promise of the land – the women have been posed like Jean-François Millet *The Gleaners* (1857) [p. 34], a work in which the rural peasants were represented with great dignity and nobility. In photography in pre-State Israel women were often seen cultivating the land, working on an equal footing with men in the service of nation building. As Irit Rogoff has suggested, such representations of the bodies of women who nurtured the land and made it fertile were "used to make claims on the land and to render those claims naturalized and organic."[15] In Nes's photograph the women are scavengers on the margins of urban society rather than nurturers of the land, and their representation as such speaks to and deconstructs earlier Zionist representations.

In Nes's Biblical Stories series, the biblical heroes are displaced by contemporary immigrants – the poor, the homeless and those on the margins of society. These, in turn, have displaced the heroes of earlier Israeli photography of the pioneer generations and the dramatic photographs of nation building or of cultivating the land; in a phrase, images documenting the dream. Undermining these great narratives of Israeli society, Nes's images advance the cause of creating a new story.

15   Rogoff, *Terra Infirma*, p. 159.

Gustave Caillebotte, **The Floor Scrapers**, 1875, oil on canvas, collection of Musée d'Orsay, Paris

גוסטב קאיבוט, **מקרצפי הרצפה**, 1875, שמן על בד, אוסף מוזיאון אורסיי, פריז

from the biblical story, adding his own *midrash* by including Isaac at the table. Esau sits to his father's privileged side, at the right hand of Isaac and close to him; Jacob is at a distance, to his left.

The contemporary setting in Nes's photograph is a soup kitchen, and the composition is based on Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (1606) [p. 34]. Nes exploits Caravaggio's dramatic handling of light in the depiction of Jacob's profile, the strong shadows cast on the wall, and the halo-like projection coming through the window onto the back of Esau's head. Although a redhead, Esau has the traditional features of Jesus. He sits upright and composed, with his arms outstretched toward the bowl of lentils that the dark-haired and swarthy Jacob pushes toward him across the table. In Nes's reading of the story, the visual codes that suggest moral and ethical lessons to the viewers are ambivalent. The allusion to the *Supper at Emmaus* also adds another layer of meaning. The Gospel of Luke relates that on the day of the resurrection Jesus appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus and was invited by them to eat something although they did not recognize him. During the meal Jesus revealed himself and then disappeared. The composition's echo of Da Vinci's *Last Supper* [p. 16], along with Esau's resemblance to conventional representations of Jesus and Jacob's to Judas, also underscore the moral ambivalence of Jacob's actions. Nes sees even the soup kitchen, where everyone is wanting, as pervaded by an atmosphere of deceit and manipulation.

Two photographs of *Ruth and Naomi* [pp. 104-105] – seen in a storehouse in one and gleaning leftover vegetables in the market in the other – bring the series full circle. Ruth the Moabite, who dedicated herself to Naomi and to her people, is often referred to in the Bible as a convert to Judaism – giving a remarkable genealogy to her great-grandson, King David. In Nes's photograph, Ruth and Naomi's self-reliance is emphasized, as well as their mutual dependence. The fields of *Eretz Israel* which had found their counterparts in early photographic images of the Holy Land have been replaced here by the modern open-air markets, where the poor glean leftovers at the end of the day. In the urban field – whose utter chaos marks a site of destruction, scarcity and disruption rather than the fruits and

based the composition on Duane Hanson's *Supermarket Shopper* (1970) [p. 33], which features an absurdly made-up woman pushing a cart full of food – not a particularly political work at the time, but in retrospect an indictment of American consumerism and overabundance at a time when much of the world went hungry. Nes's Abraham is another homeless figure, old and unkempt, a familiar sight in some of the wealthiest cities in the world, where the destitute make their living collecting cans and bottles for recycling. He carries his young son, Isaac, asleep on top of the trash that fills his shopping cart. Abraham intentionally resembles Caravaggio's Abraham in *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1601-02). Significantly, Nes's portrayal of a serene Isaac is a more Jewish interpretation of the story than Caravaggio gave it: according to *midrash*, Isaac, who was thirty-seven at the time, understood what was happening and did not resist his father out of filial respect.[13] As in other photographs from the series, Nes does not illustrate a particular moment in the story. He leaves open the question of whether Abraham is on his way to Mount Moriah or returning from it. He also leaves the meaning of the cart itself ambiguous: only the burnt pieces of wood sticking out from its sides suggest that the cart itself may represent the altar. The idea that the cans and bottles in the cart will be redeemed suggests a further play on the redemption of Isaac, who is redeemed by the sacrifice of the ram in his place. But whether that will happen in this case remains to be seen.

