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Tel Aviv

Neil Folberg at the Rubin Museum and Micha Bar-Am at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art

Rarely is the public given the opportunity to view works by two distinguished photographers in solo exhibitions running concurrently in the same city but whose approach to the art form could not be more different. One, Neil Folberg, is the archetypal romantic whose lens probes the wilds of man and nature searching for visual metaphors beyond the physical, while the elder Micha Bar-Am, an exceptional recorder of national events, is a dedicated realist who sees life in the raw and does not hesitate to pictorialize it as a primary witness. And each in their own individual venue proves their worth.

Folberg's *Serpent's Chronicle* is a collection of brooding black-and-white and chromatic narrative prints that retell the biblical epic of Adam and Eve and their short but eventful lives in the Garden of Eden. This time, however, the story we are presented with is according to Folberg's combined pen and camera through the eyes of the malevolent snake, a reptile alluded to but never seen. Each frame is an exceptional episode staged and directed by Folberg in the dense Galilee landscapes of northern Israel with two professional dancers and whose posed predicaments are augmented by Folberg's poetically written tributes. Whether dancing around a blazing fire in a photograph

entitled *Fear and Wonder in the Darkening Gloom* or tenderly searching each other's eyes, the photographer skillfully extracts the maximum from his two characters as they move gingerly among an overabundance of bramble, foliage, trunks, and stones.

Floating through a shower of stars and a dense carpet of heavenly bodies a silhouetted Adam searches for his spiritual self and his maker while on earth Folberg has created an artificial paradise; or at least assumed what he and the snake think it might have looked like. In so doing, Folberg has substituted the perennial apple (a European fruit of cold climates) with a green fig, the preferred fruit of the Mediterranean region. As the fruit takes over and Adam and Eve begin their relationship, psychology and human traits enter their physical beings. And in time greed, mistrust, and perfidy engage their lives and the unraveling of mankind commences with their expulsion from paradise.

Historically, accounts from the Old and New Testaments have been configured imaginatively in many artistic media—painting, opera, symphonic music, etc.—in order to enhance the fundamentals of their core messages. *Serpent's Chronicle* (also published in book form by Abbeville Press in three editions including a Collector's Edition with an original signed print, size A3) is no different. Folberg has set aside his bible to make a pictorial allegory of spiritual innocence and wonderment that evolves into worldly paths of dismay, guilt, and expulsion.

For Bar-Am there is no bible, no allegory, and no narratives; there is only the blunt-



Above left: Neil Folberg, *Fear and Wonder in the Darkening Gloom*, color photograph, 48 x 61 cm. ©NFolberg. **Above right:** Neil Folberg, *Your Ancestral Memory*, color photograph, 61 x 61 cm. ©NFolberg.



ness of truth. For the exhibition *Dividing Line* he, together with Orna, his wife and professional partner, searched his archives and chose a cache of prints in black and white and a few in color that convey the harsh reality of the 1973 Yom Kippur War still fresh in the public consciousness 40 years after the fact.

Walking through the gallery I realized that I and scores of others in the room were not merely looking at interesting photographs but, like mirror images, they were transformed into startling reflections of our lives. Remaining neutral in the face of this reality was not a consideration. The crowd was not searching fields of conflict in some other country, or at incidents that happened to other people in some far off land. These were "in-your-face" pictures of tanks, combatants, and bunker positions that any one of the spectators could have experienced firsthand. For many it was not an exhibition but a time machine, not only for Bar-Am.

Dividing Line was borne of Bar-Am's decision to provide

the public with a more representative perspective of the war; to dust off old negatives and recall those horrific days in October 1973. It is a display of images both spiritual and physical of men and machines, confidence and apprehension, and of the victors and the vanquished. He has accomplished his goal with 40 prints, many seen for the first time and several measuring more than a 140 centimeters high while others 30 by 40 centimeters.

No soldiers, no vehicles, no weapons, no prisoners. Just ten chairs of diverse designs, an empty cigarette box, an old can of battlefield rations, utensils and plates, all encircling a blazing fire at sunrise. It was the *Last Morning of the Yom Kippur War* and the chairs, corresponding to several layers of society, defined by the rich brocade to the simple wicker, speak of brothers in arms, of unfailing camaraderie and those lost in combat. In the Bar-Am context there is nothing more heartrending than an empty chair, but especially one meant to be occupied by a weary warrior. Bar-Am has captured the soul of humanity in this

poignant picture. The ghostly light is Shakespearean and the fire is akin to a biblical sacrificial altar. There are no uniforms to be seen, yet one cannot escape the pathos of that morning, for we know who was and who was not there.

In addition to Bar-Am's classic photographs of the war included in the exhibition such as *Artillery Barrage*, *Suez Canal*; *Egyptian POWs*; and *Landmines, Northern Sinai*, there are several unfamiliar pictures, notably a few individual studies in which facial expressions provide and bodily gestures replace the intimidating desert landscape. A young sergeant biting his nail looks into the distance with trepidation, possibly confusion. Together with his platoon in *Forward Position*, *Suez Canal*, the group attempts to understand the "moment" before or after; in a photograph called *Budapest* several soldiers, wearisome and worrisome, huddled together in a steel fortification as they wait patiently for an artillery barrage to cease; and *Bunker, Bar Lev Line on the Suez Canal*. Shot in 1969 (four years before the Yom Kippur War), this prophetic photograph depicts a lone soldier drinking his coffee while scrawled on a corrugated wall behind him is a paratrooper's jump insignia with one wing clipped, an indication of the available competency the paratrooper can muster to maximize his fighting effort. Here, the symbolism was written on the wall.

Gil Goldfine

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Micha Bar-Am, *Bunker, Bar Lev Line of the Suez Canal*, 1969, black and white photograph, 100 x 150 cm.



Micha Bar-Am, *Forward Position, Suez Canal*, 1973, black and white photograph, 80 x 115 cm.