

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, SAN DIEGO

MAY 28–JULY 14, 2002

ADI NES

P H O T O G R A P H S

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY,

COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO, 

SEPTEMBER 27–DECEMBER 21, 2002

The San Diego presentation of *Adi Nes: Photographs* is made possible by contributions from Joyce and Ted Strauss and by the Garfield Family Foundation. Additional support comes from the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture, and the California Arts Council.



The Chicago presentation of *Adi Nes* is supported in part by grants from the Illinois Art Council, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts; and the Consulate General of Israel, Chicago.

Adi Nes

Born 1966, Israel

Lives and works in Tel Aviv

Education

- 1989– Department of Photography, Bezalel
 1992 Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem

Awards and Scholarships

- 2000 The Nathan Gottesdiener Foundation
 Israeli Art Prize, Tel Aviv Museum of Art
- 1999 Education, Culture & Sport Minister's
 Prize for Artists in the Visual Arts, Jerusalem
- 1993 Sandra Jacobs' Anglo-Israeli Photographic
 Awards Project Scholarship, Department of
 Plastic Arts, Cultural Office, Jerusalem

Solo Exhibitions

- 2001 *Recent Photographs*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art*
- 2000 *Adi Nes: Photographs*, Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv*
- 1998 *The Soldiers*, Milkweg Gallery, Amsterdam
- 1996 *First Act*, Photography Department Blanche
 and Romi Shapira Gallery, Bezalel Academy
 of Art and Design, Jerusalem

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2002 *Revelation: Representations of Christ in
 Photography*, Hotel de Sully, Paris, and Israel
 Museum, Jerusalem*
- 2001 *Aspiration: Toward the Future in the
 Middle East—11 Israeli and Palestinian
 Artists*, Riffe Gallery, Columbus, Ohio
 (traveled)*
- Re-Thinking: Photographs and Video
 from Israel*, IFA Gallery Bonn, Germany
 (traveled)*
- 2000 *Time Frame: A Century of Photography in
 the Land of Israel*, Israel Museum, Jerusalem. *
- La repubblica dell'arte—Israel*, Centro
 Arte Contemporanea, Palazzo Delle
 Papesse, Siena, Italy.

Photography in Israel: A changing View,
 Margolis Gallery, Houston

*Exposure: Recent Acquisitions from the
 Doron Sebbag Art Collection, O.R.S. Ltd.*,
 Tel Aviv Museum of Art*

*From Mirror to Memory: One Hundred
 Years of Photography in the Land of
 Israel*, Mané-Katz Museum, Haifa,
 Israel (traveled)*

- 1999 *Recipients of the 1999 Minister of
 Science, Culture and Sport Prize*, Israel
 Painters and Sculptors Association, Tel Aviv

*Old and New: Recent Acquisitions in
 Photography*, Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

- 1998 *After Rabin: new Art from Israel*,
 The Jewish Museum, New York*

Fou de roi, Nimes, France

Bamot—Art from Israel, Jüdisches
 Museum der Stadt Wien, Vienna*

Kol Hakavod, Janco Dada Museum, Eim
 Hod, Israel*

*Condition Report: Photography in Israel
 Today*, Israel Museum, Jerusalem.*

*Capturing Reality: 19 Israeli and Palestinian
 Photographers*, Tennessee State Museum,
 Nashville*

Serial Number, Memorial Center, Kiryat
 Tivon, Israel, and Municipal Gallery,
 Rehovot, Israel

- 1996 *Israeli Diary*, Tel Aviv Cinematheque

- 1994 *90-70-90*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art

Export Surplus, Bograshov Gallery, Tel Aviv

- 1993 *Jewish Gay Life*, Akehurst Gallery, London,
 and Artist House Gallery, Jerusalem

Adi Nes and Naomi Talisman, Camera
 Obscura School of Art Gallery, Tel Aviv

* indicates the exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue

Monographic Catalogues

Adi Nes: Recent Photographs. exh. cat. Tel Aviv: Tel
 Aviv Museum of Art, 2001.

Adi Nes. exh. cat. Tel Aviv: Dvir Gallery, 2000.

Selected Articles in English

Dempsey, Judy. 'Seeing Through the Image.'
Financial Times (March 11–12, 2000), pp. 9.

Grushkin, Daniel. 'Telling It in Gat.' *The Jerusalem
 Report* 12, no. 3 (June 4, 2001), pp. 40–41.

