



ADI NES
ISRAEL



Images from the series "The Village" 2012

THE VILLAGE

Interview by Silvia Bombardini

Silvia : *We often like to imagine identity in the shape of a diamond, faceted and almost refractive, a precious prism of perspectives and wonder, delicacy and hard edges. It both glistens and hides, like compressed memory in an inviolable shell, and in your work we feel its wise and slightly hurtful beauty, its lucid longing and a faint but lingering, primeval disquiet. How do you manage to unfold and portray your own national, religious or sexual identity, in all its intimate and perilous shades?*

Adi : The creative process is one full of wonder which evolves in the deepest and most intimate parts of the artist’s soul. The spark which ignites a creative moment sometimes occurs in a flash of inspiration, while at other times is the product of hard, Sisyphean work. My style of work is akin to film making. Most of the time I begin a new series of photographs by extensively researching numerous sources of visual information such as art history, the history of photography, reservoirs of internet images, textual research of literature, films and more. Yet as with all artistic creations, my creative process begins with some personal experience, in the recent or distant past. My creations reveal multiple layers of myself. Perhaps because I’m a man, I deal with masculinity; as an Israeli, I delve into Israeli identity; I grew up in the periphery, which is apparent when one looks at the backgrounds of my images; I am the son of Sephardic parents so my photographs have many dark-skinned models or relate to ethnic issues; I am an artist who refers to other works of art. During the long work process which includes all the elements of photography including costumes, lighting, position of subjects, composition of the entire frame, angles and lenses, I mix all these elements and ideas to create one picture which, while beginning as a single spark of inspiration, later passes through many filters which distill the essence of the idea on one hand, while abstracting it to metaphorically touch upon human existence on the other. Thus, my works are born from a private moment and are capable of touching numerous audiences.

S : *While so deeply rooted in your personal history in fact, your images shift from artistic introspection to appeal to a much broader, possibly timeless realm of interpretations. They seem to locate, in familiar moments from art history or the Bible, the same recurrent patterns of behavior and values, doubt and dreams and faith, maybe the essence of human beings if we could peel away all the multiple layers of our identities. What do you think we would find behind? Would you describe your art as allegorical?*

A : While a moment ago I described my art as multi-layered, it’s difficult to imagine it as an onion, or as an archeological site wherein one layer rests upon another. A more accurate description might be that of a mirror which reflects what is in a kaleidoscope. The elements are always the same no matter how you turn the mirror, yet the image constantly changes. There are many ways to interpret works of art. One way is via the prism of the creator. For example, my creations can be read in the context of art from Israel. Or, perhaps, even as art created by a gay artist – homoerotic art. It’s not as if beneath the many layers lies a secret waiting to be discovered, rather, as the kaleidoscope turns, exciting elements are reflected by the mirror. In other words, it’s not a pyramid structure in which one layer of identity rests on another, enabling one to peel layers down to some primordial base, rather, I’m suggesting a different way of looking at the world: through a spiral. The point of departure is the moment of inspiration. Energetic motion which is creative flows and propels the idea and grants it substance unbounded by place or time. This motion places the creation in the center while propelling it upwards.

S : *Aside from their precise, highly accurate figurative references, there always is in your photographs a quite pictorial approach of your own, some careful and patient virtuosity in composition, a thoughtful palette of lights and shadows and juxtaposing hues. Would you tell us something more about your creative process, how does an idea slowly take on its incredible, oversized shape?*

A : To render a dramatic moment in most of my creations I combine elements from different worlds. It could be from the life of soldiers in the field with art history as I did in The Last Supper or biblical heroes in the form of the homeless. I also do this through the combination of materials: the warm, naked human body resting on the cold floor (as in the Noah or Abel pictures from the Biblical Stories series); and by contrasting colors: cold fluorescent lights on warmly colored automatic machines (as in Noah from the Biblical Stories series). Since photographers don’t have the privilege of choosing a palette for painting, like a painter I dedicate a great deal of attention to costumes, texture, and invest resources and time in auditions, while scrupulously attending to details of composition and lighting. Unlike other photographers, I don’t usually work with flash lighting, but rather with constantly shining lamps as used in filming so I can see what’s going on and adjust the lights on the set accordingly. I also still photograph using real film and negatives while printing the old fashioned way in a dark room rather than digitally. Usually, this entraps viewers from their initial impression since the photographs are oversized and beautiful, colorful and sexy. Yet from the moment they’re trapped, complex ideas begin to appear via the multiple layers buried in the picture, the connections to sources of inspiration and the presentation of pictures beside one another begins to crystallize.

S : *Choosing staged photography to reflect your world seems to add to the documenting intent a very personal, intimist and creative value, akin indeed to a painter's brushwork or the peculiar style of certain filmmakers. What drove you initially towards this fascinating and complex technique?*

A : For many years I earned a living by working in the film and television industry which influenced my style from the outset. Along with this, like all producer/directors my personality tends to be one of a control freak. Staged photography gives the feeling of some sort of control over the photographic elements. Yet even the most precise planning is never perfect and on the set I remove the director’s hat and replace it with the hat of the photographer who must always be sensitive to subtle changes in weather, temperament of the models, and the integration of all the necessary photographic components.



