

THE ARTS

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Bedouin life from a child's eye view through a camera

by Anita Kantrowitz, Contributing Writer



A young Bedouin boy casually leans against a rough-hewn wooden table, his kaffiyeh blowing in the wind. Laid before him are some of the traditional tools of Bedouin coffee-making, essential to their culture of hospitality. A mortar and pestle for grinding the beans, a large cast-iron pan for roasting them, and a bacraj, or coffeepot.

Behind him is a section of a cinder-block wall, a sign of the permanent housing that is gradually replacing traditional Bedouin tents. English writing appears across the chest of the Western-style sweatshirt he wears beneath his jalabiyya jacket.

The photograph is part of an exhibition titled, "Passages Between the Past and Future: Photography by Bedouin Children of Abu Kaf, Israel," which continues through Sept. 30 at the Venice Arts Gallery. According to Kim Frumin, the educator, artist and Fulbright Fellow who designed and implemented the project, this and other photos in the exhibition accurately show the fluidity between tradition and modernity at Abu Kaf.

Frumin sees the boy's relaxed pose, amid artifacts ancient and new, as epitomizing a "great harmony ... between the past and the future" in the children's lives.

The seeds of this project were sown in the summer of 2003, when Frumin visited Israel on a community service trip. Walking through the Bedouin village of Wadi El Na'am, Frumin felt like the "pied piper of 35 millimeter film." Fascinated by the camera slung over her shoulder, the children followed her around, excitedly calling out in Hebrew: "Take my picture!"

Frumin was intrigued by the fact that "in a village without water or electricity ... the children were so excited about the camera." Concerned with escalating tensions between the Negev Bedouins and Israel over land disputes and access to basic services, she thought about ways she might help create bridges between the cultures.

"I realized that my experience and expertise lay in art education and in working with different cultures," she said.

With the children's excitement for photography fresh in her mind, Frumin decided to use art "as a tool for communication and expression."

From December 2004 through April 2005, Frumin worked with 10 youths at a school in the recently recognized Bedouin village of Abu Kaf. The students practiced taking and developing pictures -- none had ever used a camera before -- and examined photographs taken by other children around the world.

Frumin and the children also "spent a lot of time with the idea ... of how the camera gives you new eyes to see everyday things in new ways," she said. "I hoped that spending time examining and reflecting on their community would foster a pride in their unique culture and a love for Israel."

Though shy at first, the students quickly became eager to write and talk about their culture.

"The project tapped into a wellspring of thoughts [and] feelings about their community and their traditions," Frumin said. They also "knew they had a unique perspective to share, the experience of being a Bedouin child," a notion that was very "empowering" for the children.

In another photo, a young girl is counting on her fingers as she kneels for prayer. Frumin explained that "she is praising Allah the prescribed number of times and is showing how kids remember to count the correct number."

The principal of the Bedouin school, Ali Abu Kaf, has been so impressed by the children's "work, their ideas ... and the power of their writing and photographs," that he suggested Frumin undertake an expanded second round of the project. This time, however, he'd like the Bedouin children to partner with children from Jewish kibbutzim in the area.

As Frumin said, "the project would be a 'living together' -- not just tolerating each other or existing together -- project." Frumin hopes to begin this second round in February or March and is "actively looking for sponsors."

"Passages Between the Past and Future: Photography by Bedouin Children of Abu Kaf, Israel," through Sept. 30. Venice Arts Gallery, 1809 Lincoln Blvd., Venice. (310) 822-8533.