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Israel Inside Out

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In the decades of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, no single iconic image has been captured by a camera's lens. No girl running naked from the dark fog of a napalm attack. No hooded man standing crucifixion-like on a box, wires dangling from his hands.

Instead, we've had a steady barrage of stock horror: Commuters wandering dazed and bloody around the contorted shell of a bombed bus. Young boys in dusty streets throwing stones at soldiers. A chanting crowd whipped into a frenzy by a burning flag. A sea of mourners following a body hoisted on men's shoulders.

These scenes could be from last week, last year, or last century. We are shown them over and over again, presumably because news outlets think they will help us understand. For those in the conflict zone, though, the deluge of pictures does little but bolster the case for carrying on the struggle. And for those of us who are far away, skimming headlines over breakfast, it reinforces the seeming impenetrability of the conflict. Our empathy reflex is triggered but quickly relaxes. We shake our heads and turn the page, no more the wiser.

Into this saturated visual lexicon Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin submit a wholly different portrait of Israel -- one that demands careful thought and cool analysis. In their *Chicago* (SteidlMack/Distributed Art Publishers, 2007), there are no bodies in pain or anguish, no misery tugging at heartstrings. There are only Israeli structures, landscapes, and objects -- artifacts that, when we see them through Broomberg and Chanarin's lens, reveal the tragic constructs of an Israel transformed by its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The book is anchored by a series of photographs from a mock Arab city, the Chicago of the title, built by the Israeli military for urban combat training. In an accompanying essay, Eyal Weizman, director of the Centre for Research Architecture at the University of London's Goldsmiths College and author of the forthcoming *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (Verso, 2007), explains the moniker -- it is 'in homage to that other bullet-ridden city' -- and details the site's history.

In Chicago's earliest incarnation, when Israel occupied parts of Lebanon in the 1980s, the site resembled a Lebanese village. It was later expanded to double as Tikrit, Iraq, where soldiers hoped to assassinate Saddam Hussein (a 1992 accident at the facility resulted in the deaths of several soldiers and put an end to that plan). Since then, the faux town has functioned as a generic, life-size blueprint for Palestinian urban centers and even as a Jewish outpost in Gaza, for soldiers to practice removing settlers.

Chicago now is even more expansive and technologically advanced. Within eight square miles stand a fake refugee camp, mosques, and apartment buildings. Sounds simulate the cacophony of war as soldiers train with laser guns, surveillance gadgets tracking their movements. This latest rendition was unveiled to reporters attending a drill at the Tze'elim Military Base in the Negev Desert in January -- an affair coinciding with the shakeup in the Israeli Defense Force that followed its recent debacle in Lebanon, when Israel drew domestic ire for failing to rout Hezbollah forces that killed three Israeli soldiers and captured two others. 'This is our playground to practice for anything we need,' Lieutenant Colonel Arik Moreh, the base's second in command, gushed to the Associated Press.

Broomberg and Chanarin's photos lack such giddiness. Their Chicago is an eerie ghost town inhabited by burned-out cars and pockmarked cutouts of Israeli soldiers 'Arabized' to look like the enemy. Cement walls have been punched through with star-shaped holes, the scars of 'worming' -- an Israeli tactic of traveling through dense urban areas by blasting through interior walls, into living rooms and bedrooms, instead of venturing into vulnerable streets and alleys. Other walls are marred with graffiti ('Reign of chaos,' 'The end!').

'It is difficult to pinpoint what it is about this place that is disturbing,' Broomberg and Chanarin write in the text that decodes their photos. 'Perhaps it's the combination of the vicariousness and the violence. It's as if the soldiers have entered the enemy's private domain while he's sleeping or out for lunch, sifting through all his private belongings with too much curiosity.'

But this is not the enemy's domain; it is an Israeli conception of it. This divide -- between how Israelis imagine themselves and Palestinians, between what they see and what they don't -- provides the common thread throughout Chicago. Relying on a kind of inverted documentary approach, the book's images show not reality, but a fantasy of it.

Take, for example, a chapter chronicling a day in the life of Mini Israel, a popular attraction where tourists walk or ride golf carts through a scale model of the country. Where Chicago posits an imagined Arab reality, this plasticized utopia offers Israel's vision of itself. Toylike Israelis sun at the beach, pray at the Western Wall, watch the sunset from their balconies. Tiny construction workers lay bricks for new buildings, continuing Israel's development unabated. Meanwhile, a carefree Muslim man tends his sheep; other Muslims pray toward Mecca.

'There is something painfully nostalgic about the place, giving rise to the uncomfortable sensation of visiting a future that was meant to come to pass but never did,' Broomberg and Chanarin write. 'In this fantasy there are no checkpoints or observation towers. No suicide bombers. No armed security guards. No anxiety.'

Other chapters echo this willed myopia. One shows nothing but close-ups of rock walls -- what Jewish settlers see from the car window as they travel some of the 'bypass' roads that permit unfettered travel in the Occupied Territories. Another features the views from inside various Israeli surveillance posts -- 'a fragmented, militarized vision of the land that transforms the entire panorama into a potential battlefield.'

A subtler series shows the biblically idyllic forests planted by Jews throughout the country -- 'natural' scenes that leave little trace, the authors write, of the Arab communities that once were there. Another showcases studio portraits of bombs disguised as everyday objects: a fire extinguisher, a watermelon, a beer can. But these are actually recreations, painstakingly handcrafted by the Israeli Bomb Disposal Unit for its Jerusalem museum.

Taken together, these myriad images and the oversized text accompanying them read like a picture book that demands a deeper look at Israel. It is an investigation, Broomberg explains in an interview, that the

two London-based photographer-writers felt compelled to pursue after visiting the West Bank city of Ramallah a few years ago for an international film festival. The two, who have photographed the world's hot spots together for 10 years, were shocked by what they saw. There was the widespread unemployment and the erosion of dignity at roadblocks and checkpoints, but also the frustration, isolation, and cultural alienation. And then there was the shock of their own naivete.

They returned to Israel -- a place they had both visited in their youth, where they joined other Jews in planting trees like those in the forests of *Chicago* -- and saw a culture reminiscent of that in their native country, South Africa, under apartheid. 'It's a strange mixture of denial and naivete,' Broomberg says. 'It's a reality kept from most Israelis, where everyone's lying on the beach, having a good time, exactly like South Africa in the 1980s.'

Then they set out to translate the emerging body of literature coming from critical Israeli academics like Weizman into a 'visual poem,' pursuing their politically and emotionally charged project with a calm, distanced style. The result is a visual interpretation that is particularly crucial now, as the world looks back at 40 years of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories seized in the Six-Day War. That overwhelming victory, political analyst Yaron Ezrahi wrote 10 years ago in his award-winning study of Israel's shifting identity, *Rubber Bullets: Power and Conscience in Modern Israel* (University of California Press), was seen by many Israelis and Jews worldwide 'as a turning point, a license for Jews to historicize the fantasy of a resurrected Jewish kingdom, validation of the 'Holy History' of the Jewish people.'

As the pages of *Chicago* show, it is a costly vision -- for Palestinians *and* for Israelis -- that requires a fresh set of eyes.

You can see the images in Chicago, as well as photos from Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's other collections, at www.choppedliver.info.