Karpel, Dalia. 'Man's Work.' *Ha'aretz Magazine*
 (April 6, 2001), pp. 20–23.

Tzur, Uzi. 'Renaissance Men.' *Ha'aretz Magazine*
 (April 6, 2001), p. 19.

Collections:

Israel Museum, Jerusalem
 The Tel Aviv Museum of Art
 The Jewish Museum, New York
 Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego
 Various Private Collections in Israel & abroad

Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego
 700 Prospect Street
 La Jolla, California 92037
 (858) 454–3541

Museum of Contemporary Photography,
 Columbia College, Chicago
 600 South Michigan Avenue,
 Chicago, Illinois 60605
 (312) 663-5554

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1. Untitled, 2000, 39³/₈ x 49¹/₄ in. (100 x 125 cm.)
2. Untitled, 1999, 35¹/₂ x 35¹/₂ in. (90 x 90 cm.)
3. Untitled, 1995, 35¹/₂ x 35¹/₂ in. (90 x 90 cm.)
4. Untitled, 2000, 73 x 92¹/₂ in. (185 x 235 cm.)
5. Untitled, 2000, 39³/₈ x 49¹/₄ in. (100 x 125 cm.)
6. Untitled, 1999, 23¹/₂ x 35¹/₂ in. (60 x 90 cm.)
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Israeli Artist

Adi Nes makes large-scale color staged photographs charged with a slyly audacious theatricality, symbolism, and sexuality that both surprises and informs. Using hired models and teams of assistants, he carefully constructs dramatic scenes to be frozen by the camera's shutter.

Set in actual locations, Nes' images depict commonplace subjects from contemporary life in his country: soldiers on military exercises, boys in rough-edged housing projects, women and children enacting street dramas. Although they employ real people, places, and themes, Nes' photographs are not strictly naturalistic. From scouting locations to providing costumes and props, to renting lighting equipment and wind machines, Nes leaves no elements of his compositions to chance. He carefully creates a heightened realism that alchemically transforms everyday life in Israel.

Mythology and art history inspire many of Nes' photographs. Among his sources are the stories of biblical figures and Greek and Roman gods, paintings by Leonardo da Vinci and Caravaggio, and historic photographs documenting the founding of Israel. Like *tableaux vivants*, in which actors reenact the static compositions of famous paintings or events, Nes photographs allow him to collapse ancient and modern eras as well as personal and cultural allegories. The images allow him to consider his existence as a gay man and an Israeli. "I am interested in the gap that exists between objective reality, and the reality that exists in my mind," he says. Mixing artifice and real life, Nes' work allows him to

simultaneously inhabit significant moments and displace his preoccupations into aestheticized realms. Because they focus primarily on men, the photographs enable Nes to consider the objects of his desire as well as connect himself with connoisseurs of the male form ranging from Michelangelo to Robert Mapplethorpe. Because they frame daily life in Israel in mythological or art-historical contexts, the works enable the artist to look for abiding truths in a troubled present.

Nes' first staged photographs, the Soldiers Series, considers the role of the army in Israel. The powerful Israeli Defense Force is central to the country's self-image, and the role you play in it is crucial to your social standing and career opportunities. Like all Israeli men and women, Nes was required to serve in the military, and he landed a prestigious assignment as an air traffic controller at a desert airbase. However, he found himself serving at pivotal periods in his own life and the life of Israel. He was a young gay man in his country's most macho institution and a soldier for a nation engaged in a process of self-examination.

During the 1990s, as Israel approached its fiftieth anniversary, a new skepticism toward its cultural legends emerged. The country was

no longer a hardscrabble land of idealistic Zionists; it was a booming, cosmopolitan nation with all the attendant problems. Increasingly, its citizens asked whether the country was, as its founders believed, a good kid in a bad neighborhood or a bully cruelly repressing the Palestinians. Young artists like Nir Hod and musicians like Aviv Geffen openly expressed undercurrents of dissent. They questioned mandatory military service as well as conventional gender roles—something shocking in a place where adolescent existential angst traditionally took a back seat to patriotic duty. The 1995 assassination of



Untitled, 1996, 90 x 90 cm.



Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1498, fresco in the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, 15 x 29 feet

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a right-wing Israeli, a traumatic event that disrupted a promising peace process and revealed vast rifts in Israeli society, intensified the nation's soul-searching. Nes' *Soldiers Series* simultaneously illuminates the spectrum of masculine identity and investigates the mythology of one of the bedrock institutions of Israel.

