

# AT THE STILL POINT OF A TURNING WORLD

In his latest exhibition, photographer Adi Nes has created large-scale images of a fictitious village, as part of his ongoing examination of Israeli myths. News photographer Alex Levac talked with Nes about reality, truth and artistic vision

Adi Nes and Alex Levac are opposites. Nes, 46, graduated from the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, and shows his work in New York and Paris. He is a master of meticulously crafted, staged photographs utilizing actors. The final products, which have undergone lengthy planning, are complex scenes of epic proportions and symbolic meaning. Levac, who is 68 and received the Israel Prize for photography in 2005, has published five books of photos and is primarily a news photographer who focuses on fleeting moments which, once captured on film, are gone forever. On the occasion of Nes' new exhibition, 'The Village' – which consists of 13 large-scale photographs depicting detailed scenes from the life of an imagined quintessential Israeli village – Levac met with Nes for a conversation at the Sommer Gallery of contemporary art in Tel Aviv, where the exhibition runs until July 7. Through their encounter, they enable us to take a closer look not only at the village Nes created, but at the many complex ways in which Israeli photography confronts Israeli reality. (See more about Adi Nes on page 16.)



Adi Nes (left) and Alex Levac at the Sommer Gallery, Tel Aviv. The spontaneous vs. the staged.

Photos by Alon Ron



Untitled (Chorus), 2009. All of Adi Nes' works are untitled; the names in parentheses are given for identification purposes.



*Alex Levac:* Like me, you photograph moments and situations.

*Adi Nes:* We actually photograph different moments. You photograph the moment that happens, the decisive moment [an allusion to famed photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson's book "The Decisive Moment"]. But I will always choose the moment before, a split second before the thing happens. You do the same, but with you, moments are real. For me the photograph is conceptual. As in my series about biblical stories. There I always chose to show – not Abraham with the knife, as in Caravaggio, or the moment when the knife falls, as in Rembrandt – but precisely the moment after, when Abraham comes down from the mountain. You, Alex, often show the ridiculous in the high, lofty or dramatic moment. I always looked for "the moment after," the human. For example, in the work titled "Annunciation" [in which a male and a female soldier are seen announcing something to a mother, ostensibly

by the death of her son], my scene is the moment before the word is spoken. The woman already knows what will happen immediately, but I chose the moment before. My "Annunciation" also connects to the angel's annunciation to Mary.

*L:* Your works contain quite a few Christian elements.

*N:* Yes, but they are not so much Christian as they are elements from art. It was not by chance that I chose Leonardo's "The Last Supper" [Nes' well-known "The Last Supper Before Going Out to Battle," from his series of 22 photos of soldiers]. I sought the image, not the Christian element. I also connected "Annunciation" to the notion of a Jobian announcement.

*L:* I like this photograph very much. How did you manage to arrive at the look of the mother in her bereavement, a look that disturbs and captivates me even when I am far from it?

*N:* I gave the woman instructions on the set. Nonprofessionals tend to over-

act. I explained to her that she has to look past the messengers, because in her world they have existed from the day her son was drafted. They are always present there. She is always expecting them. They are in her head – not in reality. When I saw that it was hard for her to work with that, I told her, "You are a woman of the valley. The people of the valley are hard and tough, you will not crack." She herself lives in Moshav Talmei Eliezer, near Hadera. In other photographs I worked with professional actors. When I want to generate "electricity" on the set – emotional energy – I use a professional actor who possesses charisma, like Yossi Yizraeli or Asher Sarfati. Someone like that on the set creates energy around him. It's a manipulation I perform on the subjects who are being photographed, but you too are a manipulator.

*L:* That's totally clear. I have no doubt of it. Because I too choose a particular moment, a particular angle. Every photographer is a manipulator, though he

might not always be aware of it. Even if you have to photograph a simple object – such as an egg, say – every photographer will photograph it differently, and that is particularly true when it comes to frenetic, complex street situations. But at least my manipulation is not staged.

