

Capturing Human Moments Amid Chaos in Israel and the West Bank

by **Roberta Smith**, February 18th 2016



“Contact Sheet, Palestinian Jerusalem” (2013) by Gilles Peress is part of the “This Place”, exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.
Credit Byron Smith for *The New York Times*



“Jerusalem, 2011” by Rosalind Fox Solomon.
Credit 2011 Rosalind Fox Solomon

In “This Place,” an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, life and photography and art cause sparks to fly. Its more than 600 images have been taken by 12 well-known photographers, and document life on one of the most contested stretches of land in the world: Israel and the West Bank, where Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians, Bedouins and Africans, among others, often live tensely side by side, and the threat of violence is never far away.

Though none of the images could be considered news photographs, they are rarely less than striking and they vigorously play off one another. When so much art-world photography is staged, heavily conceptual or even abstract, “This Place” is refreshing for emphasizing the genre of concerned or engaged photography. Although engagement may be unavoidable in this exhibition, where history is so heavy and life so fraught. Yet the show is also very much a meditation on the expansiveness of photography itself. Few things illuminate differences in sensibility and style like a dozen photographers finding their way through the same subject.

“This Place” was conceived by the French photographer Frédéric Brenner, who has long documented the Jewish diaspora and who has been taking pictures in Israel since 1978, when he was 19.



Portrait of Ruth Chaya Leonov-Carmely, Nechama Weitman and Pnina Leonov, by Frédéric Brenner in 2010. Credit Frédéric Brenner, Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York



Stephen Shore's "St. Sabas Monastery, Judean Desert" (2009). Credit Stephen Shore and 303 Gallery, New York

He assembled a team of organizers and raised support from several private sources, determined to avoid government involvement. He ultimately chose photographers who were neither Israeli nor Palestinian, but outsiders. In the end, he also decided to include his own work. In his interview in the catalog, Mr. Brenner tells Charlotte Cotton, the show's curator, "As my idea began to crystallize, it made sense to invite 'others' to question 'otherness.'"

The 11 photographers invited to participate are American, Canadian, European and Korean. Some work digitally, others develop prints. They include the photojournalist Gilles Peress and the sensitive portraitist of people under stress, Rosalind Fox Solomon. But Mr. Brenner has also mixed in art-world photographers like Thomas Struth, Steven Shore and Jeff Wall.

Mr. Wall is known for large, elaborately staged photographs that usually have an acute social subtext. Perhaps not surprisingly, with a little looking, he discovered a ready-made Jeff Wall scene, full of social fissures, in the Negev. "Daybreak," the first photograph in the exhibition, depicts a group of Bedouin workers wrapped in bright blankets sleeping at the edge of an olive grove during harvest time, while an enormous industrial-looking complex — a prison, it turns out — looms on the horizon. The accompanying text panel begins with a disclaimer from Mr. Wall's catalog interview: "I witnessed it and didn't invent anything."

Inside the show, you're tugged this way and that by differences in style and subject. There are large and small photos in color and black and white; some dot the walls irregularly, others hang in tight grids. They offer sandy landscapes, cityscapes and people, either pausing for the camera or on the move. As if blessing the show, Mr. Brenner's relatively modest work comes early: a sparse arrangement of clear, concentrated portraits of Israeli families that are among his first forays into color, and a large, lonely image of the partly-built Palace Hotel (now the Waldorf Astoria) in Jerusalem, a hollow shell that evokes the Roman Colosseum, but with soundstage fragility.



Fazal Sheikh's aerial views of the Negev Desert. Credit Byron Smith for *The New York Times*

Mr. Peress, known for documenting regions of conflict in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Rwanda, makes images mainly of young Palestinian men going through checkpoints, hanging out or flitting with danger. We see two slim adolescents, their heads wrapped in scarves, make obscene gestures to Israeli soldiers just off camera. With their subjects often caught in motion, these images make the tightrope of life in the West Bank especially palpable.

Ms. Solomon's magnetic portraits cut across all ethnic and racial lines and are arguably the most deeply human images in the show and perhaps the most traditional, reaching back to the work of Diane Arbus, Paul Strand and Eugène Atget. Each one is printed by the artist in rich black-and-white tones — a moment of stillness snatched from the chaos of life.

