

Nili Goren

## Turning Fiction into Routine

Adi Nes's photographs proudly expose the dual power of staging. They are too beautiful to be real, yet not too fantastic to be plausible. They embed an idealization of routine and a realization of drama, generating an engaging convergence akin to an upgraded reality, a reality with cinematic beauty and real-life problems. This fine balance between drama and routine is, among others, a result of a complex production centered on the construction of a photo set. Its construction is, perhaps, the meditative phase that introduces fiction to the agenda and routine to illusion, like the transition into the world of cinema upon entering the movie theater, as the lights go off before the actual screening begins; on a photo-shoot set, however, this process builds up gradually.

In his two large-scale series created in the course of a decade of artistic practice (the soldiers, 1994-2000, and the teenagers, 2000), and even in the first series he exhibited upon his graduation from the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem in 1992, Nes has addressed male identity and Israeli identity. These are the major themes in his works, through which he conducts a dialogue with the history of art and culture, with the history of photography and its function as a social mirror, with the history of sexuality, homoeroticism and its myriad representations. Within the multi-cultural discussion itself, Nes's point of departure is clearly Israeli society and reality. In his works, alongside the conspicuous presence of Israeli identity and social awareness,



On the set of *Untitled*, 2003 (cat. 13), photo: Ram Tsizing



*Untitled, 1994 (detail)*

considerable weight is given to details from his private, personal biography.

In the body of works that appeared in *Vogue Hommes International*, the brands and style are the authentic details into and around which fiction is spun. The setting is neither a jail nor a fashion show. The photographed subjects are neither prisoners nor models. The apparel is international designer clothing for Autumn/Winter 2003-2004. The location is Israel, and it is likened to a prison where Israeli, Palestinian, foreign workers, minors and adults are all incarcerated together.

Nes chose to photograph the realistic situations he staged in the prisoner photographs not in their original setting, but in an entirely reconstructed one. His drawing away from an authentic setting and constructing an imitative photo set seems essential precisely due to the preoccupation with current materials and the direct analogy to the local reality. As opposed to the construction of photo sets as fictive complexes that preserve a safe degree of contextual illusion, the visual sources of inspiration for this series are drawn from a highly concrete reality: news photographs, photo



Muslims in Serb prison exercise yard , unknown photographer

archives on the Net, fashion photography, and the artist's private memories from his military service in a detention facility. The prisoners' walk in the prison yard (cat. 14) is an example for a scene constructed after a news photograph from Bosnia. Even though the wall of the structure in the background of the staged photograph is not that of a prison, a special production was dedicated to this shoot, as part of which the photographer and subjects, along with the production team, photography and lighting equipment and props, traveled to a distant site in the south of Israel which is not a detention facility. During the long hours spent there, the 'proper' lighting was designed, the subjects were dressed in designer clothes, the photographer positioned them according

to the carefully planned composition, and the barbed wire fence was stretched across the wall of the deserted structure to serve as an apt backdrop for the row of Israeli men functioning as international models and representing local prisoners in an illusive scene whose source of inspiration is, as aforesaid, a press photograph from the Bosnian war. From the horrifying reality of that war, Nes has chosen an innocent image devoid of horror; but even though he radicalized its naiveté in his pastoral Israeli reconstruction, the harshness of the un-photographed horror still remained.



Life magazine, June 13, 1967. Cover photograph by Denis Simon

The soldier photographs were indeed shot in army bases in Israel and they feature, among others, a religious soldier and staged scenes that explicitly allude to Israel's military heritage, and especially to its photographic documentation, such as the ink flag being raised at Umm Rash-Rash (Eilat) in the War of Independence or the Kalashnikov hoisted at the Suez Canal in the Six Day War. Nevertheless, they contain virtually no identifying marks for specific locations in the country, and the Hebrew inscription IDF on the khaki uniform, similar to any military uniform anywhere, has been concealed in most of the photographs. Likewise, in the photographs of the young teenage boys taken in various towns throughout the country there are no specific location



Weegee, *Heat Spell*, 1938

clues. The urban landscape and architecture are identified as areas with a specific socio-economic affiliation, but this identification is shared by other places in the world as well. Here too, certain images are associated with Israeli photographic iconography, such as Nes's photograph of the sleeping teenagers (cat. 7) and a photograph of sleeping boys from one of the many press reports about poverty in Israel. But this image is prevalent in the poorer strata of any society, and its visual documentation has origins in foreign photography as well (e.g. Weegee's *Heat Spell*, 1938, depicting children sleeping on a fire escape in the Lower East Side, New York); the photographic documentation of



Still from *Un Chant d'Amour*, a film by Jean Genet, 1950

poverty is also associated with an entire project in mobilized American photography, that of the FSA (Farm Security Administration) from the great depression years, just as the image of the hoisted ink flag is associated in the universal visual memory with the American flag raised in Iwo Jima, or even on the moon.