*N:* That is true, but you know ahead of time what will happen in the arenas you wander around in.

*L:* It's not quite like that. It's true that there are events which I know in advance possess a higher potential for me to find what I am looking for. But at the center of my photographic work lie wandering, wonderment and discovery in the theater of life – anew each time. I am looking for the surprises within the routine. Sometimes I imagine it as a vast supermarket in which I suddenly spot something I would like to have. Maybe it's a familiar product in new packaging, and sometimes it is within reach and tasty. Sometimes it is too high. Sometimes when I touch it, it breaks. The ele- ▶

◀ ment of surprise always exists. But in your work you create the moment in a way that is astonishingly precise and marvelously aesthetic. I never know exactly what I want until I discern it in a flowing, endless sequence. Accordingly,

form, composition and lighting are less relevant.

But let's go back to "Annunciation," which I see as a fantastic photograph. I connect with it first of all from the journalistic side, because never before has a

## Bearing witness

We are now at the height of an era in which photography, more than ever before, is considered an integral element of art. Not long ago, graduates of schools of photography aspired to work in the press or in fashion; nowadays almost all of them immediately dream of an exhibition in a gallery or museum of art. There is an ongoing decline in the status of the photographer as an inquisitive fieldworker, an anthropologist, a visual researcher who is ready to take himself to remote places in order to freeze a particular moment in the name of his overriding belief: that the world of objects amid which we live possesses infinite meanings, and that he is duty-bound, as a photographer, to capture them on film and thereby contribute personal impressions to the viewer. He does not purport "to photograph reality as it is," as many mistakenly think. He wants only to add another stone, engraved with his personal imprint, to the mosaic of human memory.

His place is now being taken with dizzying speed by photographers of a different kind. They are practitioners of conceptual photography, who remove themselves from "the concrete" and create reality-like images which stem from the mind. Their goals are radically different. They are artists, and as such are committed to no one but themselves. They try to divert our gaze in a different direction. "Forget about the concrete, it is meaningless," the philosophers of photography teach us. Immersed deeply in analysis, their eyes are shut so that reality (there is such a thing) will not disturb them.

If we read closely the remarks of their high priestess, the late Susan Sontag, in her book "On Photography," we will see that she is perhaps not even all that fond of photography: "Like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive." And she goes much further: "There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time."

I have never felt that I am a sublimating murderer or that I have violated anyone. Sontag is mistaken and misleading, and with the aid of philosophical-psychological arguments, she emasculates the traditional photographer, pulls the rug out from under his feet when she says that "photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects." That is an irrelevant argument.

The classic photographer does not try to touch reality, like the innocent observer without a camera. Both see everything in a different way, personal and manipulative. But the photographer tries to depict for the other what he sees with the help of the camera, which is usually far more accurate than any other means of documentation. He operates within the existent, completely dependent on the concrete, and does not create something from nothing but tries to create from the extant a few more layers of "extancy," in accordance with his cultural, aesthetic, political approach. But he will never touch reality. He uses his hands to hold the camera, his feet to draw closer, move back or circumvent the scene he is photographing. He does not want even to utter a sound. He wants to be the fly on the wall, his presence minimally felt, so that it has no effect on the events. He is bearing witness.

The conceptual photographer derives much encouragement from Sontag's words, from Roland Barthes, and from others. Even when he photographs objects in reality, he will distort them or present them explicitly as his distinctive interpretation. Freed from the intolerably heavy ball and chain that shackle him to the concrete, he creates a world of his own. Although he too uses a camera, he does so mainly in order to lend credibility to his "works," as he styles them.

But if that is indeed so, let us differentiate clearly between the two: one is a photographer, the other an artist. The former looks at his photographs and tries to see how far he has been able to preserve the moment; the latter has created art, a world of his own, and tries to discover how closely his creations are consistent with his inner world.

Curators, collectors, developers of talent and those who set the bon ton are elevating the conceptual photographer, mainly for financial interests. They are the manipulators of our vision. It's only a pity that this is degrading the value and the status of the documenting photographer, and also making it more difficult for him, if only economically, to go on investigating the present. (Alex Levac)

Ilya Melnikov



Alex Levac. Adding to the mosaic.



