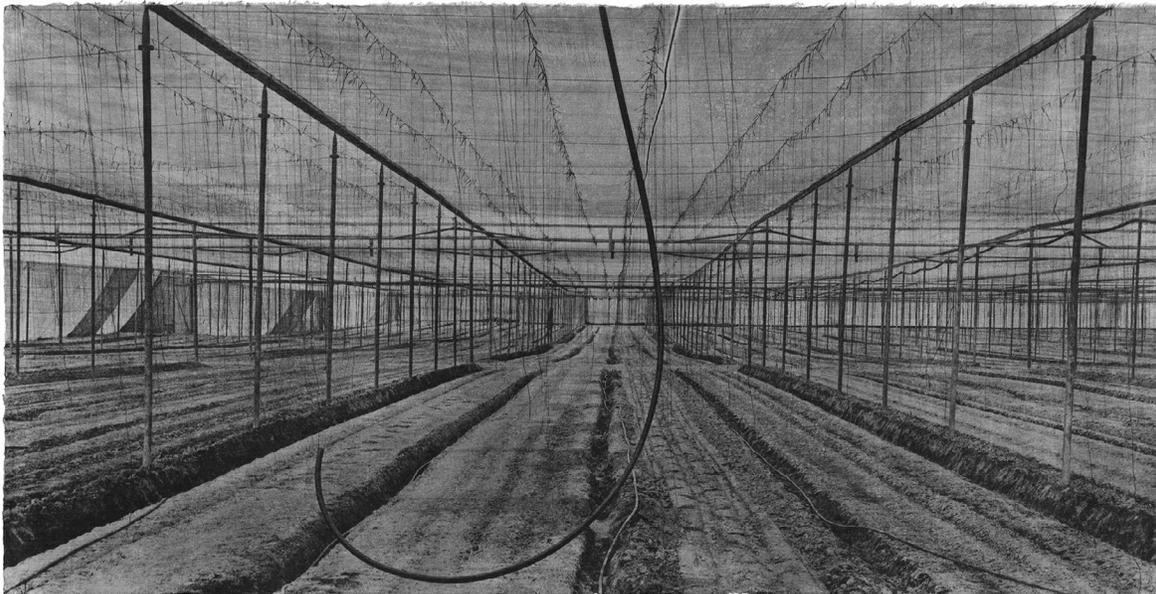


A Dozen Diverse Visions of Israel

A new exhibit, “This Place,” at the Brooklyn Museum, aims to go beyond the familiar divide

by **Alexandra Wolfe**, March 4th 2016



“Unnamed Road 002” (2011) by Jungjin Lee

Photographer Frédéric Brenner made his name taking pictures of Jews all around the world, but his latest project focuses on just one country: Israel. His new exhibition, “This Place” at New York’s Brooklyn Museum, showcases photos by 11 artists and Mr. Brenner himself.

Israel has fascinated Mr. Brenner all his adult life. Born in Paris in 1959 to secular Jewish parents, he didn’t become interested in Jewish issues until he went to university in Paris, where he set out to become a social anthropologist and to study Jewish identity.

Photography was his means of research, and the concept has guided his career. Mr. Brenner, 57, is best known for his sweeping “Diaspora” series, in which he visited 40 countries over 25 years to chronicle the far-flung Jewish people and their “portable identity.”



Artwork by Nick Waplinton

He calls his new exhibit, open through June 5, “the other face of the coin”—Jewish identity as it has found expression in a specific place and among a large population of non-Jews in the Middle East. The series features about 500 photos by photographers from eight countries, including Wendy Ewald from the U.S., Jungjin Lee from South Korea and Nick Waplinton of Britain. The well-known photographers Thomas Struth, Steven Shore and Jeff Wall also joined the project.

The subjects of the series are drawn from across Israel’s familiar political and religious boundaries. In one photo, Mr. Brenner shows a family of Jewish settlers with cattle and sheep in the West Bank’s Judean Hills. In another, the French photographer Gilles Peress captures Palestinian children playing in the streets of East Jerusalem.

Mr. Brenner says that the region’s deep conflicts were an “unavoidable reality” but adds that the photographers never ran into any trouble. In the West Bank as in Israel itself, he says, his strategy was the same: He would meet local people and get to know their stories before photographing them.

Mr. Brenner thought that the best way to get beyond the political narrative of the Israel-Palestinian conflict was to invite photographers from outside the region. He wanted them to give a sense of the history of different traditions and religions in the country, to show how everyone in Israel is an outsider of some kind. “I thought it would be more pertinent to bring others to question this otherness.”

Mr. Brenner says that he didn't choose photographers with experience in conflict zones because he wanted them to have a more "poetic" approach. He also wanted each photographer's work to differ from the others as much as possible.

Although Mr. Brenner was responsible for finding and helping to select the photographers in the show, he calls himself the project's producer rather than its curator. He came up with the concept, assembled a team of organizers and got funding. The independent photography curator Charlotte Cotton, who has held positions at such places as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and London's Victoria & Albert Museum, curated "This Place."

"I became a kind of conductor of a huge symphonic orchestra," Mr. Brenner says. "The idea was to get each artist to play according to his own score and then all to play together."

From 2009 to 2012, the photographers spent anywhere from weeks to months in Israel and the West Bank and were free to photograph whatever they wanted.

The Czech photographer Josef Koudelka—best known for his pictures of the Soviet invasion of Prague in the 1960s—captured stark, barren images of the security barrier separating much of the West Bank from Israel. Mr. Waplinton, who has focused on images of class and conflict in the past, contributed portraits of families living in Israeli settlements. Some of the artists, such as Ms. Lee, who is known for her photographic landscapes printed on handmade paper, focused on desert views and single objects in nature.

Mr. Brenner's own photos in the exhibit attempt to show "longing, belonging and exclusion." One image portrays the multiple generations of a family, each with different attire and expressions; the oldest is wearing a more traditional outfit.

Mr. Brenner considers "This Place" as much an effort to explore his own background as to understand Israel. "It's my search, my journey of: How do we live? How do we embrace the foreign, the strange, the stranger within ourselves?"