The first photographs in the series envisioned the army as a circus, with models in military dress posing as tightrope walkers, fire-eaters, acrobats, and strong men. While celebrating male beauty, these images also consider what Nes calls "muscular Judaism," a cocky derring-do integral to the image of the Sabra, the native-born Israeli nicknamed for the prickly sweet cactus pear. Nes states, "Israeli manhood in this case is aggressive and show-offy. . . . There is an element in Zionism, which is given expression in literature and film, that is taken from Greek mythology: eternal youth, the unblemished warrior, excellence in meeting

challenges, self-sacrifice for the homeland. . . . It's a form of power that is meant to show itself and not necessarily to protect the society."¹

An untitled image from 1995 (Nes never gives his photographs titles) emblemizes the artist's subversive approach. Its configuration borrowed from a Christian *pieta*, the photograph shows a medic treating a wounded soldier. Instead of bandages, however, this soldier applies stage

makeup to his patient. Absurdly tender and theatrical, this image makes obvious the melodrama of Nes' approach, while also tragically highlighting the real horrors of combat. Other military scenes similarly combine allegory and satire.

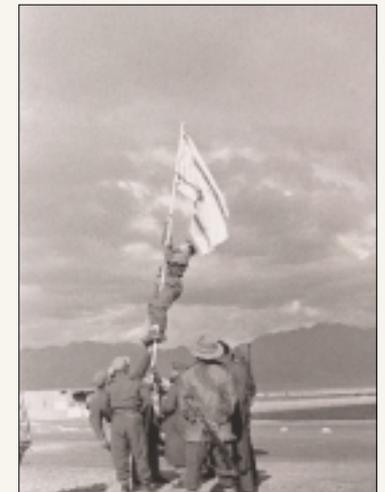
An image of a group of soldiers seated on a hillside, all of whom—except one who is missing an arm—are shown applauding, employs the ancient Zen riddle, "what's the sound of one hand clapping?" to highlight the madness of war. (Nes met his handicapped model while working at a center for disabled soldiers and their distraught relatives.) The Greek myth of Sisyphus, who is damned to eternally roll a huge stone up a mountain, is the inspiration for an image of a gang of soldiers pushing a leaking water tank up a rocky hill. The dramatically lighted and shadowed paintings of Caravaggio, a Renaissance painter, widely believed to be gay, who scandalized his

contemporaries by using raffish peasants as models for religious scenes are inspirations for a group of three photographs of soldiers sleeping on busses. Are these men, sprawled vulnerably across each other in slanted, golden sunlight lambs to the slaughter, or might they themselves harm innocents? And Leonardo da Vinci's fresco *The Last Supper 1498* is the source for Nes' largest photograph to date. Set in an abandoned barracks, the arresting six-by-ten-foot image depicts fourteen soldiers gathered at a table set with orange cups and plates—the army's traditional dinnerware. Where da Vinci's original registers the upset of the moment in which Jesus announces that he will be betrayed, Nes' version illustrates no such tension. The disciples, including one extra that Nes says he added to get away from a direct quotation, are locked in private conversations while the central Jesus, his head haloed by a bush positioned behind him in the background, stares vacantly into space. Is this dazed Christ figure responding to the ongoing spiritual shellshock of life in the Middle East? The artist leaves interpretation open-ended, saying simply and sympathetically, "I hope this isn't their last supper."

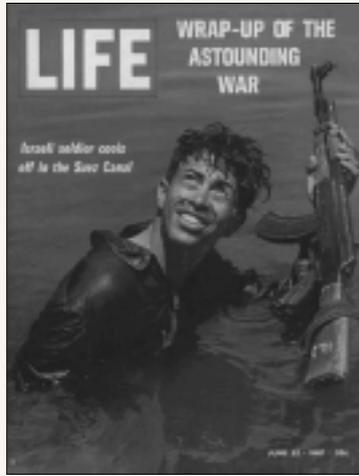
Several works from the *Soldiers Series* tackle icons of modern Israeli military history. One restages a famous 1949 photograph of soldiers raising a homemade flag over the Red Sea city of Eilat—Israel's equivalent to American photographer Joe Rosenthal's shot of marines raising of the stars and stripes over Iwo Jima. In

Nes' version, however, the Star of David banner is conspicuously absent, suggesting a vacuum of ideals. Another image, based on a famous *Life Magazine* cover image of soldier Yossi Ben-Hanan celebrating victory in the 1967 Six-Day War by brandishing his assault rifle while splashing in the Suez Canal. In Nes' updated version, five handsome, muscular soldiers frolic together in a pool of dark water, radiating a self-satisfied glamour that seems more Hollywood than Holy Land.

