Tel Aviv Museum of Art is pleased to present a selection of photographs by Adi Nes. Three of Nes's series have hitherto been featured at the Museum. The first spanned a selection of works from the "soldiers" series, 1994-2000, centered around a large scale photograph taken in 1998, featuring fourteen figures of soldier whose positioning suggests Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (cat. 4). Many photographs from that series were included in group exhibitions staged by the Museum in Israel and abroad. The second series of "youths" was exhibited at the Museum in the spring of 2001, when the artist was awarded the Nathan Gottesdinner Prize for an Israeli Artist. At the end of 2003 Nes was presented with yet another award on behalf of the Museum, the Leon Constantiner Photography Award for an Israeli Artist, and another cycle of works was showcased – photographs commissioned by the fashion magazine *Vogue Hommes International*.

These three series intertwine autobiographical elements with the broader contexts of several cultural milieus. The artist's memories as an adolescent in the Israeli development town of Kiryat Gat, or his experiences as a soldier in the IDF, assume a stratified perspective when linked with classical Greek myths and the myths underlying Israeli society, as well as with allusions to the history of Israeli and international art.

Much has been written about the use of light and shade in Nes's photographs. It ranges from soft light with sweeping modified tonality reminiscent of Neoclassicism to strong light contrasts as exemplified by Caravaggio. In this context I would like to refer to the **fire** motif in these series. Images of fire appear in several of Nes's army and adolescence photographs as a combustion whose meanings transcend its function as a source of light and drama, becoming increasingly sensual as well as metaphysical. "The fire first appeared," Nes notes (in a letter to the writer dated February 22, 2004), "in a 1994 image of a soldier breathing fire, among the first in the 'soldier' series, where one of the frame settings was the circus (an army tent as a sideshow tent, a soldier walking on rope, a fire breather, and a strong man). The inspiration for the fire breather was derived from a series of paintings by Israeli artist Moshe Gershuni. I alluded, *inter alia*, to Gershuni's 1980 painting *Hey, Soldiers*, and photographed the surge of fire in a manner reminiscent of that painting." In another photograph from 2000, a

candle flame illuminates one face in a group of soldiers, apparently celebrating a birthday in an army tent. The soldier holds a lit candle in his left hand, and the flame melts the wax dripping onto his right. A birthday candle is melting and virtually swallowed up by a plate, and another, third, source of fire, a light bulb, further reinforces the absence of light and the multiplicity of shadows engulfing the group of soldiers. A patch of light in the upper left corner of the photograph reveals a shooting range target. The birthday candles, with their imminent, anticipated burning out, bring to mind the *Memento Mori* paintings that represent human transience.



Fire acquires a particularly significant status in a 2000 photograph portraying a slide burning in a deserted public playground, and next to it a group of three teenage boys (p. 61). In the aforementioned letter, Nes writes: "I referred, among other things, to a childhood memory as someone who grew up in the time of the project-rehabilitation program (*shikum shkhunot*) in Kiryat Gat. Every morning the municipality would place fiberglass playground equipment in deserted public gardens, and at night, reckless street kids would burn them down. As in Greek mythology, which is one of the references for the series, the fire in this work is intended to signify the mystical hand of God that transpires even in wretched environs. The burning slide is an altar of sorts as well as a bridge between earth and heaven, and the youths are burning the bridge, their childhood. I tried to illustrate the ritualism in the lives of these teenagers."

The fire, like other key images in Nes's works, swings the viewer between dialectically arrayed oppositions of light and shade, warmth and chill, pleasure and pain, life and death.