The twins *Jacob and Esau* [p. 97] are different from each other in appearance and temperament. Much of the biblical commentary denigrates Esau as duplicitous and idolatrous, while praising Jacob for his high morals and studiousness, and affirming his efforts to secure his inheritance and his fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:3-8). Nonetheless, the biblical story of the two brothers does not dwell on the complexity of their rivalry, nor on the intricate nuances of both their characters. This is what fascinates Nes. He depicts the moment when Esau sells Jacob his birthright in exchange for a bowl of lentil stew. According to the commentators, Esau's contempt for his birthright proved that he had been "neither duped nor defrauded ... it had no value to him when he was famished and it remained meaningless after he was gorged."[14] In the photograph, Nes departs

13   Scherman, *The Chumash*, p. 103.

Caravaggio, **The Sacrifice of Isaac**, 1601-02, oil on canvas, collection of Galleria Uffizi, Florence

קראוואג'ו, **עקדת יצחק**, 1601-02, שמן על בד, אוסף גלריה אופיצי, פירנצה

14   *Ibid*., pp. 127-128.

appears like a beggar woman in a deteriorating, leaf-strewn stairwell open to the elements. According to Islamic tradition, Hagar's son, Ishmael, is the father of the Arab nation and the prophet Mohammed is descended from him. (In the Koran it is Ishmael, and not Isaac, who is nearly sacrificed by Abraham.) The story of Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion by Abraham and Sarah is often used as a symbol of the expulsion of Palestinians during the 1948 War. Nes's depiction of Hagar can also be interpreted in light of narratives of feminine identity in contemporary Israeli culture, where both Oriental and European projections of notions of femininity are evident. Against this backdrop, she is neither the passive, exotic beauty nor the hardworking pioneer who nourishes the land.[12] Yet circumscribed by her role as mother, she is a universal icon of anguished motherhood, whether an Arab or a Jew: lost in the desert, cut off from the land that defines her through the functions of giving birth to and nourishing boys so they may grow into fighting men who will inherit and control that land, or die for it.

In the photograph, Nes chose a model with features resembling Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (1936), and even posed her and styled her hair similarly. Lange's stark black-and-white image, considered the very quintessence of the documentary mode, is acknowledged in Nes's almost ashen hues. Lange's photograph, taken on a shooting trip in California under the auspices of the Government-sponsored Farm Security Administration, was widely published during the Depression and remains an iconic image of the period, paradigmatic of homelessness. Like Lange's migrant mother, Nes's Hagar is uprooted and homeless. Lange's mother, her face showing signs of age beyond her thirty-two years, touches the side of her mouth near her chin; Hagar, too, covers her mouth in worry, maybe also in shock. Both women look out of the picture without confronting the camera. Nonetheless, Nes's picture differs significantly from Lange's, which included two of the woman's children, who cling to her. In Nes's image, Hagar's despair is intensified by the very fact that her son is missing from the picture; poignantly, she makes a cupping gesture with her left hand as a sign of that emptiness.

The second photograph, *Abraham and Isaac* [p. 106], alludes to the story of the Binding of Isaac (*Akedah*), also known as the Sacrifice of Isaac. Nes has

12   For further discussion of these constructions, see Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 159.

Dorothea Lange, **Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California**, 1936, black & white photograph, courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington DC

דורותיאה לאנג, **אם מהגרת, ניפומו, קליפורניה**, 1936, תצלום שחור-לבן, באדיבות ספריית הקונגרס, וושינגטון

Michelangelo, **The Drunkennes of Noah**, 1508-12, fresco, the Sistine Chapel, the Vatican

מיכלאנג׳לו, **שכרותו של נח**, 1508–12, פרסקו, הקאפלה הסיסטינית, הוותיקן

and getting drunk on his own wine. Naked in his tent, he was discovered by his son Ham, who shared the news with his brothers, Shem and Japheth – who then "took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders and they walked backwards and covered their father's nakedness," so as not to see him in such a state. For their actions, Shem and Japheth were blessed by Noah, but as Ham's sight of his nakedness was considered disrespectful, he cursed him, saying, "a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers" (Gen. 9:23-25). For Nes, the heroic Noah, chosen by God to rebuild the world, is not only imperfect (for getting drunk) but also tragic, because his curse on Ham and his descendents, Canaan and Cush, has been used as a justification for oppression – including the enslavement of local tribes in Africa by European conquerors who believed them to be descendents of Cush.

