

## Adi Nes

### The Timeless Allegory of the Ages of Man

When you experience one in real time, it's hard to remember that eventually every complex geopolitical moment gets distilled to a simple plotline. Someday, schoolchildren will learn that religions clashed frequently in the Middle East, and, in the early 2000s, this conflict spread throughout the world, provoking terrible intrigues, revenges, and tragedies. Right now everything seems so original, but in fact we're really living through several chapters of *War and Peace*. The Texas oilman and WMD elements provide several novel Dallas-like and Tom Clancyian twists, but otherwise it's basically variations on the same old stories.

Of course, in Israel, where God and history are always nearby, it's easier to recognize re-stagings of time-tested narratives. Adi Nes uses photography to expose the eternal in the everyday. Using teams of models and assistants as well as cinematic lighting and set-dressing techniques, he constructs sumptuous tableaux that expand reality. His images layer contemporary life, Biblical and mythological stories, and iconic photographs from the founding of the State of Israel. Among Nes' best known works are an army barracks version of Da Vinci's *Last Supper*, the death of Adonis on a settlement-town street, and the famous Life magazine cover shot of Yossi Ben-Hanan in the Suez Canal recast with frolicking glamour-boy soldiers. The fact that the artist is a gay man fascinated with erotics and politics lends the work a unique *frisson* – an unsettlingly sexy charge complicating its connection to the eternal tales within us all.

This selection of five large-scale male portraits spans Nes' career and introduces a work from a new series based on figures from the Old-Testament. The detail- and color-saturated photographs are less histrionic than many of Nes' other constructed images, which rival French history painting in their storytelling punch. Nonetheless, they resonate with symbolic power and illuminate the heart of his project. The photographs highlight the range of themes defining Nes' work, in particular his interests in the outsider – cultural, religious, and sexual – in cultural history. For example, an image of a young boy in a striped shirt standing in a rundown alleyway, which, like all of Nes' work, is untitled but bears the working name "Joseph," contemporizes the image of the beautiful, dreamy, beloved son of the patriarch Jacob. To American eyes, this portrait of a kid in a faded, long-sleeve Technicolor dreamcoat evokes the Israeli self-image cultivated by its early settlers: the scrappy kid in a bad neighborhood. Gazing back at the viewer with large, serious eyes, this new version of cartoonist Dosh's "Srulik" begs the question of what's become of the original, carefree character.

Two depictions of adolescents further Nes' research into identity and masculinity. The boy with the freshly shaved head and too-big olive drab t-shirt is an image familiar to all Israelis: the young adult thrust from childhood into the army. The flecks of hair on his shoulders emphasize the prickly abruptness of this transition. And the image of the handsome teenager set against a yellow background represents the artist testing himself against Michelangelo, Caravaggio, and other connoisseurs of the male form as much as any specific good-looking young Israeli.

A portrait of a bearded, middle-age man comes from a spread made for the international men's fashion magazine *Vogue Hommes* that can only be described as *tragikinky*. Using a grim prison as a backdrop, Nes dressed Arab, Chinese, and other "foreign" models in designer clothing, creating a discomfiting mixture of pent-up horniness and social commentary. Nes, who experienced the humanity of Israel's political enemies firsthand during a brief stint as an army prison guard, poses this convict as a serene, stylish Buddha.

A final photograph envisions Job, the Bible's aging, suffering everyman, as a wizened Israeli senior citizen holding court on a grimy streetcorner. Old enough to be a victim of the Holocaust and/or a hero of the War of Independence, this frail character – tested and humbled during a long life – stares searchingly into the distance,

as if contemplating his own demise. You can almost hear him mutter, "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away."

Together, Nes' portraits update and make specifically Israeli the timeless allegory of the ages of man, best summarized in Shakespeare's *As you Like It*:

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players,  
They have their exits and entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.

The evolution outlined in this comedy includes a helpless infancy, a squalling childhood, a love-obsessed adolescence, a passion-driven warrior phase, a self-confident middle age, a doddering old age, and, finally, a helpless death. Unabashedly theatrical, romantic, and homoerotic, Nes' examples from this *memento mori* cycle represent one artist's quest to locate evolving lives and an evolving nation in history's continuum. We may have met these characters and heard their tales of tragedy and transcendence somewhere before, but Adi Nes' richly compassionate and integrative imagination brings them to life with powerful immediacy and relevance.

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