Untitled (Turkey), 2012

scene like this been photographed with this closeness and intimacy. I can only imagine the moment. At the same time, there is realistic credibility and maybe even something strong and dramatic that transcends reality. But it was all only in your head, because you actually control everything: You think in advance of the conception, the location, the set, the lighting and the staging. You eliminate completely the element of chance in the photographic moment.

N: I too have a great deal of depreciation. Each scene has many rejects. For example, in "Annunciation" I shot six rolls of 6 by 6, which is more than 60 photographs. And there were many more pictures on the days ahead of the shooting on the set. I do all those experiments before the shooting day itself. My lighting is very precise. Never with flashes, only with projectors. Film projectors give me absolute control over light. I soften it, cut it, dim it. I have a professional lighting designer who knows exactly what I want; we have worked together for many years.

L: That reminds me that I read a review in an American journal in which the writer claimed that your work benefits from the soft Mediterranean light. Every photographer knows how harsh our light is, to the point of hurting. It was obvious that the writer had never been to Israel.

### Quickness vs. 'slow cooking'

N: "The Village" series is like cinema but in stills. I have always had a cinematic orientation. I start with sketches on



Untitled (Portrait), 2012

paper, which are often lines, something formalistic, void of content – that is added only later – and then add another layer and render the picture concrete. The composition is very dominant and important for me.

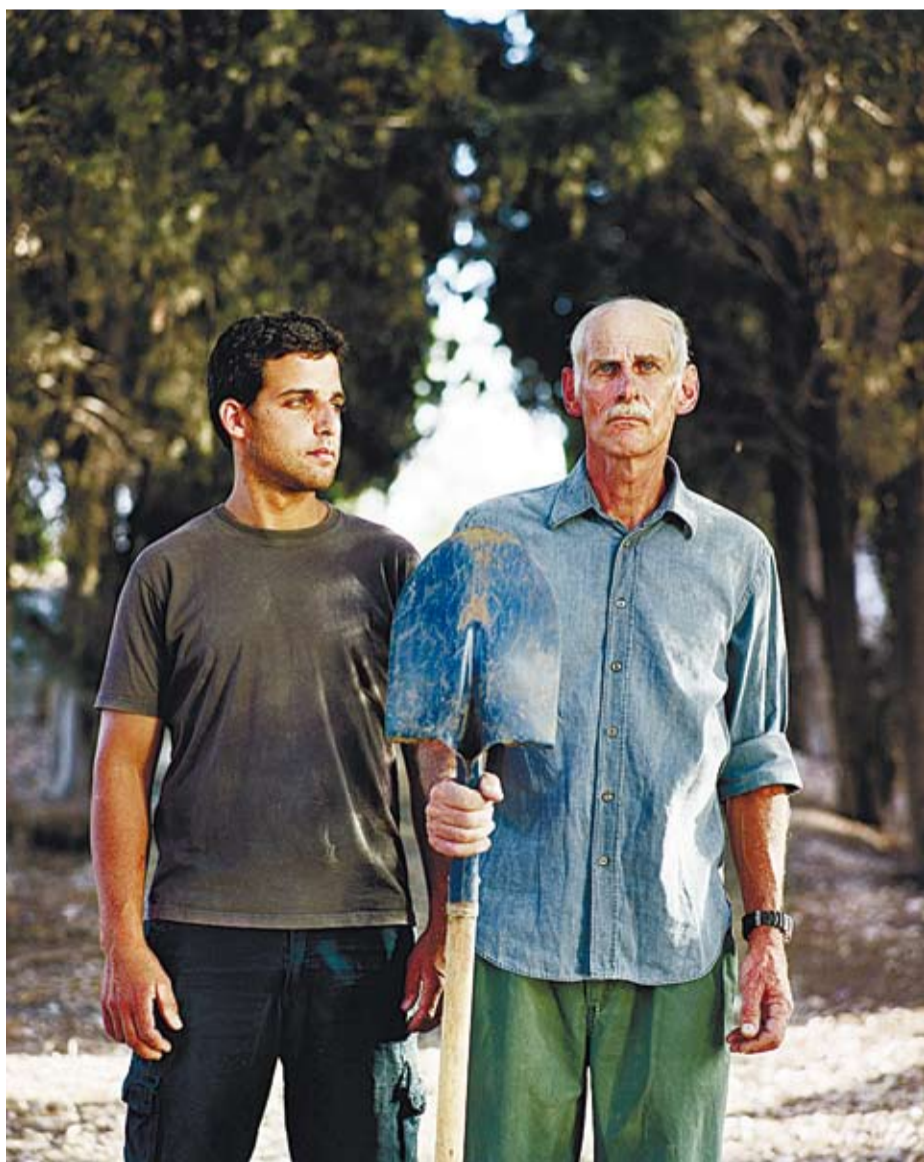
L: You are a film director.

