

**Susan Andrews**

Explores the changed perception of those of who have experienced depression

**Annette Habel**

Letting go to a greater force, falling bodies defies control

**Spencer Rowell**

Uncovering the images buried in childhood

**Fiona Yaron-Field**

Removing the wall between Israeli and Palestinian men

**David George**

Poetic documents of a disappearing landscape

**Ulka Karandikar**

Constructing identity in a time of transition

# UNCERTAIN STATES / 01



## DAVID GEORGE

### Enclosures, Badlands and Borders

These images have grown out of a long interest in the representation of man-altered landscapes, such as Edward Ruscha's "Twenty-six Gasoline Stations" (1962) and those produced by the New Topographic school in America. In the tradition of these photographers, there is a sense in which the work can be viewed as a criticism of industry's destruction of the environment but it is not the only reference. The massive structures that are depicted here have a built-in obsolescence due to the decline of manufacturing and industry in the post-industrial west, but the images also represent a benign means of marking the passage of time whilst addressing notions of "The Sublime" in representations of contemporary landscape.

[www.davidgeorge.eu](http://www.davidgeorge.eu)



(IMAGE ON COVER)

## ANNETTE HABEL

### Falling Bodies

The work engages with a recurrent set of ideas. Narratives and images of falling allude to notions of temporality, mortality, evolution, and the fateful passing from one state to another. I find it pertinent that analogue photography, with its chemical process, also embodies the notion of transformation. The bodies are expressive; there is sometimes fear or distress but the images are paradoxical; the bodily gestures convey a sense of stillness that may be read as weightlessness. Falling itself eludes control; it is about giving in to a force greater than oneself. The photographic depiction of a falling person - frozen in mid-air - may translate as imminent disaster, but it may also be an image of immortality.

My essay 'On Falling' can be viewed via the link on the homepage.

[www.annettehabel.com](http://www.annettehabel.com)

(IMAGES ON NEXT PAGE)

## FIONA YARON-FIELD

'Beyond The Wall' is a series of portraits of Israeli and Palestinian men which I began photographing a week before the last war broke out in Gaza (December 2009). The men are shown standing, facing the camera, against a wall. I have always been struck by the similarity of these two people and how closely their cultures relate. Yet both seem incapable of seeing each other or recognizing the others right to exist. "The other" is not seen as a subject with feelings, hopes and desires; he is viewed as an object that is both threatening and frightening. As a consequence of this denial to acknowledge his real identity, his humanity and he's suffering, the violence inflicted on the other is presented as defensive and justifiable.

My initial motivation in making this work arose from my own sense of helplessness about the situation in a region which I feel personally attached to. As the violence escalates and the gap between the two people widens there is a growing despair that the situation will only get worse not better. The desire to raise awareness of issues which I am personally affected by has been a strong drive to make all my photographic work. This work is my personal attempt to contribute towards an alternative way. By taking these portraits and hanging them together I have created a space where the external signifiers of ethnicity are no longer important and individual men face one another, not as "the other" but as fellow human beings.

These portraits do not try to address the blame, injustice or suffering which is real and wrong, they aim to remind us that beyond these defensive positions we are more alike than different. I hope the portraits will also challenge the most recent stereotypical image of Palestinians as poor and uncivilized and Israelis as heartless aggressors.

"It's he, the other, always the other, who puts us in a situation in which we use force. Excuse me, where are obliged to use force. For ultimately he's clearly the one who started it. All we did was react. Maybe another time, when they've understood - forced into it, by force, because force is all they understand- we'll be able to talk with them. If there's anyone to talk with. That's what we say. That's exactly what 'they' say too. Not only can't we see the other and talk to him, but it's absolutely forbidden to do so. He's not allowed to have a name, the other, or a past, a history, plans, descendants, dreams, suffering, loves and misfortunes. Because if we understood his history, if we saw his loves and his fears, if we knew his plans and his dreams, maybe, god forbid, we would discover how much he's like us-almost the splitting image. And then we would no longer be able to hit him so hard. 1. (Yaakov Raz, 2002)

