

# Tablet

A NEW READ  
ON JEWISH LIFE

## CULTURE PAGES

## Nir Hod Making It: "Mother"

People think that this is a picture of a woman leaving Bergdorf Goodman and looking for a taxi. A group of big collectors came to see the show in previews, and they were arguing among themselves about whether her bag was Prada, Hermès, or Louis Vuitton. Afterwards, when they saw where the image came from, they felt really bad and came over to me and said, "Oh, I feel so stupid," or "I feel guilty."

But I liked their response. That was the point of the image. I don't care about facts, and I don't care about politics. I care about beauty.

When you don't have information about a thing, very often you will like it, until somebody says, "Oh, this is from the Holocaust" or, "She's actually a prostitute." Then suddenly you feel, "I shouldn't touch it" or, "I don't like it." When we don't have any knowledge or information, we often fall in love with things we're not supposed to. So, I want you to enjoy this image and also to suffer by looking at it.

The original photograph that I took the image of *Mother* from is a famous picture from the Holocaust, so there is something very dark about it. It's about death. But you can also look at that picture in a very romantic, innocent way, like a little child looking at Bambi movies. There's something about the size of the little boy in the photograph as it relates to the size of the adult women and the German soldier that gave that picture its magic. All I did was to shift the focus over three feet to the woman who is standing next to him.

It's a dark photograph, but I like darkness. I like to touch darkness and bring the light into darkness and give it some kind of twist. But it's not like I put a crown on her head or a Louis Vuitton bag in the picture, or a Rolex on her arm. I did surprisingly little to the picture, except to highlight what was already there. She's bigger than he is in the frame, but for some reason no one ever seemed to notice her before. She looks like she's about to scream, but in a very, very mellow way. You can feel it. It's a very feminine gesture.

The color is important too, because it helps bring her out from the shadows. It makes her feel alive. The colors I chose for the series give the picture different moods. They make the image feel beautiful and luxurious. The purple signifies beauty and melancholy. The blue is something very royal. The brown references history and war. The green is for the uniform. The pink is very feminine. The yellow gives you black and yellow, which is very dramatic and suggests the yellow star. The richness and vividness of the colors is very much about magazines, which have been a big influence on my work.

We don't need to know too much about the image, because the magic is already there. Images like these are so strong that they almost function like in a parallel reality, some kind of Twilight Zone where you can lose yourself and where you have to function almost like a doctor. It's not about the camera, it's not about the photographer, it's not about the styling, it's not about the position of the bodies in the frame, it's about the magic of that moment. I don't care if the moment is magical in a good way or in a bad way. Here it happens to be in a bad way. But it's a very strong moment.

When you see the image of *Mother*, you understand that these were elegant women with nice breasts, rings, coats, and expensive handbags. Maybe they were rich. It's like you can see them for the first time as people and not just as survivors or victims of the Holocaust.

How did that happen? From an early age, growing up in Israel, I wanted to be the boy next to her in the photograph, with his hands raised. I wanted to be the center of attention. I even had a suit of clothes made for an art project, so I could dress up exactly like him. One day I opened up my Internet browser to my home page at CNN, and there was a photo of Hillary Clinton giving a speech and making the same kind of hand gesture as the woman in the photograph. So, when I looked at the photograph again, I saw her by mistake, not the boy. But it wasn't a mistake exactly, because I had been cued to look for her.

She's not the boy's mother, of course. No one knows who she was. There's an enormous literature about the boy, but no one knows who he was, either. I came up with the title *Mother* as a way of giving back to her what was taken from her. They took her life, and we don't even know who she was, and we can't even see her in the photo, even though she is the biggest figure in the frame. So, I said, I will give everything back to her and make her bigger than life. I will call her mother, since every woman desires to be a mother. She's a mother, and she's something beyond a regular mother, like a figure in a biblical story. She's a modern Mother Mary. She is someone specific and also something universal.

I started by using editing software to darken everything around her. I really like the shadow paintings of Warhol, so that is how I began. As I worked on the details of the image, I understood that there was a face reflected on the surface of her handbag. And if you look at her hair, you can see the ghostly image of a skull, like in a sixteenth-century European painting. So, I brought out those details more, but I didn't create them.



Warsaw, spring 1943.

They were always there, but I saw them for the first time in *Mother*.

At Yad Vashem, I met two teachers who are responsible for leading groups through the hall with that picture, and they told me they that since they saw *Mother* they have changed the way that they speak about what is happening there. They never really talked much about the woman. They never noticed the face on her handbag, or the skull in her hair, or any of the other nuances of the actual figure in the photograph, because our attention simply goes to the child.

Yad Vashem actually asked me to do an exhibition of *Mother*. The idea was that I took my image from that photograph, so let's bring her back there and have the two images hanging in the same hall. But I said no. Because when you see it in a museum, in a gallery, it's OK. But in Yad Vashem? The context is wrong. Put it in MoMA.

We're living in such a stupid time now. It's all about information: what to read, what to buy, what to like. You read something and people tell you what you should read after that based on the choices you have already made and choices made by other people who made choices that are similar to yours according to some equation. You have shoes and there's an application that will tell you what shoes would look even better on you. People like art, but they don't buy it, because first they need to know how much it sold for and how much it's going to sell for in the future. As a result, people have stopped living their own lives. Instead, they are living someone else's version of the life they should be living based on data about other people's choices. For me, *Mother* is about the opposite of that. It's about living life and discovering and exploring and seeing the world through your own eyes for the first time.

I don't think I could have done *Mother* while I was living in Israel. In Israel, the Holocaust still feels very close. It's something very, very heavy. On Yom HaShoah, the sirens go off, and the streets are empty and silent. Everyone I grew up with had a mother or a father or grandparents who suffered in the Holocaust, which makes it different than growing up in a Jewish family in America or Europe. I had to leave there and come here to have enough distance to see her as something apart from the context in which I first saw her, or didn't see her. So, it's very much a work of art from the Diaspora.

When you're outside Israel, or when you're in a state of being between countries or whatever, you can think on an entirely different level, because you constantly need to translate yourself. And that's why I translated this photo, to explain who I am. I live with somebody who doesn't speak my language, who doesn't have the same mentality, and with whom I share very little in common. It's very hard, but it's very challenging and it can ultimately be very rewarding. Just by sitting here and explaining to so many people about the Holocaust and about Israel and engaging in this constant work of translation, you can start to see yourself when most people really don't see themselves at all: They just exist.—as told to David Samuels

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# PAUL KASMIN GALLERY



Mother  
(Blue), 2012.

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