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GALLERY REVIEWS

They live amid deadly violence

■ Everyday people in the Middle East provide their perspectives in 'This Land to Me.'

By Leah Ollman , Special to The Times, Special to The Times

If there is one statement in "This Land to Me — Some Call it Palestine, Others Israel" that will stop you in your tracks and stun you into rethinking some basic assumptions, it's this remark by a Palestinian woman named Nuha Awadallah: "The one thing I have never dared ask my best friend, a Jewish Holocaust survivor, is why she agreed to come to Palestine and why she didn't leave when she became aware that she was living on my land."

Since when are Palestinian nationalists best friends with Jewish Holocaust survivors?



Ellen confesses that she finds men with multiple tattoos "sexy."



Projection
(Courtesy Griffin Contemporary)

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This might be the most jarring testimony in the show at Sherry Frumkin Gallery, but others also hold revelations, affirmations and surprises. **Barbara**

Grover, a political consultant turned photojournalist, made this stirring installation after interviewing and photographing Palestinians and Israelis living in cities, villages, refugee camps and kibbutzim. She printed a dozen black-and-white portraits on large white canvas panels and hung them beside slightly smaller panels of text.

Walking into the gallery space is akin to entering a life-size magazine spread. At first, the conventionality of the format threatens to dull attention. In time — and it doesn't take much, just a minute to read any panel — the potency of the words emerges, and it begins to make more sense for the vehicle not to call much attention to itself.

That said, Grover's photographs are certainly handsome and lucid, cleanly composed and moderately generous with contextual information. The subjects engage our gaze directly. Essentially, Grover positions us in direct conversation with each man, woman and child. A soundtrack of interview excerpts in Hebrew, Arabic and English plays in the gallery, adding another layer of texture to the installation, but making it a bit harder to focus on the words in print.

The effectiveness of the project hinges on Grover's access to a range of voices and the candor she's able to elicit from each. Grover asked her subjects what the land means to them, and the answers, although tinged with familiar political rhetoric, reach deeply into how the Middle East conflict plays out through personal



relationships and each resident's sense of self.

The author Amos Oz refers to Israel as one big refugee camp, and these testimonies affirm it. Everyone feels displaced in some way, whether it's the Palestinian teenager who doesn't feel fully human living in a refugee camp, away from her family's village, or the American-born Jew who's settled in Israel but feels estranged from the government's policies.

In Grover's installation, we hear from a Palestinian woman whose husband is a jailed member of the militant Martyr Yasser Arafat Brigade, formerly known as Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, and an Egyptian-born Jewish woman who fought in Israel's war of independence as a teenager and who describes her connection to the land as that of a child toward the mother who nursed her. And we hear from a Palestinian university professor who believes that the land belongs to no one but God and that "God does

not like to see his children fighting."

Some make a religious claim to the land, some a historical claim. Running through them all, even the youngest voice, is a sense of exhaustion from the enduring conflict. "We have both lost time to live like normal people," says a Palestinian from East Jerusalem, who has carried weapons since the age of 7, lost a son in the struggle and come to the conclusion that peace is more important than land.

Grover doesn't give much time to militant viewpoints, but those are the perspectives most often heard in the media. There, the situation is billed as a zero-sum game, with one side's gain spelling the other's loss. The voices Grover has highlighted make it evident how much more complex reality is on the ground. There are multiple, coexisting truths. Faith, fear and hope intermingle for all the players, and contradiction is a basic condition of life.

Grover's installation amplifies viewpoints otherwise muffled by the clamor of reportage that centers on acts of violence. Earnest and valiant, her work asserts the convincing notion that the fates of Palestinians and Israelis are intertwined, whatever happens. As Israeli-born social worker Anat Brand states, for herself as much as for everyone interviewed: "I am not going anywhere. I am part of this place and part of its tragedy."

Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica Airport, Studio 21, 3026 Airport Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 397-7493, through Jan. 8. Closed Sunday-Tuesday.

Still relevant after all these years

James Turrell hasn't had a solo show in L.A. in nearly 20 years. His current exhibition, at Griffin Contemporary, features installation works conceived and first created more than 30 years ago. They couldn't be more fresh, relevant and compelling had they been devised yesterday.