Nes' newest works consider the civilian sphere and life in rural cities. Born in Kiryat Gat, a "development town" populated mostly by recent immigrants in the northern Negev desert, he is familiar with the difficult conditions



The "Ink Flag" at Eilat, March 10 1949. Photographer Micha Perry. © National Photo Collection, Israel.



Life Magazine, June 13, 1967. Cover photograph of Yossi Ben-Hanan by Denis Simon

experienced by many of Israel's newest and poorest citizens. Nes is especially interested in representations of Mizrahim, or Jews from Asia. The son of an Iranian father and a Kurdistani mother, the artist knows firsthand the subtle prejudices experienced by dark-skinned Israelis and frequently casts them as his protagonists. In a portrait of an adolescent Mizrahi boy with a bird on his shoulder, for instance, Nes creates a contemporary Nimrod, a mighty hunter from the Old Testament. Among the inspirations for the image is a well-known 1939 sandstone sculpture of Nimrod by Yitzhak Danziger, a member of the Canaanite Movement, which tried to connect the first Jewish settlers in

Palestine to pagan peoples described in the Old Testament as a means of circumventing centuries of Arabic and Muslim influences. Speaking of Danziger's iconic figure, Nes says, "My Nimrod is not cut from sandstone but rather lives in a sandy town. He is not a hunter; he is a survivor. Like other teenagers in my pictures, he tries to build his own world in the backyards of a barren town."

Often, Nes interweaves social commentary and personal memories, creating images that seem part documentary and part dreamscape. An image of six boys sleeping in a barren room was inspired by a newspaper photograph illustrating an article about a poor family. When he noticed the photograph was staged, Nes was compelled to create his own version in an apartment specially rented for the occasion. While working with his hired models—again chosen for their Middle-Eastern features—childhood memories of sleepovers with friends, of hordes of cousins descending on his house, and of a friend abused by his parents came flooding back. Nes realized he was creating a multiple self-portrait, a composite image of his young selves.

Other works read as trenchant allegories of the clashes of values in contemporary Israel. An image of boys skulking next to a burning playground

slide suggests that the country is not the paradise for children its founders intended it to be. A photograph of boys grappling in front of a faded socialist-realist-style mural of industrious fishermen—a scene the artist says is inspired by the Rape of Dionysus—contrasts the country's utopian ideals with its violent reality. A scene of a boy lying on a street surrounded by grieving women, inspired by boyhood memories of seeing a contemporary struck by a car, becomes in Nes' conception an image of the death of Adonis, the "most Greek of the Greek gods," and a divine tragedy set in a place where violence can surprise you at any time, on any street corner. And a portrait of a man lifting a boy over his head, enacted by two members of a Capoeira club in a suburb of Tel Aviv, becomes an emblem of same-sex connection or possibly even an updated version of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac.

While his photographs clearly tackle timeless and timely subjects—life, death, war, love, and religion in the Middle East—Nes makes nothing explicit. Using the distancing lenses of art and legend, he deftly suggests, yet never defines, the allegories, dramas, and erotics latent in his contemporary subjects. Nes describes his artistic goals in straightforward terms: "I am bringing the presence of the other into the public discourse. The photographs make comments on Israeli manliness, on

the social realm and also on the composition and lighting of photographs."² At the same time, the artist also acknowledges a greater symbolism informing his project: "Israeli light, you know, is harsh and searing, it creates deep contrasts. What are we if not a people of contrasts who are always doing battle between the dark and the light, between what is shadowed and glaring?"³ An outsider in a country like no other, Nes is aware of parallels between his own quest for self-realization and the odyssey of Israel. He rereads historical precedents as a means of legitimizing his own life and of framing his young country's travails in the continuum of world culture. In the process, Nes creates his own personal and cultural pantheon—a collection of everyday myths and masterpieces—which serves as a bridge between past and present, tragedy and triumph, fear and hope, fact and fiction, the individual and the world.

TOBY KAMPS, CURATOR