

Adi Nes
Yediot Ahronot Interview
27 April 2012
Vardit Gross
Translated by Gary Tishkoff

IDF army officers lightly touch a woman's arm. Their faces are serious. The woman looks past them, already knowing what they're going to tell her, as if she's been waiting for days, ever since her son put on his uniform and left. Despite the fact that we've never seen real photographs of such an intimate encounter, we know exactly what's happening. We hear the knock on the door which preceded the light touch on her arm, we feel how the female officer's hand trembles slightly. We're eternally ready to bear such news.

Adi Nes, one of the most important Israeli artists of our times, photographs our society with great precision. He photographs the moments we all know without ever having even seen them before. Those moments etched in our collective consciousness whether we like it or not. *The Village*, Nes' new photographic exhibit, forces viewers to confront the Zionist dream as it appears at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. The skies are blue, the fields green, the youth are all painfully handsome, and this pain is everywhere – present, hovering, and threatening.

Nes' exhibit opens on May 17th at the Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv and at the same time in galleries in New York and Paris. This is not a strange situation for the artist who has shows on a permanent basis in leading museums and galleries throughout the world. Official international acclaim occurred five years ago when his picture *The Last Supper*, in which he photographed soldiers inspired by Da Vinci's famous painting, was bought by a collector at a public auction for \$264,000 – the highest price ever paid for an Israeli photograph. The money, however, went to the seller of the photograph, and not to Nes, who had sold it eight years earlier for a mere \$1,500. But this directly influenced sale prices of his works which now go for tens of thousands of dollars. Because of this achievement, Israeli art is now looked at differently throughout the world.

As a result of his success, Nes understood that he must – and could – focus on photography. He left his work as the assistant manager of Keshet television's promotional department and became a full-time artist. "I was happy that the art market was able to appreciate the work of a contemporary photographer" he said. "I was happy that I, as a promising artist, was able to provide this type of revenue for a collector who purchased my work at the beginning of my career at a low price. Of course, the recipe for success is also connected to timing and the art bubble which was at its height in those days."

Don't you have another copy of that print for sale?

"Of course not, all copies of that print were sold-out. I can't even afford to purchase my own work! In general, in my personal life, I don't buy goods at such prices."

Imagined and Reconstructed Dream

Nes, 45, grew up in Kiryat Gat. His personal biography is strewn with pictures in which he confronts questions of his Eastern-Oriental origins and the gaps in Israeli society inspired by the city of his birth, along with his interest in sexual identity. In the IDF he served as an air traffic controller. After being discharged, he went to interview at Betzalel Academy of Art where he wanted to study painting. Because he erroneously checked the

wrong box on the application, he was sent to be interviewed by the faculty of the photography department where he showed-up armed with his portfolio of drawings. He was accepted to that department without showing a single photograph and on the strength of his drawings alone because they recognized his artistic eye.

It's almost misleading to call Nes' works photographs. His pictures are precisely staged and more closely resemble film production than photography. While a large number of Israeli photographers focus on documenting the turbulent Israeli present, Nes works over a period of many months scrupulously preparing every detail for his highly staged photographs: engaging in research, lighting, costumes, and even in applying make-up to the actors and directing their stance. When shooting, a large support team surrounds him and helps him refine the moment which becomes a picture.

In *The Village* series Nes presents an enchanted yet subversive world. The giant, oversized prints invite viewers into each scene of beauty and grandeur, yet like a sweetened trap, imprisons them inside until the message begins to sink-in. He borrows elements from Greek tragedies: the village chorus, the blind seer, the goat held by its horns. The landscape is taken from the present: dark blue kibbutz work shirts, work boots, worn wooden buildings.

To find the perfect chorus, Nes travelled around the country to see amateur chorus groups. Other images he found by searching Facebook for the lines and facial expressions that he had sketched out in advance. He waited a long time for a specific turkey to die a natural death so he could have it stuffed according to the precise way he wanted it to appear in one of his pictures.

You chose to create an imaginative village, yet close enough and connected enough to a specific reality.

“From the beginning it was clear to me that ‘The Village’ would be located in the Jezreel Valley. There are a few reasons for this. The first is that Naveh, my partner, is from that valley. The second is that it is such a charged place, from Biblical times up to modern Hebrew literature and Israeli culture. The valley residents didn't only dry the marshes, they also wrote it. The village which I created is a metaphor for the Land of Israel – a small place which arose after a tragedy, whose vistas are green with trees full of fruit, yet with an undercurrent of disquiet.”

