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December 17, 2004

ART

A piece of land, a land of peace

■ Barbara Grover raised the eternal Israel- Palestine question among the region's inhabitants. The responses contribute to a larger dialogue.

By Susan Freudenheim, Special to The Times

Um Subhi, a Palestinian, metaphorically opens her door to visitors to the Sherry Frumkin Gallery in Santa Monica. She stands life-size in a black-and-white photographic portrait that hangs at the gallery's entrance, her words writ large next to her.

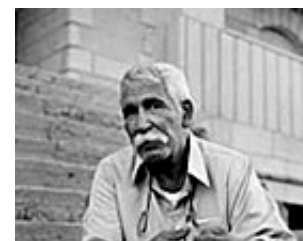
"What is important now is to try to hold onto what I have," says this resident of the Jenin refugee camp whose home was destroyed by Israeli soldiers. "I had always hoped to move back to my land, but now I know that no one will be negotiating for the land I once had. I am not going to fight for it. My land is important to me. But first of all I want peace. Peace is the most important thing. I love peace."



Ellen confesses that she finds men with multiple tattoos "sexy."



The witness
(Genaro Molina / LAT)



Living it
(Sherry Frumkin Gallery)

Subhi's eyes are wary, her stance a bit defiant, but her words are weary. She has been a victim of a war between Israelis and Palestinians that has caused great suffering on both sides. Her wish is an opening, just as her door stands open, though the picture does not reveal what lies beyond.

Around the corner, Rabbi David Lazar is shown standing before the Western Wall in East Jerusalem, a place considered one of the most sacred icons of Judaism, where Jews come daily for reverent prayer. Hands in pockets, eyes as uneasy as Subhi's, his words are just as firm.

"I have no problem reconciling that the Zionist myth I grew up with is not the truth because this piece of land is the only place in the world that a Jew can be free and live as a Jew. But in this Jewish state there has to be religious freedom, economic equality. This is not the case today, and it is unjust and evil, and must be fixed."

These two are among 12 portraits by artist-photojournalist Barbara Grover in an exhibition titled "This Land to Me: Some Call It Palestine, Others Israel." For the show Grover asked each subject the same simple question: "What does this land mean to you?" Their answers and images are paired, each reflecting the subject's background. Art and politics merge, as each new encounter provokes an intimate conversation in the viewer's mind.

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These people were deliberately chosen for diversity, but their passion is equal throughout. For the question they've been posed is fundamental to both Jews and Palestinians, whether living in cosmopolitan Jerusalem or in a refugee camp. Land remains the essential question in Israel, and it represents real estate and so much more. Idealized, historicized, sanctified and plundered, the land is, on the most basic level, home. The weariness, anxiety, sadness and fundamental desire for an end to the strife, as represented in this exhibition, suggest that hearing what the land means to these people — not the leaders, but the populace — could be a road to greater understanding, even peace.

Grover, 48, is a petite but powerful presence herself as she greets a visitor to the show. A former political consultant, she is a native of Los Angeles, where she currently lives. In 1996, Grover left politics to travel the world as a photojournalist. She has worked as a freelancer for a variety of publications, including Time magazine, Stern and the L.A. Weekly, seeking out subjects that advocate for social change. A secular Jew raised in an ardently Zionist family, she first

traveled to Israel as a teen, then lived there for five years as a young adult and returned in her 40s to work as a journalist. Her connection to the country is as profound as it is complex.

"I have seen suffering all around the world, and I have done stories that I think have been important. But I think that because of my connection to Israel, and because I did feel responsibility as a Jew, I felt like I needed to do something that would have an impact, that would somehow confront the myth, the misconceptions and the stereotypes that I think really fuel the violence, not just in the Middle East but all over the world."

The seed of what she would ultimately create was planted when she traveled to Israel in 2000 to work for a nonprofit, the Jerusalem Foundation, after being away from the country for two decades. She was hired to create a brochure for the foundation, which was established to fund services that promote equality for Palestinian Israelis. "I had the chance to really get to know Israelis and Palestinians from all walks of life and to listen to their stories," she says.

