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Adi Nes: Staged Photography as Contemporary Visual Midrash

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Adi Nes (1966-present), b. Kiryat Gat, Israel

Adi Nes, Interview, October 10, 2019

My art deals with issues of identity, of masculinity, and of being Israeli. I come from a Sephardic family so I deal with ethnic issues. I grew up in a small development town, Kiryat Gat. So I deal with being on the periphery instead of in the center. I am gay, so I deal with homoeroticism and gay identity. I am artist and a Jew, so I deal with art and Judaism.

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Adi Nes, Untitled 1999

Chromogenic Print, 90 x 144.5 cm, The Israel Museum

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The Last Supper, Leonardo Da Vinci, 1495-1498
Tempera on gesso, pitch and mastic



Sacrifice of Isaac, Carravagio, 1603
Oil Painting on Canvas



Duane Hanson, Supermarket Lady, 1969-70



Jean-Francois Millet, The Gleaners, 1857

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Adi Nes, Abraham and Isaac, 2004
Chromogenic Print

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Ruth and Naomi, 2006
Chromogenic Print



Ruth and Naomi
Chromogenic Print

From “Shoot Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Huddled Masses: The Biblical Stories of Adi Nes,” April, 2007

In conceptualizing the Biblical Stories series, Nes draws inspiration from early photographic views of Palestine that pictured contemporary inhabitants as if they had emerged directly out of the biblical text. The demand from tourists, pilgrims, and other Christians for images of the sites that Jesus walked made photography of the Holy Land a profitable enterprise in the 19th century. The rational and scientific nature of the new medium made photography the perfect tool to establish the “truth” of the events of the Bible and legitimize actions based on such affirmations. (Protestants, in particular, with their millennial fervor, sought to convert Jews and Muslims as a precondition of the Second Coming of Christ). The actual lives of the people who lived on the land at the time were obscured by colonizing interests, as is evident in many early survey photographs from which such figures are absent altogether. Other images that did include local people at biblical sites and ruins – most often Arabs and Bedouins – tended to present them in a “timeless” way. As Vivienne Silver-Brody has suggested in *Documentors of the Dream: Pioneer Jewish Photographers in the Land of Israel* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), the land was imaged as “a symbol of faith” framed by Christian theology.

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Reflection Question

Adi Nes' photography is richly layered and multivalent, leading us backward and forward simultaneously.

To what extent do you think his multiple, layered identities (as Kurdish, Iranian, gay, artist, Jew, Israeli) lead [or allow?] Nes to create this type of art?

Zionist Challenge

Photographers in the nineteenth century sought to portray an ideal reality of the Holy Land which harmonized with their views of Scripture and messianic teachings. And in many ways, the early Zionist artists that we encountered sought to do the same – in placing the 'New Jew' on a pedestal and envisioning a redeemed reality for the Jewish people.

Do you think the revisionist art and critical midrash of Ruth Schloss, Yigael Tumarkin and Adi Nes help to form a more holistic and healthier contemporary Israeli identity?