To a certain extent, it appears that most of your works until now shed light on different aspects of your personal biography, yet now you've moved to a more national picture.

“They're different faces of the same thing. I show a world which is part of me, and in a wider sense, perhaps a part of all of us. The ‘beautiful Land of Israel’ wasn't just the narrative and dream of people from that valley, rather, it was a dream that all people of a certain generation had and grew into. Kiryat Gat was the capital of the Lachish region. In my childhood, meeting other children from neighboring agricultural communities was meeting the ethos itself. The children of these communities, beautiful and blond haired, symbolized the myth in which we were brought up from the songs we sang in our music lessons and the books we read from the municipal library. Youth group activities and summer work programs on a kibbutz accompanied me all my life; this is part of my identity. And still, it's clear that the dream of a ‘beautiful Land of Israel’ is imaginary and reconstructed, and that the people who created this knew it.”

Even then they didn't believe it?

“I have no doubt that the dream was written in an intelligent and sophisticated way to create an ideal model toward which new immigrants should strive. These were stories which grew from the soil of the valley, and not by happenstance. Otherwise, it would have been impossible to live in a place so bare and full of mosquitos. They wanted to detach themselves from the arrogance of their parents who grew up in exile, and from the difficult circumstances of their situation, and create a new place in which everything is good. An ethical place, one of mutual support and community.”

Nes knows first-hand the process of myth building in that valley. For the past five years he's researched it deeply, as part of his thorough photographic preparations. Yet this period of time was especially full for him not only because of this new project. In 2007 his *Biblical Stories* exhibit opened at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and it garnered tremendous acclaim world-wide appearing non-stop in museums as well as in Evangelical church pamphlets. At the same time he was travelling around the world wherever his works were appearing, Nes and his partner, an attorney by profession, managed to bring four children into the world through surrogate parenting in the US. This past year, they moved with their two daughters (aged 3 & 4) and pair of twins (10 months old) to Balfuria, a small village not far from Afula, which served as one of the photographic sites in the new series.

In fact, you now live the village dream you created.

“Sometimes a man falls in love with a woman, sometimes with another man, I fell in love with this place while I was scouting out locations for this project. This is Naveh's childhood village; we moved here at my initiative and with some reservations on his part.”

You left Tel Aviv at the height of your career. Isn't this difficult?

“Moving from the center to the periphery is dramatic, yet it's the right thing to do at this time, both for the children and for our careers. When it won't feel right, we'll change. It's clear that children need to grow-up on firm ground where they can set roots. We're surrounded by a very supportive family, and my mother can easily get to us via Highway 6. She gets on in at Kiryat Gat, and gets off in the north, and we spend a good amount of time together. Since my studio's still in the center, I get up early, start my day with Avshalom Kor, and return with rebroadcasts of afternoon radio programs. To my delight, I've gotten to a stage in my career where it doesn't really matter where I am physically. With the internet, flights and inexpensive telephone calls, ones roots can be in a little village in the Jezreel valley, while the tree tops bear fruit in Tel Aviv, Paris and New York.”

There's something optimistic in that you moved to live in a place you photographed. When one only looks at your photographs, it's difficult to decide whether you saw the dream in the valley, or mostly its shattered pieces.

“I believe that the dream still exists. When I left the center to look for a suitable location in the north, I felt as in Neomi Shemer's song that 'I met, in a corner, the old Land of Israel, the lost and beautiful and forgotten Land of Israel, which outstretched its hand, to give, not to take'. I met people who, when you say to them 'art and culture' are immediately on your side. They don't want you to take their picture; yet they'll really help you truly and honestly should you need it. These are people of action, who have romantic dreams. I think some of them continue to live the dream all the time, while others – in the city and in the periphery – live it only sometimes.”

Nes claims that dreams have two sides: a magical side, and a dark, fearful side. “So it is with the Zionist dream” he says. “We sometimes forget this while struggling, yet without the dream, without yearning to build one society, without empathy for this place, for different minorities who live amongst us, and for the peoples who live around us, we have no reason to be here. People without dreams, their fears have no place to go except into reality; they should take something, go to sleep, and begin dreaming.”