N: Absolutely. I am also a one-person production company – the driver, the tea server and the costumer, too. Many people join on the shooting day; there will be between 10 and 15 on a set like this. That sometimes affects the intimacy of the subject. To overcome that obstacle, I create intimacy with him beforehand. The first meeting is in his home, in his arena. I try to understand him. Sometimes an assistant will try to get him to talk on

**NES: 'WHEN I WANT TO GENERATE "ELECTRICITY" ON THE SET, I USE A PROFESSIONAL ACTOR ... [WHO] CREATES ENERGY AROUND HIM. IT'S A MANIPULATION I PERFORM.'**



Untitled (Annunciation), 2010



Untitled (Blind), 2011

the way to the set – [to provide] information that I will use during the shooting. I also tell him about myself. Sometimes I record an interview with the subjects when I meet them for the background talk. Generally they are not aware of this. In some cases I use things they have told me to manipulate them on the set. Most of the subjects are people I got to through Facebook, but in this project there are also professional actors. I have to feel the character I am creating before shooting: I stand or lie in the same pose, dressed in the same clothes. Part of my strength as a photographer comes from the slowness [in this process].

*L:* With me it's the polar opposite. Quickness constitutes my hold on reality.

*N:* Yes, I am the slowest in the world. "The Village" is a project of 13 photographs that took five years [to complete]. As a result of the slow cooking, many things become calmer. And in this context of talking about photography: our greatest challenge today as photographers in a world that is packed with images which many people produce in very high quality and with infinite distribution, including mobile phones, is how to seize the viewer and make him look at

your work for more than a fraction of a second.

*L:* As a classic photographer I have a serious philosophical problem with photography of your kind. In my view there is, and must be, a razor-sharp distinction between classic journalistic photography and conceptual photography, because they document two different worlds. Classic photography does not exist without reality. It is completely reality-dependent. Your photography, though, stems from the mind, from emotion, from fantastic talent, but everything is expected or preplanned. You create that reality; without you, it would not exist. I really am a photographer of the split second that lends the existing concrete reality interpretation, however personal, but I did not create it. And another thing: You rely on the realism and credibility of classic photography to lend your work credibility. I suggest differentiating clearly between the two approaches, even to give them different names.

*N:* I agree with you about the credibility, because the eye believes pictures. And I use that trick. It wasn't by chance that I added another character to "The Last Supper Before Going Out to Battle" (1999), like some passerby whom the camera happened to catch. But in my view it doesn't really make a difference. As long as the image affects reality, what difference does it make?

Actually, I know only one case that was very dramatic and relevant to what you define as photography, and I am referring to your photograph of the No. 300 bus incident. [Nes is referring to Levac's 1984 photo documenting the hijackers of the No. 300 bus being led away from the scene alive, contrary to the official version; publication of the photograph led to a complex, ramified investigation which resulted in dismissals and resignations of senior figures in the Shin Bet security service.]

