

BARBARA GROVER

November 20 - December 31, 2004 at [Sherry Frumkin Gallery](#), Santa Monica

by Orville O. Clarke, Jr.

The recent death of PLO Leader Yasser Arafat has thrust the problem of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to center stage again, not that it's been far from our collective minds for many years. But it is a fortunate coincidence that Barbara Grover's exhibition focuses unabashedly on the problems that common people, and she displays both Israeli and Palestinian subjects, face living in a divided and deadly Middle East.



"Um: Um Subhi by her front door, Jenin Refugee Camp," 2004, photograph.

It would be an easy out to focus only on the topicality of her art, which is in fact a powerful and impressive demonstration of the common bonds that people share. The installation consists of twelve life-size portraits (44" x 60") paired with narratives of those appearing in the photographs on an accompanying canvas. To further immerse the visitor, the narratives are recorded and played in the gallery, bombarding gallery goers with text, images, and spoken words.



"Moshe: Moshe in his garden, Soosiya Settlement," 2004, photograph.

The blending of text and image has a long history in art, ranging from Pablo Picasso to Barbara Krueger. Grover pairs these large individual presences with their own words makes for a combined impact which is complementary. The subjects that Grover selected range from the aged and wise grandparents whose knowledge and wisdom are crucial to our civilization, to the burning intensity of youth--a young pregnant woman and a child.

In both documentary as well as in aesthetic terms, we are with the people most affected by the actions of politicians and warriors. The artist allows us into their world in a way that lends them greater dimension and presence than would conventional portrait photographs or paintings.

The images of the narrators have a seductive quality. We visit them on the steps of their home, in the den surrounded by their beloved books, or in front of a school. The world that is presented is that of the everyday and the comfortable; we are brought into their realm to catch a realistic glimpse of their lives. This is not the “photo op” that fills the evening news or pages of weekly magazines. It is precisely the ordinariness of the locations that brings us in. Furthermore, in the tradition of August Sander or even Walker Evans’ images in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, it is the everyday that has the most power, as we are transported into a place we can understand and in many cases share. It is through this commonality that we gain understanding.



"Amit: Amit in the family computer room, Kibbutz Yiron," 2004, photograph.

The full natural scale of each work puts the narrators in our space and allows us to regard them face to face. Grover has each subject look straight at us as they give their testimony on the Arab/Israeli controversy. We become witnesses to their struggle for some sort of resolution in a land of discord. To listen as they describe their personal search to reach a compromise that will allow them to live in a land loved by two cultures lends fresh, at times unexpected perspective to the familiar political frame. It is this love of land and tradition that binds the narrators representing each side together and provides some basis for optimism that a larger resolution will come.



"Sanabel: Sanabel in her neighborhood, Deiheshe Refugee Camp," 2004, photograph.

While the overall message that is presented is one of hope, the words that accompany the images present a range of emotions that confront as well as comfort: hope, despair, anger, and above all love. Grover’s installation will haunt you and provoke reflection afterwards regarding the faces and words of those this conflict has touched in so many ways. Perhaps it is best encapsulated by one of the artist’s subjects, *Anat*: “But I am not going anywhere. I am part of this place and part of its tragedy.”