In the prisoner photographs the equation is reversed. A jail is a closed, universal setting where the outside is not concrete. While it possesses considerable symbolic value, as such, its geographic identity is insignificant. Naturally, there is a tendency to place prisons in isolated, sequestered and not easily accessible areas, but this policy crosses cultures and topographies (and is thus accentuated in cinema and literature too), and its significance remains symbolic. Nevertheless, it is here of all places, in a location whose appearance is not necessarily local, when the majority of shoots are taken behind closed doors rather than in the open air, and where the clothing style and design are quintessentially international, that Nes tightens the strong link to a local social reality, to Israeli politics and current events. The project was photographed, against the backdrop of the disintegration of the *Hudna* (cease-fire agreement) and the return to tension and high security with violent clashes between the fighting parties in the region. At the same time, the economic crisis worsened and a sharp increase in Israel's crime rates was noted. The prison, like the photograph, functions as a social mirror, and the prison photographs in the current series unfold, with the elegance of fashion photography and the ritual silence of still photography, a long line of conflicts, crises and clashes, from which violence has been neutralized and left outside the frame, in the realms of life rather than as a metaphor. Instead of freezing the crucial moment as in news photography, there is a perpetuation of the moment that preceded it and its extension to a duration that is not measured in terms of photographic or literary time, but rather as an existential concept. The profile of the Israeli prison guard and the Arab youth (cat. 12) is one of a frontal confrontation between occupier and occupied, between tough manhood and stormy sensuality, between the aspiration for order and the desire to disrupt it. In the dangerous scope of proximity verging on actual physical contact, as exhibited by their faces in the photograph, they stand on the concrete floor underneath the frame, and the political, emotional and sexual tension is imprinted forever. In a prison-as-metaphor there is no catharsis - no sensual outlet, and there will be no documentation of an outburst. Similarly, in the photograph depicting an act of arrest (cat. 17), the focus is shifted from the violent act to the body language that refines the hand struggle into a balanced gesture



of a war dance, while the entire composition is channeled to the beautiful face of a Middle-Eastern looking youth. It is hard to tell by his facial features and skin color whether he is Jewish or Arab. From the details of the occurrence it is hard to tell whether we are concerned with an arrest on political or criminal grounds, and it is hard to notice amongst his many expressions the transitions between hatred, submission, pride and humiliation.

The only photograph in the series where violence is not restrained is that of the Doberman with a designer collar embedded with precious stones around his neck, seen storming from amidst barbed wire fences in a dark background (cat. 18). In the Jewish collective unconscious a Doberman and barbed wire fences are associated with Nazism, the Holocaust and extermination. The use of this highly charged image implies an acute critical statement not only with regard to Israeli society, but also with regard to notions of captivity, oppression and discrimination in their wider senses, including sexual oppression, racial discrimination and captivity by images and types.

The discussion of the stereotypical image acquires a special emphasis in Nes's *oeuvre* in the portrait photographs that are ostensibly isolated from any context. Each of the series features, alongside group scenes, portraits of individuals detached from the group context (teenagers, soldiers, or prisoners), shot against a neutral background with no external feature attesting to the specific concern of the series (development town, army, or prison), nor any attributes identifying the photographed subject as an individual item in the overall theme. Nevertheless, it seems that even if we isolate them from the sequence, their affinity with the series will remain intact. This is indeed the photographer's unique brushstroke, but at the same time, it also attests to the bonds of image and the danger of quick use of labels and the hasty elimination of distinguishing traits in favor of shared qualities. The photographs' themes have clung to the subjects' portraits and the photographed individuals; in fact, not only the theme, but also other contexts and classifications associated with the series' title, the photographic language and its origins, and the subject matters addressed by the artist. Homoerotic tension informs the solitary portrait as well as the contemplation of the model embodying it, even when it is not presented as part of male identity/sexual identity/Israeli identity. These portraits are subordinate not only to the order of photography, but also to the interpretive rhetoric accompanying it and the moral implication of such mechanisms, that are based on signification via association between signs, forms and concepts.



*Untitled, 1999*



*Untitled, 2000*



*Untitled, 2003*



*Untitled, 2003 (detail)*