The credibility in that case was essential for the changes that followed the photograph's publication. But it is indeed a question of two different mediums of photography, similar to the way we can talk about two different mediums in painting: oils and aquarelles. I come from the place of painting. I wanted to be a painter. I got to photography by mistake. I ignore the philosophy of classic photography. From my point of view, "the decisive moment" has no meaning. I can fabricate it, paint it, duplicate it and imagine it. The camera is a tool through which I express myself, and if I managed to touch the hearts of others or cause them some change – then that is pure gain.

*L:* Still, conceptual photography has existed for 30 years and still draws its power from the reality of what is photographed.

*N:* You're right that it's deceptive. The whole "Village" project is built like a ►

**LEVAC: 'I NEVER KNOW EXACTLY WHAT I WANT UNTIL I DISCERN IT IN A FLOWING, ENDLESS SEQUENCE. ACCORDINGLY, FORM, COMPOSITION AND LIGHTING ARE LESS RELEVANT.'**

## The surface – and below

In his two working decades, Adi Nes has distilled his visual language and style to the point of creating a distinctive school of photography in Israeli art. Since graduating from the photography department of Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in 1992, Nes has been exhibiting regularly and taken part in dozens of group shows in Israel and abroad. Nes fuses precise planning and staging of the scenes he wishes to create or reconstruct with technical meticulousness in lighting and composition, evoking classical works and inviting the viewers not just to marvel at the beauty of the execution but also reread Nes himself and add a layer of interpretation to his. By taking a stand as a "creator" of a scene rather than documenting it in real-time and by orchestrating cultural references into his own work of art, Nes takes after the likes of Jeff Wall and Cindy Sherman, though unlike the latter he doesn't participate as a model in his own work. It is a projection of his vision, his touch is more than present, but he himself is removed, even hidden.

Nes' new series of photographs, "The Village," which is being reproduced in these pages courtesy of the artist, is currently on show simultaneously in Tel Aviv at the Sommer Gallery of Contemporary Art; in New York at the Jack Shainman Gallery; and in Paris at the Galerie Praz-Delavallade.

In this series Nes brings to sophisticated perfection the technique and themes which have engaged him in his previous works – "Soldiers" (1994-2000), "Boys" (2001) and "The Biblical Stories" (2007): Masculinity as an aesthetic Zionist ideal, Biblical myths, heroism and sacrifice, Israeli militancy, as contrasted with universal values and the place of mothers in this culture. All take on heightened intensity in the light of the location, the village, which Nes treats like the idyllic "Israeli way of life" but which, viewed close-up and critically, is seen to have lost its way. The photos are rich in content and span from a beautiful portrait of a boy and his horse walking through a field of yellow grapefruit, to an emotionally explosive scene in which soldiers visit the home of a soldier's mother as the bearers of bad tidings. In this photograph Nes gives a bold visual expression to a formative scene that is embedded in the Israeli collective psyche, a dreaded moment that was previously predominantly dealt with in Hebrew literature. Most recently it can be found in the award-winning novel "Prompter Required" by Haggai Linik, who describes the soldiers' visit to his house – and his mother's reaction – as a moment both expected and unexpected that lasts a lifetime.

Nes' works are both local and universal. His "Soldiers" series, including a scene titled "The Last Supper Before Going out to Battle" – an evocation of Leonardo Da Vinci's renowned painting, but with actors dressed as soldiers – has had an enormous impact on the way contemporary Israeli photography looks at this subject matter. It is not that soldiers were not looked at before – they were. But the way photographers see them now has been influenced by Nes' use of models, his ability to display undercurrents, and while linking the image of soldiers to cultural icons of western art, still manages to show how lost soldiers can be. A print of his Last Supper work is on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem; no wonder that it was sold at Sotheby's in 2007 for a record amount for an Israeli work of art (\$264,000). "Nes brings to the surface representatives of rejected and repressed Israeliness," the judges wrote when Nes was awarded the Education, Culture and Sport Minister's Prize for Artists in the Visual Arts in 1998 for this series. "They are embodied in his work by homosexual masculinity. These rejected representations are promoted by Nes from the dark fringes of the stage to its center, where they play the 'lead roles' heretofore reserved for 'standard' Israelis, in the photographic scenes. The result generates a shock which forces the viewer to reexamine his conventional world of conceptions about Israeliness." These words remain poignant and true today, with his new series. (Tal Niv)



