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THE ARTS

Whose 'Land' Is It?

An exhibit of Israelis and Palestinians explains the intifada in their own words.

by Gaby Wenig, Staff Writer

FORUM

Barbara Grover had traveled the world photographing such heart-wrenching subjects as children living in trash dumps, but it was a garlic braid and a pair of kids' shoes in a bombed-out house that moved her most of all.

That house belonged to Salah Shehada, commander of Hamas' military wing, Izz al-Din al-Qassam, the most lethal and extreme of the Palestinian terrorist organizations. Shehada and several members of his family were killed in 2002 when an Israel Defense Forces F-16 destroyed their home.

"[The garlic and the shoes] made me realize how both sides have forgotten the human face of this conflict," the Los Angeles-based photojournalist said.

Grover's observation only encouraged the project she was working on in Israel at the time — a collection of photographs of ordinary people from all sides of the conflict who would talk about what the land meant to them. That collection is now being shown at the Sherry Frumkin Gallery, in an exhibition titled "This Land to Me — Some Call It Palestine, Others Israel."

Hanging in the exhibition are 12 life-sized black-and-white photographs, which are accompanied by 12 canvas panels that carry first-person narratives of the photographs' subjects. In addition, a looped audio of excerpts from the interviews with the subjects plays overhead. The narratives and the photographs form a synergy that takes the relative tranquility of the images and bathes them in the violence of the region.

Grover's aim for the exhibit is twofold: she wanted to create an oral history of the conflict and bring her subjects to life. The large photographs are meant to be confronting and to provide a way to see beyond the bloody images so often displayed across the television screens. Grover wants viewers to have a transposed idea of what ordinary Israelis and Palestinians are experiencing.

"I wanted the subject and the viewer to be on common ground," she said. "We don't really hear from most Palestinians or Israelis in the conflict — we hear from leaders and we hear from intellectuals, but with life-sized images people can look eye to eye at the other, or eye to eye at what they consider themselves."

Grover chose her subjects by trawling the streets of Israel and the territories, looking for people with "presence." She wanted a diverse range of people from both sides of the divide — from the settlers to the terrorists. She looked for people who wouldn't give her spin, and who would be articulate and honest. And although she really wanted them to answer the question "what does the land mean to you?" she realized that

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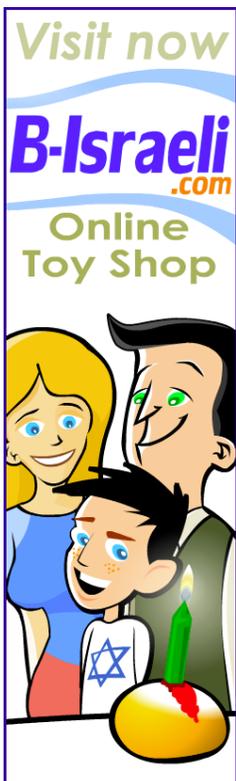
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even in the relative security of an interview, there was no way to escape the reality of the intifada and the suicide bombings.

"Here, you can go to a mall to escape," Grover said. "In that part of the world if you go to a mall you are confronted with the [violent] reality."

The answers Grover got to her questions were surprising. Amit, a young boy from Kibbutz Yaron who wears a soccer T-shirt and stares intensely at the camera with his deep and soulful eyes, thinks that Jews would be better off living in Uganda — an option considered by Theodor Herzl.

"It would have been hot in Uganda, but we would be living in peace," says Amit in the statement accompanying his photograph.

In another photograph, Um Subhi, a Palestinian woman who lives in the Jenin refugee camp, stands at the door of her house in a floral housedress and a headscarf, looking suspiciously at the camera. The open door is both the entrance to the violence outside her house, and her family's protector against it.

"I tell my own children and the shahab (Palestinian youth) that violence is not the answer," she says. "Israel exists, let it exist."

Other statements are more troubling. Hanadi, who stares defiantly at the camera with a picture of her husband — a member of the Al Aksa Martyrs Brigade (recently renamed Brigades of Martyr Yasser Arafat) — in the background, laments that she can't be a suicide bomber because she is pregnant.

"I don't want to die because of my baby, but who knows what I would do if I wasn't pregnant," she says. "I am willing to do anything for my land."

Grover defended the more disquieting opinions in her exhibit.

"I think that everyone deserves to be heard," Grover said. "I think that understanding what brings someone to Al Aqsa is very important to understanding what this conflict is all about — it forces people to confront their prejudices and their fears."

"This Land to Me — Some Call It Palestine, Others Israel," is showing at the Sherry Frumkin Gallery, 3026 Airport Ave., Studio 21, Santa Monica, from Nov.

20-Dec. 31. For more information, call (310) 397-7493 or visit www.thislandtome.org.

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