"I started thinking about things I had never really thought about, like the dual histories, what really happened in 1948 and how so much changed because of 1967," she says, referring to the two critical wars that established Israel's territory. "While there was the obvious self-exploration, that is not what led me to do this particular project. When I returned [to Los Angeles], I was so struck by the disconnect between what I saw and experienced through my face-to-face encounters and what people abroad understood about the situation. I felt I had to do something to bridge that gap."

That Grover allows her subjects to speak for her is an articulate and convincing device that underlines her political savvy. "I know what influences a person's thinking," she says. "If I was going to help shatter those myths, and help people see the complexity and humanity, I couldn't just show one point of view."

To see the show is to share many different emotions. Two young women are particularly striking because they look like sisters. One, Anat Brand, is Israeli, the other, Sanabel Hassan, is Palestinian. Both say peace will come only when Palestinians have a homeland, but they stand on opposite sides in the meantime. "Only six months ago I worked for peace like a lioness," says Brand, the Jew. "But now I am in such despair over the situation here that I barely leave my house" in Givatayim, just outside Tel Aviv.

For Hassan, home is a refugee camp. "Where do I belong? Why am I not living like other children?" she asks. "Before the last Intifada, I didn't know what the Occupation really meant. Now I realize that until the Occupation is over and I can live in my homeland, Palestine, I won't have a normal life."

Grover began the project in earnest in 2002, traveling to Israel for two months and interviewing and photographing 33 people. She found her subjects through friends and professional contacts and, at times, just by stopping people on the street. She knew she needed people who would be articulate, cooperative and willing to let their stories become part of an art project and a proposed book, which Grover hopes will travel the world. She wanted her subjects to be honest and to represent myriad points of view. Getting people to open up was not difficult, she says. "They too feel frustrated that all we see in the rest of the world are pictures of suicide bombers and Israeli soldiers and kids throwing stones. They know that their reality is not reflected in those stories."

Grover says that while gathering material, she lived the life of both Israelis and refugees. She traveled through checkpoints, slept in homes under fire and, she says, missed getting killed by a suicide bomber because of a split-second decision to get back into her car. To avoid influencing her subjects, she did not identify herself as a Jew during an interview, though she had determined that she would be honest to anyone who asked. They didn't, however. Instead they commented on how comfortable she seemed with them, more so than most journalists covering a spot news story. She attributes her ability to fit in to having lived there in the late 1970s, when mixing with both Jews and Arabs was not as difficult. Seeing both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has remained a constant for Grover, stemming from her first visit. "I grew up with the myth of the beautiful soldiers and the pioneers," she says. But even in 1971, when she came to the country as a student, what she saw was quite different. In Jerusalem, she says, "I rode on buses and the Arabs were at the back. I went to the Old City and the Arabs were the merchants. These were images I could transpose to the struggles in America. I'm not sure that at the time I could articulate to myself what that meant, but I felt a need to go back and figure it out."

She says she also has always felt a need to advocate for social justice: "One of my earliest memories is this desperate need to fight for the underdog and just the injustices, and I think I became that way because I was raised Jewish."

As she sits in the Frumkin Gallery, she listens to the reactions of Jews and Palestinians to her work. She says she has been fascinated that the same pieces can provoke contradictory reactions. "There are Jews who walk in here and say, 'This isn't objective, this is biased. Where's the parent who lost a child to a suicide bomber?' And I say, 'Well, I interviewed that person, but that person didn't make it into the show.' Then I ask, 'What do you think that parent is going to say? Because the parent I interviewed was the most left-leaning person I interviewed, and he is working closely with the Palestinians for peace.' "

She says that the response from Palestinians also has been colored by expectations. "I've heard several times, 'No Palestinian would say, 'Peace is more important than land.' ' And I say, 'You say that because you don't live under occupation, you haven't lost children.' "

In the gallery, voices of the subjects speak in Hebrew, Arabic and in English on a loudspeaker, lending truth to the words on the wall. As she surveys the room, Grover sighs and returns, like a missionary — or perhaps a politician — to her vision: "People keep saying to me, 'Oh, you've captured ordinary people.' Well, to me they're all extraordinary. They all have something to say, whether you agree with it or not."

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'This Land to Me' Some Call It Palestine, Others Israel

Where: Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica Airport, Studio 21, 3026 Airport Ave., Santa Monica

When: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays

Ends: Jan. 8

Price: Free

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