Untitled (The Last Supper Before Going out to Battle), 1999



Untitled (Eclipse), 2012

◀ dream from my point of view, and as in a dream you take elements from reality. I created a cinematic story in stills here. The documenting historian-photographer looks for something on the axis of time – factual evidence. The artist, namely me, works on a completely different axis: on the axis of the depth of longings and memories and desires. The camera is my drawing in light. To take dark regions from my soul, expose them, render them visual in order to offer repair to myself. I never take an interest in the historical truth.

### 'Encounters of opposites'

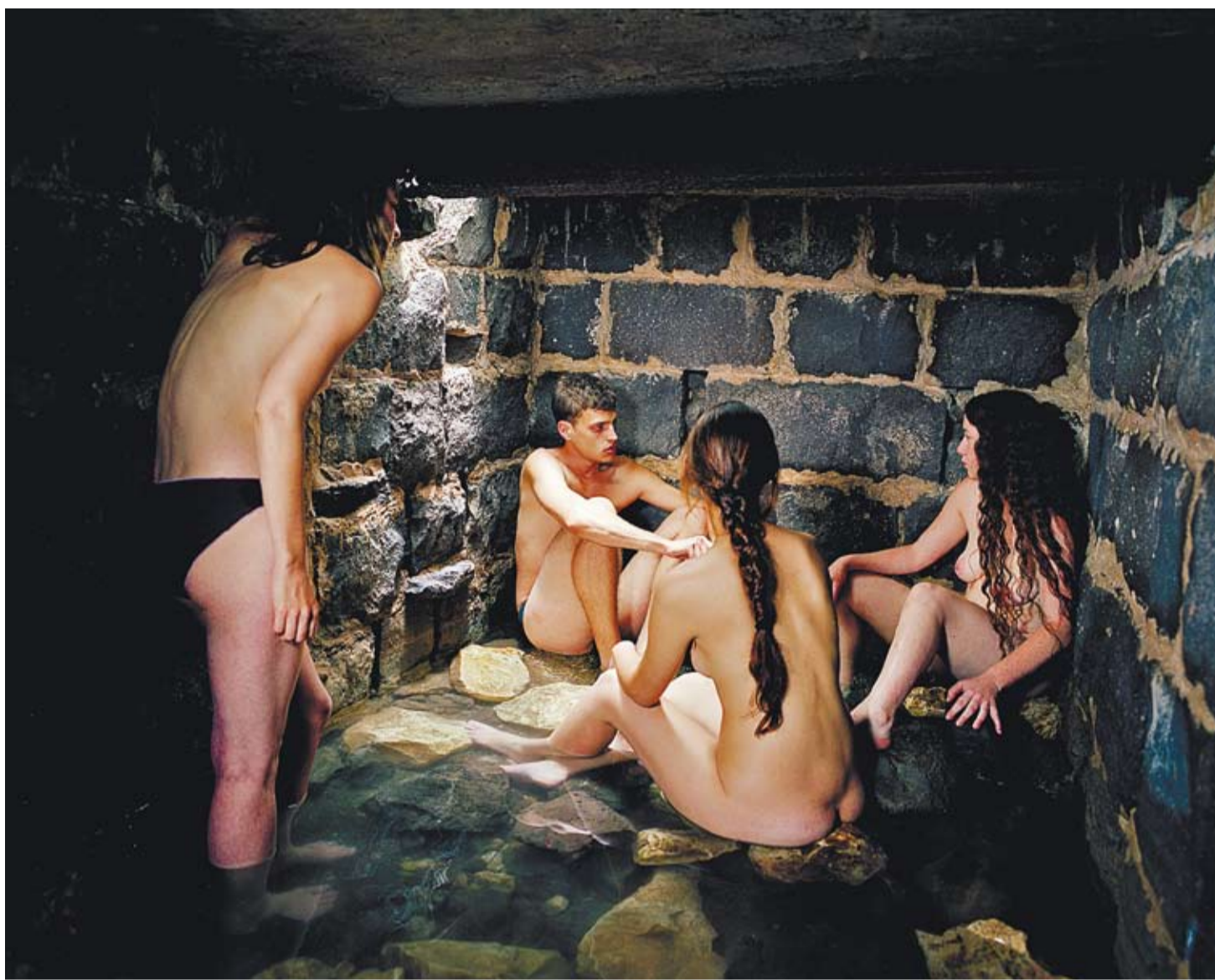
L: I am starting to understand and to think, and through you to get to myself. It seems to me that the picture I most connect with, mainly emotionally, is