In the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Michelangelo painted the drunken Noah surrounded by his three sons after Ham discovered his father in this disgraceful state. Nes recalls Michelangelo's composition by situating the naked figure (uncircumcised in "the land of the Jews," and thus yet another stranger marked as such) beside three automated DVD dispensers, which have replaced his three sons. According to Nes, he wanted the viewers of the photograph to recreate Ham's sin by looking at this image of a naked man. "We need Art," he proposes, "as an intermediary, in order to really see and feel empathy toward the homeless street people who exist in every modern city throughout the world – the people that we try to avoid seeing." While Nes warns of the dangers of voyeurism or alienated looking, he also suggests that art, when approached in the right way, can fulfill Noah's blessing.

Judaism is founded on the paradox of exile. In Genesis 12:1 Abraham, the first Patriarch, is commanded by God: "Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation." Abraham obeys and leaves with his wife, Sarah, for Canaan – *Eretz Israel*. There God appears to Abraham and tells him: "To your offspring will I give this land" (Gen. 12:7). Yet later, Abraham is also told that his offspring "shall be aliens in a land that is not their own." Nes engages the story of Abraham and his family in two photographs. In one, *Hagar* [p. 96], the protagonist

10 Nili Goren, "Turning Fiction into Routine," in *Between Promise and Possibility: The Photographs of Adi Nes*, edited by Daniel Cornell (Tel Aviv Museum of Art and Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 2003), p. 8.

11 See Rabbi Nosson Scherman (ed.), *The Chumash* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1993), p. 21.

Titian, **Cain Slaying Abel**, 1543-44, oil on canvas, Santa Maria della Salute, Venice

טיציאן, **קין רוצח את הבל**, 1543–44, שמן על בד, סנטה מריה דלה-סלוטה, ונציה

identified as areas with a specific socio-economic affiliation, but this identification is shared by other places in the world as well."[10]

In his two photographs of Cain and Abel [pp. 94-95], Nes presents another story of homelessness and exile, this time as part of a narrative of fratricide. In one photograph he cast the Israeli "free fighting champion" and one of his opponents in the roles of Cain and Abel. Although one brother clearly has the advantage over the other, can we really be sure which one is Cain and which Abel? In the Bible, Cain is marked by God for striking down his brother, but in the photograph it is the brother who has the lower hand who is heavily tattooed. Perhaps the photograph represents an earlier moment, when Abel had the upper hand over his brother, alluding to the biblical commentators' gloss, that Abel was actually the stronger of the two brothers and that Cain tricked Abel into releasing his grasp on him so that he could overcome him.[11] In the second of the photographs, *Abel*, based on a painting of the same subject by Peter Paul Rubens [p. 31], Abel's nearly naked body as he lies dead on a cold stone street is warmly illuminated. In the background, a red spotlight among the predominantly blue city lights ominously colors the ground, like a pool of the victim's blood. In these two photographs Nes sought to express the idea that "the victim and the perpetrator of violence both represent misery, which is bequeathed to the present human condition." In the fact that Cain's own son was a builder of cities, the biblical story itself possibly hints that this predicament may be the crux of urban life. The sensual male body of the person playing dead Abel allowed Nes to retain the impact of the Old Master version. The beautiful French film actress Audrey Tautou smiles as she gazes out from a poster inexplicably hung sideways, in sharp contrast to the reality of the surrounding misery.

