

Israel and the West Bank, Through the Eyes of a Dozen Visitors

by **Vince Aletti**, March 16th 2016



“The Weinfeld Family” (2009) by Frederic Brenner. Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York

“This Place,” an exhibit now at the Brooklyn Museum after stops in Prague and Tel Aviv, collects the work of twelve international photographers, made in Israel and the West Bank during extended visits between 2009 and 2012. One of those photographers, Frédéric Brenner, conceived the project as a way to approach a fraught and familiar subject from a number of fresh perspectives. In the exhibition’s catalogue, he writes, “I wanted to find collaborators who were not embedded in the daily conflicts and dialectics of Israeli and Palestinian life, and who could look without complacency but with compassion...I was determined to identify artists who were driven by questions, who embraced uncertainty and paradox, and who, through their highly individual work, could illuminate the many fault lines of this place.”



Josef Koudelka, Route 60, Beit Jala, Bethlehem area. Specially designed slabs were incorporated into the wall along major transport routes such as Road 60 to prevent potential attacks. Courtesy MAGNUM PHOTOS

A French Jew best known for pictures documenting the Jewish diaspora, Brenner had come to see Israel as “a place of radical alterity, of radical ‘otherness,’ ” so “it made sense to invite ‘others’ to question ‘otherness.’ ” Of those others—Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth, Josef Koudelka, Rosalind Fox Solomon, Gilles Peress, Nick Waplington, Fazal Sheikh, Jungjin Lee, Wendy Ewald, Stephen Shore, and Martin Kollar—only a few had ever been to the country before, and none had produced a substantial and focussed body of work there.

Not all of them have pulled that off here either, but the collective impact of “This Place” is substantial. Even when the photographers take up similar subjects (big families at home, checkpoints and barriers), each has a unique point of view, and the range of styles, formats, and scale makes for a lively installation. Jeff Wall, who produced only a single photograph for “This Place,” gets to open the show—and set the tone. “Daybreak” is a dimly lit landscape under a blank sky, white at the horizon and pale blue above. Beyond a stretch of rocks and a dirt road, there’s a dense grove of olive trees, and beyond that a long, low building with a few guard towers: a prison. The lumpy, colorful mounds in the foreground are sleeping figures—blanket-covered Bedouin olive pickers who will rise with the sun and bed down again when it sets. Wall saw that scene one year, just as the harvest was ending, and returned the next year to make the picture over a period of nearly a week, accumulating images taken just before dawn that he then digitally cobbled together for the final print. The result is charged but ambiguous; when it was shown alongside other work in Wall’s 2015 show at Marian Goodman, it appeared to address a theme of homelessness and migration. Here, it introduces the idea of displacement—a nomadic existence on contested land—and the threat of containment, if not imprisonment.

In a divided country, even seemingly straightforward pictures of the landscape—and “This Place” is full of them—have complicated backstories, with wall labels to explain them. In some cases, those labels are more interesting than the work they accompany, but Fazal Sheikh’s grid of forty-eight aerial views of desert terrain rewards viewers on all levels. Sheikh’s theme is erasure and forced resettlement, mostly of Bedouin villages whose traces have been obliterated or covered over by military training grounds, reforestation tracts, toxic-waste sites, and new settlements. Seen from above, these sites turn abstract:

pale, sand-colored ground that is smudged, gouged, and haphazardly patterned, like art-brut drawings. But the work's seductive aesthetic doesn't undermine its concern with a traumatized territory or the history buried there. Perhaps because Josef Koudelka's panoramic photographs of the wall that surrounds much of the West Bank don't need any explanation, they have an especially strong presence here. Reproduced in heavily inked black and white, they're shown in a slide-like projection and as pages in an accordion-fold book displayed under glass on a long, narrow platform that becomes the show's own dividing line—a symbolic barrier that can only hint at the wall's imposing, deadening presence. Working on both sides of a divide that Koudelka says “mutilates the Holy Land,” he doesn't really pretend to balance. Some graffiti he saw spray-painted there summed up his feelings: “One Wall, two prisons.”

Photographs of people who navigate that divide ground the show in a wonderfully complicated human presence. Nick Waplington, who spent several years in Israel as part of this project, focussed on Jewish families—many of them new immigrants from Canada, Britain, and the U.S.—who had moved into settlements in the West Bank. His uninflected group portraits and suburban landscapes give little hint of the furiously contested nature of the settlements and their occupants' position as outsiders seen by some as righteous pioneers and by others as zealous interlopers. Rosalind Fox Solomon's portraits, hung close together in an alcove here, are more probing and more uneasy. She photographed widely and among all sorts of people, usually subjects who elude stereotype and definition. Solomon's refusal to



Jeff Wall, “Daybreak, on an Olive Farm in the Negev, Israel” (2011). During his first visit to Israel in October 2010, Jeff Wall came upon a scene of Bedouin olive pickers sleeping on a farm near Mitzpe Ramon, which sits in the shadow of a large prison. He returned for the next harvest in October 2011 to recreate the scene and make his image “Daybreak”.



"Jerusalem" (2011) by Rosalind Solomon
Courtesy Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York

label her pictures with anything but the place where they were made forces us to examine them—and our preconception—more closely. Wendy Ewald doesn't dispense with descriptive information in the work she presents here, but she also effectively undermines narrow preconceptions.

As with all her projects, Ewald acts as a facilitator, providing cameras to other people (often children, always amateurs) and editing and presenting their pictures. For "This Place," she worked with sixth graders in a kibbutz and a Bedouin village, the owner of a market stall in Jerusalem, students at a military academy, and Gypsy children in the Old City, among many others. Their snapshots of ceremonies, meals, landmarks, animals, friends, and family gatherings combine for a fragmented, random, and disarmingly intimate view of a place far more multicultural than its politicians care to admit. Sidestepping conflict and controversy, Ewald suggests that the best way to enter the conversation "This Place" sparks is by recognizing and understanding that heterogeneity.