"Annunciation," maybe because it is also a document of a particular moment that is so quintessentially Israeli – documentation of our greatest nightmare, which sometimes unfortunately takes on flesh and bones.

N: I want to talk about manipulation and temptation. I tempt the viewer, throw him a line with the 'bait' of a large, sharp, colorful picture, mostly based on a classical composition, fascinating at the first moment, a kind of sweet honey trap – for some people even too sweet. There are many levels to which not every viewer connects. But neither is it relevant what the photographer wanted to say and not what reality wanted to say. What is relevant is what it does to the viewer.

L: A honey trap – my work has that, too. But from the opposite angle. I sometimes think of my Haaretz column as a sort of sweet trap. [For the past 15 years Levac has published a weekly column

**NES: 'I'VE ALWAYS HAD A CINEMATIC ORIENTATION. I START WITH SKETCHES, WHICH ARE OFTEN VOID OF CONTENT AND THEN ADD ANOTHER LAYER AND RENDER THE PICTURE CONCRETE.'**



Untitled (Nude), 2011

titled "Framed" in Haaretz Magazine, which captures moments, some of them comic, that he sees in the street.] I know what people expect and I deliver the goods. True, I derive great pleasure from it. Still, the column has a certain format in which I am imprisoned and through which I see things. I think that because of the growing gap in favor of photography of your kind, reality is not something that people hang in their living room. Maybe I am actually a cartoonist, but the layers in the photograph are important. I photograph a great many other things, which no one sees: different projects, faces in the street, the city at night, the Dead Sea, and many more for which I cannot find a platform. And I am not alone among my excellent colleagues. These days conceptual photography hangs in living rooms.

N: I want to say something more about "The Village." This whole project is about encounters of opposites. The dra-

matic moment in every work of art is the meeting of opposites, not only in terms of content but even in the type of photo. Mine ... is presented in larger than life-size. This village works on opposites in the most extreme way. On the surface, the people have the blue skies and the green fields, while in the cellars and the attics, all the demons are liberated.

L: I agree completely about opposites. They are definitely the base and also exist in many of my shots. But in contrast to you, my photographs require a hold in the everyday reality that passes by me relentlessly and vanishes just as rapidly. I have to capture it, because I believe in documentation.

I have another question that bothers me about your "Village." No one is happy. Everyone looks like they know something that we are not aware of. I see in it a kind of eulogy to the village and to us in general.



Untitled (Shooting), 2010

N: That is heavy if it is indeed our reality.

L: One last question. Let's say that after the world is destroyed, the last surviving thing will be a photo archive without any explanations. How will historians from another galaxy be able to tell which is

the documentary photograph and which is the conceptualist art creation that was staged with great precision, like yours?

N: In any event, they will write their interpretation and try to understand the totality, so the distinction is meaningless. ■

**LEVAC: 'CLASSIC PHOTOGRAPHY DOES NOT EXIST WITHOUT REALITY. YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY, THOUGH, STEMS FROM THE MIND, FROM EMOTION, FROM FANTASTIC TALENT, BUT EVERYTHING IS EXPECTED.'**