The reference to film within a photograph that is constructed through a process highly dependent upon cinematic techniques brings another level of meaning to Nes's work. In addition to *Abel*, this is particularly striking in the photograph *Noah* [p. 107]. Having emerged from the ark with his family after the flood to fulfill God's commandment to "be fruitful and multiply on the earth" (Gen. 8:17), Noah, "a righteous man," debased himself by planting a vineyard

Werner Bischof, **Hungary**, 1950, gelatin silver print, the artist's estate

ורנר בישוף, **הונגריה**, 1950, הדפס כסף ג'לטיני, עזבון האמן

David looks directly yet cautiously into the camera, while sheltering the younger boy, Jonathan, who leans into him for support. The pose alludes to the way in which David held his harp, so that he appears to be plucking or playing Jonathan, releasing a silent yet soothing music.

In each of the photographs in the Biblical Stories series, the hero is positioned on the precipice of an abyss of exile or marginality, forced into the position of outcast. Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers and imprisoned in Egypt, the land of his exile, is depicted in one of the photographs [p. 98] as a young boy in a colorful striped shirt that suggests the Coat of Many Colors that Jacob had given him. He stands, dreamy-eyed and forlorn, a boy like any other with an imperfect character, in a narrow street in an impoverished neighborhood, far from home, a blonde, blue-eyed stranger. Only the bright blue sky behind him suggests his future, and the wisdom and faith that will lead him out of the abyss.

The Talmud's interpretation of Job's story of suffering and final reward, which sees it as nothing more than a parable, was startling and extraordinary to Nes. The reality of human suffering is all too clear in his *Job* [p. 102], depicted as an elderly man (portrayed by Nes's own uncle) gasping for air.

The composition of Nes's *Elijah* [p. 99] has two sources: a photograph taken in Hungary in 1950 by Swiss photographer Werner Bischof, who documented the plight of the refugees and dispossessed in Europe after World War II, and Guercino's *Elijah in the Desert Fed by Ravens* (1610-20). By portraying the Prophet, a harbinger of the messianic age, as a homeless man asleep on a bench in a housing project courtyard, he suggests the many guises adopted by the Prophet – known for his fiery nature as well as for his capacity to display vulnerability, to appear as an impoverished worker or as a non-Jew. Like Bischof's figure, in Nes's work his feet are dirty and his legs are locked together, as if tensely girded against the elements.

Nes's allusion to specifically social documentary photography, here and in other series, extends his photographs' meaning from the particularity of poverty and oppression in Israel to general conditions in contemporary society. This is also evident in the Boys series, where "the urban landscape and architecture are

Simeon Solomon, **Eight Scenes from the Story of David and Jonathan**, 1856, pencil and gold leaf on paper, collection of the Jewish Museum, London (detail)

סימיון סולומון, **שמונה סצינות מסיפור דוד ויהונתן**, 1856, עיפרון ועלה זהב על נייר, אוסף המוזיאון היהודי, לונדון (פרט)

9   See Raymond-Jean Frontain, "Subjects of the Visual Arts: David and Jonathan," *glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Transgender and Queer Culture*, accessed 31 December 2006: <http://www.glbtq.com/arts/subjects_david_jonathan.html>. See also James M. Saslow, *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts* (New York: Viking, 1999).

as Nes's work attests, has also played a central role in deconstructing the myths of national identity that the medium had helped to establish.

"Sometimes you go far in order to meet yourself," Nes has suggested in discussing how he came to the Bible as a subject for his art. Investigations of masculine and national identity have already loomed large in his series Soldiers (1994-2000), Boys (2000), and Prisoners (2003). In the Biblical Stories, he continues to explore these themes and their mutual contexts, as well as the theme of Jewish identity – for the first time making women an integral part of his work by including the stories of Hagar, and of Ruth and Naomi. In a very real sense, all of Nes's work is about the identities within himself – his origins as the son of Iranian immigrant parents from the development town of Kiryat Gat in the south of Israel, his gay identity, his identity as an artist, as a Jew, and as an Israeli. Nes, who was born in 1966, feels that the renewed importance of biblical mythology in Israeli culture in the wake of the 1967 War was instrumental in nurturing his identity. (He had already referred to that war in his Soldiers series, by quoting the famous *Life* magazine cover of June 23, 1967 [p. 141], featuring the disarmingly handsome Yossi Ben Hanan with a captured AK-47, cooling off in the Suez Canal.) Israel's victory in that war has often been read through the victory of David over Goliath, in accord with Zionist customary use of biblical narratives for the validation of contemporary national and political ones. Yet, in his Biblical Stories, rather than the heroism of David in his defeat of Goliath, Nes chose to represent David with Jonathan – the beautiful youths whose relationship has figured in art and literature as a homoerotic trope.[9]