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S : If your earlier series Soldiers, Boys and Prisoners focused on the individual -male, handsome, in his untamed homoerotic appeal and full critical potential-, in Biblical Stories your area of interest appeared to widen somehow, to include the scene around him and introduce an element of narrative, clearly unraveling in our collective consciousness. With your new series The Village we assist to a further spatial expansion, a society in itself, with its mute overlapping storylines and invisible struggles. How do you believe your photography evolved over the years, how did you?

A : Your analysis is beautiful and interesting. It's true that there's development from one series to the next in how the hero – or perhaps it's more correct to say 'anti-hero' – is presented. Biblical Stories was influenced by how the bible, specifically Genesis, is written: in the fashion of a character and background, as in theatre. As opposed to Greek mythology which one can read and know exactly what each hero ate, wore and with whom he fell in love, the bible is sparse on details. Cain killed Able. Why? One needs to make many assumptions. My biblical heroes were modern stereotypes of people who live in the streets of scarcity and impoverishment. In street life there's also an element of selfishness and withdrawal.

For the most part, every project is, to a certain extent, the antithesis of the previous one – which is why I created The Village to be the exact opposite of communal living. Of course, as you pointed out, I've also matured. The Soldiers series I began in my twenties, at a time when the reality was that if you were gay, you were treated as odd. Currently, I'm in my forties openly living with my male partner raising our four children together. I've changed and the way I look at the world has changed. When you're young your vision is less deep, extroverted, maybe even provocative. Yet as you age, you begin to be more thoughtful and aware of the space you occupy.

S : In the past few years in fact, you rather rapidly became a father of four: do you think that such a mayor, thrilling change in your life, with the sudden enlargement of your family unit and emotional sphere along with a first-hand experience parenting in Israel could be responsible for the ampler landscape in your new work?

A : No. From my experience personal events seep into one's art after digesting them for a long time. The artist is like a child: he's nourished from the scratches and scars he experienced in childhood. I sense it will take many long years before my parenthood is expressed in my creations. The richness of scenery is a parable for the life of the spirit in my characters. Only where there's a forest and many trees can one find deep shadows; in barren places trees are scarce. I needed these rich landscapes in order to create a large area of shadows for my protagonists/characters in which they can express their fears, trepidations and desires.

S : The land of Israel is a very young, very resolute tangible reality, with a too long, way too harsh lineage of dreams and hopes and expectations to meet. Like a diamond still rough, it was born under pressure, and brims with potential in the eyes of its people. What does The Village stand for in Israeli society, and what does it stand for, for you?

A : On one hand, The Village is a metaphor for Israel. It's a small place established after a tragedy with a charged atmosphere because it's never able to free itself from its past. On the other hand, The Village is also the arena in which psychological tensions exist. The project is built as theatre, or as a dream in which different characters present many voices which resonate within us. In the village, various tensions exist between open and closed spaces; sterile and fertile ones; lit, exposed places and those which are shaded, hidden; public versus private spaces; strict fathers as opposed to soft-hearted sons; or, alternatively by a younger generation estranged from an authoritarian father. It is, among other things, a project about growing up, and about the need to incorporate opposites and contradictions in order to continue existing and surviving. The painting which inspired the entire project – even though I didn't create any specific photograph from it – was Bruegel's Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. In a Sisyphean sort of way, the farmer in Bruegel's painting continues to plow even though dramatic events are taking place around him and Icarus falls into the sea. Like Icarus and other tragic Greek heroes, the characters in my photographs also suffer from the sin of pride; hubris is the element which undermines them.

This is connected to the place in which I feel my society exists today, yet it's also connected to my understanding that the strength of the farmer – who is, in my eyes, a metaphor for human beings – lies in the fact that he continues plowing. To enlarge this idea means that our strength to continue existing is derived from the fact that alongside the Sisyphean struggle of our daily lives we have dreams and beliefs, art and culture – call it what you will.

In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche wrote about two opposing forces in people: the Apollonian and Dionysian forces. Apollo, the sun god, represents restraint, calmness and clear reason. Dionysus, on the other hand, represents ecstasy and human creativity.

I sense that everything is composed of opposites. Art, or faith, is the inspiration for life and death; or the fear of death is frequently the inspiration for faith, or art.

S : In the dignified and wary, almost palpable atmosphere of the place, angelic masculine youths cohabit with older villagers of some subtle, delicately suggestive tragic features: the blind man, the chorus, the goat. Slightly apart, standing by the lemon trees, a young outsider and a pale horse observe their life with curious melancholy. Is there a character in the series who you could identify with, or one that you're particularly fond of?

A : The view of the photographer is usually the view of the outsider – the person who looks at things from the side. This is the way I look at things also by virtue of my biography: as a gay, who grew up in the periphery, from a middle-class Sephardic family. The first picture I photographed in this series was the boy with the horse; I identified with this immediately. In the Zionist ethos, the Ashkenazic, European or native-born image was established, which was a symbol one strove to be like. This person had to represent the complete opposite of the weak Jew who came from the Diaspora after the Holocaust. The new Jew sought to rid himself of the past and to build a new society. Frequently, erasing the past for the sake of unifying society (an idea based, to a certain extent, on socialism) caused the Jewish identity of many new immigrants from all corners of the world to be devalued.



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