The need to shed the self-image of the poor weak Diaspora from the Shtetls of Eastern Europe and create an image of a healthy strong worker of the land was an important part of Zionism. The self image of the pioneer related to the boundaries of Mandatory Palestine and was modelled on Russian Revolutionary literature which ideologically the pioneers felt akin to. This element of Zionism was an extension of an image from biblical times. Like King David, the pioneer was very hard working, pure in his heart, undefeatable even against the greatest opposition and self sacrificing for the homeland. Photographs of agricultural workers or the building of infra-structures re-enforced the idea that this was an uncultivated space, implying that the immense hard work of the Israeli workers brought this landscape to life. The images changed the 'Jew' into an Israeli and created a greater distance from their terrifying past. Traditionally Palestinian men were photographed incidentally as part of a biblical landscape. Their presence added to the exotic atmosphere; the Shepherd tending his flock, a distant olive grove next to a crumbling stone building all, as Raja Shehadeh describes in his book 'Palestinian Walks' (p.xiv) as producing an image of a land without people. Within the domestic space, the images taken of Palestinian men were closer to the late 19th century studio portrait photography. A portrait of the head of the family, typically wearing a Kaffiyeh (a traditional Palestinian headdress), hang on the walls at home or in their businesses along side the portraits

of religious and political leaders. The photograph acted as a mark of respect and reminder of the patriarchal dominance. Today these images have been replaced by social documentary photographs and news footage. The men are no longer proud and idealistic but seen either as persecutors or victims of violence. We are more likely to see flashed on our screens poor quality identification photographs of 'terrorists' than the proud portraits of the past.

While the depth and complexity of the history of the Jewish and Palestinian people is not the focus of this paper, the conflict today is a result of it. The trauma lying in the collective psyche of the Jewish people and the rationale for the formation of the Jewish state is largely an outcome of the years of persecution suffered and in particularity the genocide in Europe. The Holocaust confirmed for the nationalist Jews what they had already believed, that Jews could not expect anything from anyone and if they were to survive they must trust only themselves. It is only later that it developed feelings of ethnic superiority with regards to the Arabs. Strangely it seems that the 'founders' (The Yishuv) did not wholly welcome the survivors of the Holocaust but quite the opposite appears to be true. The Holocaust was perceived as an object of shame and its survivors poorly treated on their arrival to Palestine. I wonder if these weak vulnerable damaged people did not match the Zionist image of the new strong model Jew. Their pain and horror was both unbearable and triggered feelings of guilt in the rest of the Jewish community that had been spared their fate.

In psychoanalytic terms reminders of inner weakness and pain have to be expelled even at the cost of self destruction or dehumanisation of the other. These unbearable parts of ourselves are split off or repressed and 'projected' outwards. This defence against unwanted aspects of the self distorts our view of the other. 'The other' is only regarded in respect of his perceived defects; this distortion renders him to be considered a threat, one that needs to be controlled. Respectable man's potential for violence is 'split off' from their 'civilised' existence and the 'uncivilized' part of himself is projected on to the other.

I have found borrowing ideas that exist within the discourse of psychoanalysis helpful in thinking about how victims of persecution distort the image of themselves and 'the other'. John Bowlby's view (1988 p.9) was that human infants are pre-programmed to develop in a socially co-operative way and that whether or not they do so depend on how they are treated. Recognizing the importance of self and acknowledging its relation to the 'the other' is characteristic of all psychoanalytic theories founded on a relationship model. Scottish Psychoanalyst W. D Fairbairn saw the infant as enmeshed in his relations to others, discovering himself in the process of interaction. He believed that these early relationships were based on identification. He suggests that the child's need for good caretakers is so great that the child with bad parents would rather believe that it is their fault rather than the fault of their parents. The child will see himself as being bad in order to see and keep his parents as good objects. Fairbairn used the term 'moral defence' to describe how the child internalizes his bad parents. The introjection of the 'bad' parent is a defensive manoeuvre to keep the world safe and to believe your parents really love you as it is intolerable to live without this feeling of protection

**"It is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil"**  
3. W.D Fairbairn (1952p.66)

This identification with the persecutor helps us understand why a high proportion of victims of child abuse later go on to abuse others. The victim seems to have to find another victim, someone weaker than himself

to dominate. There is evidence that women tend to internalize the persecutor and then turn this rage onto themselves, carrying out perverse acts towards their bodies and often their babies, both which are treated as objects. (Welldon 1988 p.72) Men tend to turn this aggression outward onto an external object. It is my view that rather than entering their own trauma the Jewish state is passing it on to another people. Seeing Palestinians as part objects denies them their humanity.

