

Photo/video exhibit on Israel at Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland is first-rate

By **Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer**
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COURTESY ANDREA MEISLIN GALLERY, NEW YORK

A photograph by Rina Castelnovo shows how Reut Unger asked Israeli soldiers to halt a bombardment of the Gaza Strip while her wedding was under way next door at Kibbutz Alumim in 2005.

REVIEW

Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland What: "Hugging and Wrestling: Contemporary Israeli Photography and Video."

When: Through Sunday, Jan. 10.

Where: 8501 Carnegie Ave., Cleveland.

Admission: \$4. Call 216-421-8671 or go to Mocacleveland.org.

Anyone who wants proof of the ongoing excellence at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland will find plenty in the exhibition "Hugging and Wrestling: Contemporary Israeli Photography and Video." MOCA, which thinks of itself not just as a local or national institution, but an international one, reached halfway around the world to organize a courageous, insightful and politically impartial look at Israel.

The museum was originally approached by the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland as a possible venue for one of several exhibitions celebrating the 60th anniversary of Israel's independence in 2008.

When that project fell through, MOCA proceeded on its own to research and assemble the present show, which explores ways in which Israelis embrace their difficult destiny ("Hugging") while struggling over it ("Wrestling").

Organized by Senior Curator Margo Crutchfield, the exhibition surveys the work of nine photographers and video artists who convey aspects of life in Israel in ways that are honest, direct and riveting.

The exhibition is notable not only for the high quality of the work on view, but for its commitment to truthfulness rather than a concern over whether the contents could be viewed as pro-Israel or anti-Israel.



The Strongest Girl in the World is a video production by Rona Yefman, featuring Tanja Schlander. The work is featured at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland in "Hugging and Wrestling: Contemporary Israeli Photography and Video."

Much of the work -- including Rina Castelnovo's stunning photographs around the edges of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- is both impressive as art and as journalistic documentation.

Castelnovo's image of a bride pleading with an Israeli tank crew to stop bombarding the Gaza Strip so her wedding can proceed is one of the more unforgettable images in the show. It juxtaposes a beautiful young woman in white with a deadly-looking war machine, compressing into a single image a vivid summation of life in Israel.

Equally blunt is Castelnovo's wide-angle image of a young Palestinian girl amid the wreckage of her home, or her telephoto shot of an Orthodox Jewish woman cradling her baby while guarding the West Bank settlement of Gush Katif with a gun slung from her shoulder.

A video installation by Rona Yefman takes a completely different artistic stance, using satire and street theater to score points about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In it, a Danish performance artist, Tanja Schlander, plays the role of Pippi Longstocking, "the strongest girl in the world," as she vainly attempts to dislodge part of the huge concrete wall that divides Israel from the West Bank. Black-robed Palestinian women cheer her on as she groans, grimaces and cries out.

By using different artistic means, Yefman and Castelnovo explore from different perspectives the ways in which historical forces engulf and overwhelm individuals.

Barry Frydlander, by contrast, focuses on panoramic street scenes, in which the collective lives of Israelis seem to unfurl like plots in a movie.

Frydlander documents the site of a popular cafe in Tel Aviv in the aftermath of a terrorist bombing, or records the liveliness of a street corner where young men gather on a Friday afternoon to scope out young women who walk by.

Michal Rovner presents a darker view of collective identity in "More," a 2003 video displayed originally at the Venice Biennale.

In it, hundreds of people walk in a tight circle, as if to demonstrate adherence to some powerful inner compulsion toward orderliness and control. Periodically, however, the circle explodes as hundreds of people spin away from the center, as if impelled by centrifugal force.

Rovner's pessimistic view of mob behavior is echoed ominously by Yael Bartana's 2001 video "Trembling Time." This work records a scene along a highway at night during Yom Hazikaron, Soldier's Memorial Day.

When a siren sounds, traffic stops and motorists step out of their cars for a moment of silence to remember soldiers who died fighting for Israel since 1948.

The Bartana video is a poignant documentation of a moment of collective Israeli solidarity, and an uncomfortable comment on the Orwellian aspects of conformity and mass behavior.

By exploring such diverse and challenging works, MOCA avoided the boosterism that might have tainted a show staged in a community with a large Jewish community, many of whose members are strongly committed to Israel.

It's a credit to everyone involved, including the show's many supporters and sponsors, that MOCA has been able to deliver such a provocative exhibit. Then again, the show offers a positive reflection on Cleveland as a place where high-quality exhibitions on controversial topics are not only possible, but encouraged.