“I’m not a dreamy artist,” clarifies Nes. “These pictures are not kitsch – forces of nature stronger than the village people, fear of the unknown or unexpected can be seen on their faces. Yet if there’s light at the end of the tunnel, then one also knows how to get to it. In Israeli society people like to hide behind the sentence: “the fact that I’m paranoid doesn’t mean people aren’t out to get me.’ When you bring things to light and examine them, and express them visually or through literature or even politics, then you can live with them. This is my mission as an artist, to cast the net and raise issues.”

You really think this is your mission?

“Acts of many creative people eventually lead to changing public opinion, and that change leads to political change. This happened in the Gay community. A large amount of the change which occurred was due to acts by individuals: a film maker who creates a film, a poet who writes a poem, an author who writes a book, a photographer who has an exhibition. These things are expressed in the press, in public opinion and in politics. Artists shouldn’t be drafted to create art, yet literature and art create culture, and for a lot of people this leads to understanding their identity. When a person knows his or her identity, then s/he can know the identities of others so that together we can create a healthier society.”

An Unfathomable Scandal

Nes speaks from experience about the change the Gay community has undergone. The *Soldiers* series of photographs dripped with homo-eroticism and contributed to a revolution which led to the Gay community to crown Nes, and his partner at the time, the poet Ilan Scheinfeld, as honorary members. Yet this doesn’t mean that he’s entirely satisfied with the community’s situation today, especially in light of the difficulties he experienced bringing his children to Israel. “There’s a vast gulf between the way society accepts Gays and how the authorities treat Gays. What the Ministry of Interiors did was outrageous: not recognizing legal documents in which a birth certificate was issued by court order signifying that Naveh and I are both the parents of our child. The Ministry of Interiors recognized only one of us as a parent, and they forced that parent to undergo genetic testing. This is an unfathomable scandal. The Ministry never asks straight couples who come to Israel with their American born children to undergo genetic tests to prove their parenthood!”

And the suggestion was that you adopt the children?

“Why should I adopt my own children? These children are mine. I held my daughter close to my heart day and night for 100 days when she was in the intensive care unit for pre-mature babies. She was born in the 26th week of the pregnancy and weighed only 790 grams. Both her fathers arrive with her birth certificate. Why do I have to lose my fatherhood when I enter Israel? We’re planning to submit an appeal to the Supreme Court – and I’m constantly urging Naveh to free-up some time to do this – that if we must undergo genetic testing, then so must everyone. There has to be one law for all.”

An attorney and an artist will change the world.

“Until the *Biblical Stories* project I didn’t really think an artist could actually change reality, since artists work exclusively in an arena which simply reflects things. Yet dreams also have the power to change things. Look, our state began with a dream. Via an artist’s sensitivity, s/he can reflect how fragile a society is, and if people recognize this, then it’s another crack which shatters a problematic reality.

The children in whose name he fights, explains Nes, changed a lot in his life. “The essence of being an artist is to be very focused on yourself. Everything loses proportion in light of the most important thing which is Art. Yet when one becomes a parent, suddenly there are things just as important. A lot of effort is required to preserve the balance and remain true to oneself while continuing to be creative.”

I suppose you photograph the children a lot.

“Constantly. Every moment of their lives has been documented. But much to my chagrin, one of my daughters can’t stand being photographed.”

Translator’s notes:

Headlines: Nes’ Eyes

After receiving **international acclaim** when one of his photographs was sold at the highest price ever for an Israeli artist, **Adi Nes** is now launching a new exhibit which will be shown simultaneously in New York, Paris and Tel Aviv. The **backdrop**: A close-up look at village life. The **models**: Workers, fruit trees and a stuffed turkey. The **question**: What remains of the Zionist dream? The **conclusion**: Hope is not lost. The **next project**: Petitioning the [Israeli] Supreme Court in his struggle to have himself and his partner recognized as the legal fathers of their four children.

Picture captions are:

Top: *The Last Supper*. The collector bought it from Nes for approximately \$1,500 and sold it for \$264,000.

Left: A photograph from the new exhibit. “Without the Zionist dream, we have no reason to be here.”

Large picture: Another photograph from *The Village*. Nes waited for the turkey to die a natural death.

Quotes highlighted between the columns of text are:

Since my studio’s still in the center, I get up early, start my day with Avshalom Kor, and return with rebroadcasts of afternoon radio programs. I’ve gotten to a stage in my career where it doesn’t really matter where I am physically.

I don’t have another copy of ‘The Last Supper’ for sale and I can’t even afford to buy my own work. I was happy that I was able to provide this type of revenue for a collector who purchased my work at the beginning of my career.