The distortion of perception can be controlled and culturally transmitted through learning and modelling. First learnt through the family and supported by the collective group propaganda aims to influence our thinking. Felicity De Zulueta, (From Pain To Violence) proposes that propaganda campaigns aimed at de-humanizing a group or nation are more successful in a society where the template for violence already exists. For distortion of this perception to take root the seeds of abuse, racism and persecution already exist within in the emotional wounds of the person from his childhood. These people are not encouraged to think for themselves or question authority, obedience is a key element.

When the Palestinian fires Kassam missiles into towns, throws stones, blows themselves up in public places it is evidence of their rage (I do not condone this action). Revenge is seen to be their only satisfaction (although it will be short lived). The enemy becomes the 'object' of revenge and his destruction central to restore ones sense of self, in middle eastern terms 'honour'. This rage has its origins in the traumatisation of Palestinians Arabs. So we see again how the victims of violence identify with the persecutor and so the cycle of violence continues.

To go beyond the wall is to go beyond these defensive positions that of 'moral defence' projection and dehumanisation. It is a position where we recognize both our own pain and that of the person standing opposite us. It is a position where our perception is not distorted by our own narcissistic injuries of self.

The State of Israel has erected a barrier which is an 8 metre high concrete wall and is approximately 703 kilometres in length. It runs within the West Bank and along part of the border of Israel and Jordan. Supporters argue that the barrier is a necessary tool protecting Israeli civilians from Palestinian terrorism. Opponents argue that the barrier is an illegal attempt to annex Palestinian land under the pretence of security. Originally I thought to make these portraits against the wall that divides the two communities but it became clear to me that this wall has become a symbol. There are dividing walls all over the country some of these are more obvious than others. I am also suggesting that the walls are psychological and the barriers that need to be removed are inside us. To have ones back against the wall is a position of vulnerability and mirrored my own feeling of 'helplessness'. When we come up against a wall we are imprisoned or have reached some kind of impasse. In a showing of Nizar Hassans film 'Invasion' he suggests that although the Palestinians are imprisoned they have somewhere to go- resistance. Israelis, he comments, are not in movement they are in defence. Palestinians have nothing to loose that gives them purpose and strength. So the wall that the Israelis have built to defend themselves and feel safe is the same wall that has become a symbol of Palestinian resistance. I took this idea of the wall with its double meaning and used this as the backdrop for these portraits. To be put against a wall reminds us of acts of submission and power, this uncomfortable was an authentic reflection of my encounter with these men whose lives I walked in and then out of.

For photographers who photograph their intimate life like; Nan Goldin, Elinor Carucci, Richard Billingham, Nobuyoshi Araki, the camera moves as they do in their daily life. It becomes an extension of them. This subjective viewpoint is clearly visible in the way the photographer freely tilts the angles of his frame, uses existing light, blurs the image and get very close up to his subjects especially in intimate moments. When we as observers view these images we feel that the photograph is as much about the

photographer as it is about his subject. The men in my images are strangers and the static frame reflects the position I stand in relationship to them. This position of detached observation is characteristic of the deadpan aesthetic. The camera angle is straight on to the figure. This vantage point is selected to be as neutral and simple as possible. In this way we feel our relationship to the people is direct and we can look at them as they look at us. In the tradition of Walker Evans and Robert Frank, Joel Steinfeld has been travelling through United States taking portraits of strangers. These portraits are taken on a large format 8-by-10 view camera in order to capture the rich textures and telling details of the person and his landscape. Like in, "Passing Stranger's, I have asked these men to break from their daily routine and take a moment to be photographed. These images record this encounter between myself, a woman, and a man from a very different cultural background. Steinfeld's portraits are almost all placed outdoors in a landscape or cityscape and the play of subject against the background is significant. In my portraits the relationship the man has to the wall behind him is equally very important. All of Steinfeld's pictures are taken from about the same distance and all the subjects are looking directly at the camera, a formal uniformity that unites his subjects together. It is up to us to decide what we are willing to assume, on the basis of outward appearance, about the people staring back at us from the image.