Turrell is a legendary light-and-space "perceptualist," prone to environmental gestures large and small that recast vision and experience. The three early works in this show do what Turrell does best — infuse abstraction with presence, marry color and light, craft wonder.

In "Enzu Blue" (1968), the shaft of light so common in romantic, spiritual landscape imagery is transformed into an immaterial wedge of blue hugging the corner of an otherwise bare gallery. The machinery behind the magic is simply a projector, aided by a bit of paint on the floor to capture the projected color and give the illusion that the light ray has dimension. The small room, with its luminous diagonal stripe, becomes a sanctuary, a space to empty out the mind and absorb through the senses.

"Gard Red" (1968), another "cross-corner projection," casts a triangle / pyramid of emergency red into the corner of an adjacent space. In "Raemar" (1969), Turrell stages another glorious piece of optical theater, making a wall appear to float by framing it in cotton candy light.

A set of new pieces, holograms with receding or protruding spectral swaths, feel like slight sketches next to the installations, which have decades of staying power.

Griffin Contemporary, 2902 Nebraska Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 586-6886, through Feb. 12. Closed Sunday and Monday.

Meticulous tribute to other artists

Guy Diehl's paintings are reverential, above all. A consummate technician steeped in art history, Diehl practices painting as an act of homage. In his first local solo show since 1987, at Hunsaker / Schlesinger Fine Art, Diehl pays tribute to Morandi, Rothko, Zurbaran, Ingres, Goya, Modigliani, Demuth and Joan Brown — by name as well as through visual quotes and references.

The most frequent of his tabletop subjects is books, art books mostly. In "Still Life With Joan Brown," Diehl shows a few staggered piles of books, the uppermost volume opened to two paintings by Brown, which Diehl has meticulously reproduced. In "Still Life With Modigliani #7," a postcard reproduction of a Modigliani painting rests upon a stack of books. And in "Still Life With Giorgio Morandi #2," a postcard of a Morandi painting is propped between a squat vase and two taller bottles.

There's risk entailed in bringing another artist's work so literally into your own. In the latter painting, Diehl's small rendition of Morandi's still life makes Diehl's own painting suffer by comparison. Morandi's restless touch is full of awkward yet soulful personality, while Diehl's looks consistently, almost tiresomely careful.

Diehl is terrifically adept at rendering volume, translucency and shadow, and his compositions are always elegant and harmonious. But his surfaces feel devoid of texture, and the settings have the crisp anonymity of seamless photo backdrops. Slight deviations, when they come — a translucent wave of blue refracting through the cobalt vase, the flame-like shadow of a slightly risen envelope flap — are quite refreshing.

Hunsaker / Schlesinger Fine Art, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 828-1133, through Dec. 18. Closed Sunday and Monday.

Bringing meaning out of her shells

A modest social agenda percolates under the surface of **Cindy Bernard's** recent photographs at Margo Leavin Gallery, but her style works to defeat it.

Bernard spent part of this year and last traveling through the Midwest and California, photographing band shells in public parks where free concerts are performed. She's labeled each of her color prints with a title identifying the site and the band shell's sponsoring organization — the Chicago Park District, for instance, or the Modesto Lions Club.

Considering this emphasis on civic generosity and public access, it seems counterintuitive for Bernard to photograph the band shells when unused (and in most cases, unusable) under snow. Also, she has adopted a stance so uniform and neutral that our attention is drawn not to the social function of the structures but primarily to their architectural form.

She shoots each band shell frontally, from a similar distance, centered in the frame like a typological specimen. Her method brings to mind the work of the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose hundreds of shots of water towers read like a chronicle of abstract forms, repeating across the wall like regular drumbeats.

Bernard also has a bit of Walker Evans in her, a subdued romanticism or nostalgia that offsets the coolly conceptual. Like Evans, Bernard is intrigued with the vernacular, especially aspects that seem increasingly old-fashioned. Band shell concerts are quaint entertainment compared with their competition, high-tech media centers at home and glitzy attractions at the mall. With her band shell pictures, Bernard creates a document more interesting for what it implies than for what it shows.

Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., (310) 273-0603, through Dec. 18. Closed Sunday and Monday.

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