Nick Waplinton's color photographs, in contrast, focus on Jewish settlers in the West Bank, some in comfortable homes, others barely camping out. Mr. Waplinton also displays images of new settlements, along with some sizable found objects: colorfully painted water tanks. In his catalog interview he talks of learning to read the region's visual codes: the water tanks are found on top of the homes of Palestinians, who are not allowed access to the main Israeli water supply.

Displayed on two free-standing walls that cut through the show's main gallery, big, handsome color images by Thomas Struth and Stephen Shore are both aloof and opulent. Most of Mr. Struth's photos single out specific buildings and interiors — including Tel Aviv's City Hall, where Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing Jewish extremist — and give them a slightly sinister glamour. Mr. Shore's sweeping scenes alternate the new and ancient, all under the same unremitting sun: cheek-by-jowl apartment buildings in the divided city of Hebron and historical, if not biblical sites: Mount Sodom, the Michmash Valley and the St. Sabas Monastery in the Judean Desert.



Works from Jungjin Lee's "Unnamed Road" series. Credit Byron Smith for *The New York Times*

Two photographers take up landscape in sharply different ways. The large, dark melancholic landscapes from Jungjin Lee's "Unnamed Road" series might almost be Romantic charcoal drawings. Shot in black and white and blurred by being printed on mulberry paper and then digitally enlarged, the images aren't as haunting as they should be. The exception is a startling picture of intersecting gravel roads that looks like a body being flung.

The American photographer Fazal Sheikh may be best known for images of displaced people, but for "This Place" he took to the air to conjure displacement from afar. Dominated by golden sand, his aerial views of the Negev are beautiful, even abstract, until you realize that they are scarred by shell craters, signs of military maneuvers, the ruins of ancient villages and recent evictions. Looking at them is like reading palms.

The three most impressive photographers approach the region's tensions in markedly different ways. Martin Kollar, a Slovakian, makes color pictures that hop from subject to subject but are on edge or surreal. They show dead or wounded animals, people undergoing medical procedures, a crudely camouflaged jeep and a series of cubelike buildings that seem altogether too white and crisply geometric to be real. Mr. Kollar does not label his images; they engross and unsettle on their own.

The Czechoslovakian-born French photographer Josef Koudelka makes things grimly clear in a slide projection, a foldout book and one panoramic photo. Mr. Koudelka first became known for up-close images of confrontations taken during Russia's 1968 invasion of Prague, but he is equally adept at gentler, more poetic images.

In "This Place," his images are starkly empty of human life. Instead, they focus on the separation barrier, or wall, that twists and turns through Jerusalem and beyond, separating Israel from the West Bank. The barrier surges over hills like a never-ending freight train, cuts through buildings and parallels roads, changing from concrete to cinder block to metal as it goes. It is a relentless presence, almost a beast.



Thomas Struth's "The Faez Family, Rehovot," (2009).
Credit Byron Smith for *The New York Times*

But beyond the picture frames, life goes on, especially in the nearly 400 postcard-size photographs contributed by Wendy Ewald that, with Ms. Solomon's work, give the show a kind of grand finale. Ms. Ewald again turns photography into a collective, participatory activity by having people photograph their own lives.

For "This Place," Ms. Ewald distributed cameras and taught basic skills to people, young and old, in 14 locations in Israel and the West Bank: grade schools, military academies and villages, whether Israeli, Palestinian or Bedouin. She edited the images, arranging 30 from each group on a set of shallow shelves hung on the wall. Infused with the casual precision of intimacy, these images could be excerpts from exceptional scrapbooks or Instagram feeds. Weddings and other rituals take place, old friends meet up, meals are shared, newborns are shown off, teenagers turn the cameras on their friends and themselves. Whatever the time or place, the heart of the matter is regularly reached here — and throughout this moving and insightful show.

A version of this review appears in print on February 19, 2016, on page C21 of the New York edition with the headline: "Capturing the Human Amid the Chaos."