In Nes's oeuvre, homoeroticism plays a role as a mechanism that exposes the ambivalence in a national narrative grounded in a mythos of heroic masculinity. The moment that Nes represents in his *David and Jonathan* picture [p. 101] does not have an exact parallel in the Bible, but it suggests their parting, at which they "kissed one another, and they wept with one another, until David [wept] greatly" (1 Sam. 20:41) or their rendezvous in the Wilderness at Ziph (1 Sam. 23:16-18), when they made a covenant with God and it was understood that Jonathan had put aside his ambitions for David's sake. The young man playing the red-haired

3   See Kathleen Stewart Howe, *Revealing the Holy Land: The Photographic Exploration of Palestine* (Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1997), pp. 12-13.

4   *Ibid*., p. 123.

5   Vivienne Silver-Brody, *Documentors of the Dream: Pioneer Jewish Photographers in the Land of Israel* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), p. 23.

6   Such images are reproduced in cat. *Painting with Light: The Photographic Aspect in the Work of E.M. Lilien*, curator: Micha Bar-Am (Tel Aviv: Dvir and Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1990); See also Chaim Finkelstein, "Lilien and Zionism," *Assaph – Studies in Art History* 3 (1998), pp. 195-216; Michael Berkowitz, "Art in Zionist Popular Culture and Jewish National Self-Consciousness, 1897-1914," in Ezra Mendelsohn (ed.), *Art and Its Uses: The Visual Image and Modern Jewish Society*, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 6 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 9-41; Milly Heyd, "Lilien: Between Herzl and Ahasver," in Gideon Shimoni and Robert S. Wistrich (eds.), *Theodor Herzl: Visionary of the Jewish State* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999), pp. 165-193; and cat. *E. M. Lilien: the First Zionist Artist* (Tefen: The Open Museum, 1997).

7   See Silver-Brody, *Documentors of the Dream*, p. 23.

8   *Ibid*., p. 12.

Christians for images of the sites that Jesus walked made photography of the Holy Land a profitable enterprise. The rational and scientific nature of the medium, in tandem with the idea that pictures don't lie, made the new technology, invented in 1839, 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.)[3] The actual lives of the people who lived on the land at the time were obscured by colonizing interests, and this is evident in many early survey photographs, from which figures are absent altogether. Other images, that did include local people – most often Arabs and Bedouins – at biblical sites and ruins, tended to present them in a "timeless" way. This is the case, for example, in a photograph of robed Bedouins in an encampment in the Sinai desert by British photographer Frank Mason Good, accompanied by the caption: "And David arose and went down to the wilderness of Paran" (1 Sam. 25:1).[4] The land was imaged as "a symbol of faith" framed by Christian theology.[5]

Early Zionists also framed their photographs through a biblical lens, but with other motivations: they envisioned continuity with the Jewish past of *Eretz Israel*. E.M. Lilien, often called the "first Zionist artist," merged the image of Herzl with Moses in his romantic-nationalist Jugendstil works of the fin-de-siècle, based on photographic images. Best known for his graphic works, Lilien was an early Jewish photographer in *Eretz Israel* who used images of costumed local inhabitants as the source for his biblical illustrations, created for a European market.[6] In 1919, Ya'acov Ben-Dov photographed a student from the Bezalel Art Academy as Ruth in Bedouin-style clothing, gleaning the fields and holding a sheaf of wheat [p. 30]. Rather than performing the back-breaking work of collecting the leftovers from the harvest, his Ruth is portrayed in a Pictorialist mode, within the conventions of ideal womanhood of the 19th century bourgeoisie. And Ben-Dov acknowledges: "From the outset I devoted my profession of photography in the aims of national Zionism."[7] To paraphrase Vivienne Silver-Brody, who has written on Jewish photographers in Palestine in the period 1890-1933, photography played a central role in grafting a new culture onto an old one.[8] It is significant that photography,

Hendrick Terbrugghen, **Esau Selling His Birthright**, 1627, oil on canvas, collection of Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid

הנדריק טרברוחן, **עשיו מוכר את הבכורה**, 1627, שמן על בד, אוסף מוזיאון תייסן־בורנמיזה, מדריד

1 All quotations of Adi Nes are from a conversation with the author, January 2006, New York.

2 See, for instance, Dwight L. Elmendorf, *A Camera Crusade through the Holy Land* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1912).

homeless and dispossessed, focusing on their human qualities, their suffering and hardships. As in his earlier Boys series, the background for the Biblical Stories series is the social and political reality of contemporary Israel, as it moves further and further away from the socialist ideology of its founders. Reports suggesting that the poor try to forage leftover food from the market partially inspired his two photographs entitled *Ruth and Naomi*; media attention to the opening of soup kitchens is reflected in *Jacob and Esau*, discussed in further detail below.

A photograph from the Boys series (2000) [p. 72], referring to Itzhak Danziger's sandstone sculpture *Nimrod* (1938-39) [p. 19], already evinced Nes's awareness of the extent to which biblical narratives have been harnessed to the historiography of the contemporary State of Israel in order to validate constructions of national identity. His work turned a spotlight on the ambivalent legacy of Nimrod, a biblical hero who was known as a mighty hunter as well as a tyrannical ruler – and yet was taken up as an emblem by the cultural-political movement known as "The Canaanites," which attempted in the 1940s and 50s to shape an Israeli national identity based on ancient semitic culture and distanced itself from traditional Jewish religion and Diaspora Jewry. Nes's engagement with the image of Nimrod is related to constructions of masculinity, particularly masculine Israeli identity, as part of his questioning of "the dream and what happened to it."[1] The Biblical Stories series continues this interrogation, particularly as it looks at the promise Israel held for immigrants from different backgrounds.

In his versions of the biblical stories, the heroes are in desperate straits, economically and emotionally impoverished. Undermining the purity and promise embodied in the idea of the biblical landscape, Nes chose to set his biblical narratives in the contemporary urban environs of Tel Aviv. His images reveal a landscape blighted by urban decay – graffiti, unkempt lawns, litter, and an infrastructure in need of repair. In these urban settings, his figures are presented as alienated from the very land that has given meaning to modern Israeli national identity. Such alienation is a profound symptom of disillusionment: to be homeless in the Jewish homeland is the ultimate irony.

In conceptualizing the Biblical Stories series, Nes drew inspiration from early photographic views of Palestine that pictured contemporary inhabitants as if they had emerged directly out of the biblical text.[2] The demand from tourists, pilgrims, and other

Adi Nes's Biblical Stories

Susan Chevlowe

Adi Nes at work; photo: Sarit Lefkovitz

עדי נס בעבודה; צילום: שרית לבקוביץ

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When an artist in the 21st century, in particular one who is Jewish, chooses to engage the Bible through his art, it is natural to see the result as a form of *midrash* – the tradition of biblical exegesis that imparts a deeper meaning to biblical legend and makes it relevant to contemporary readers. In his Biblical Stories series, Nes brings a visual panoply drawn from art history, cinema, and the popular media to bear on his readings of the biblical texts, rendering acute observations of humanity through gesture, pose, setting and expression.

Through a process of research and cinematographic staging, Nes builds up his photographs in layers, only to pare down the incident that has sparked his imagination to its essentials. The resulting images, more than simple reenactments – though constructed with rich, authentic detail – are in this sense true to the original millennia-old narratives, while re-invigorating their meaning and power for today. Nes may be compared to Jeff Wall, the Canadian photographer who popularized contemporary staged photography beginning in the late 1970s. Nes's photographs are intensely physical, with a three-dimensionality enhanced by chiaroscuro lighting, narrative drama, and intense realistic characterization indebted to Caravaggio. Like Wall, he uses actors, although they are not professionals but ordinary people recruited through ads, on the internet, and by word of mouth. He emphasizes narratives that are open-ended, not deterministic, to tell stories about real people and everyday experience. Like Wall, he creates cinematographic images that refer to art history, but unlike him he does not rely on digital manipulation or composite images. Perhaps this more traditional approach accounts in part for the great humanism emanating from his work.

Nes begins each series with a script and a thematic framework which structures and unifies it – as do the lighting, palette and setting. In the present series (2003-06), consisting of fourteen images, he represents biblical heroes as today's