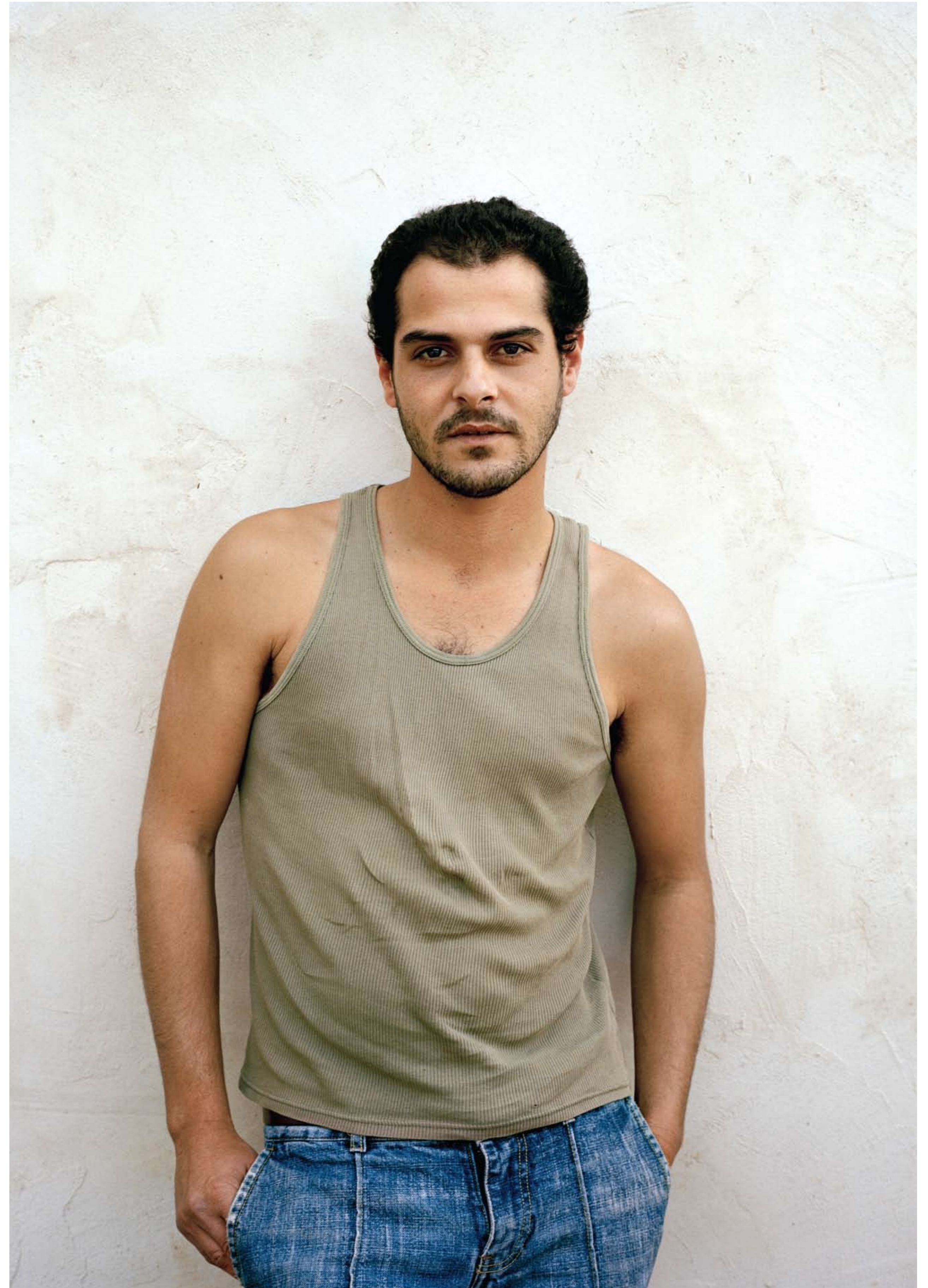
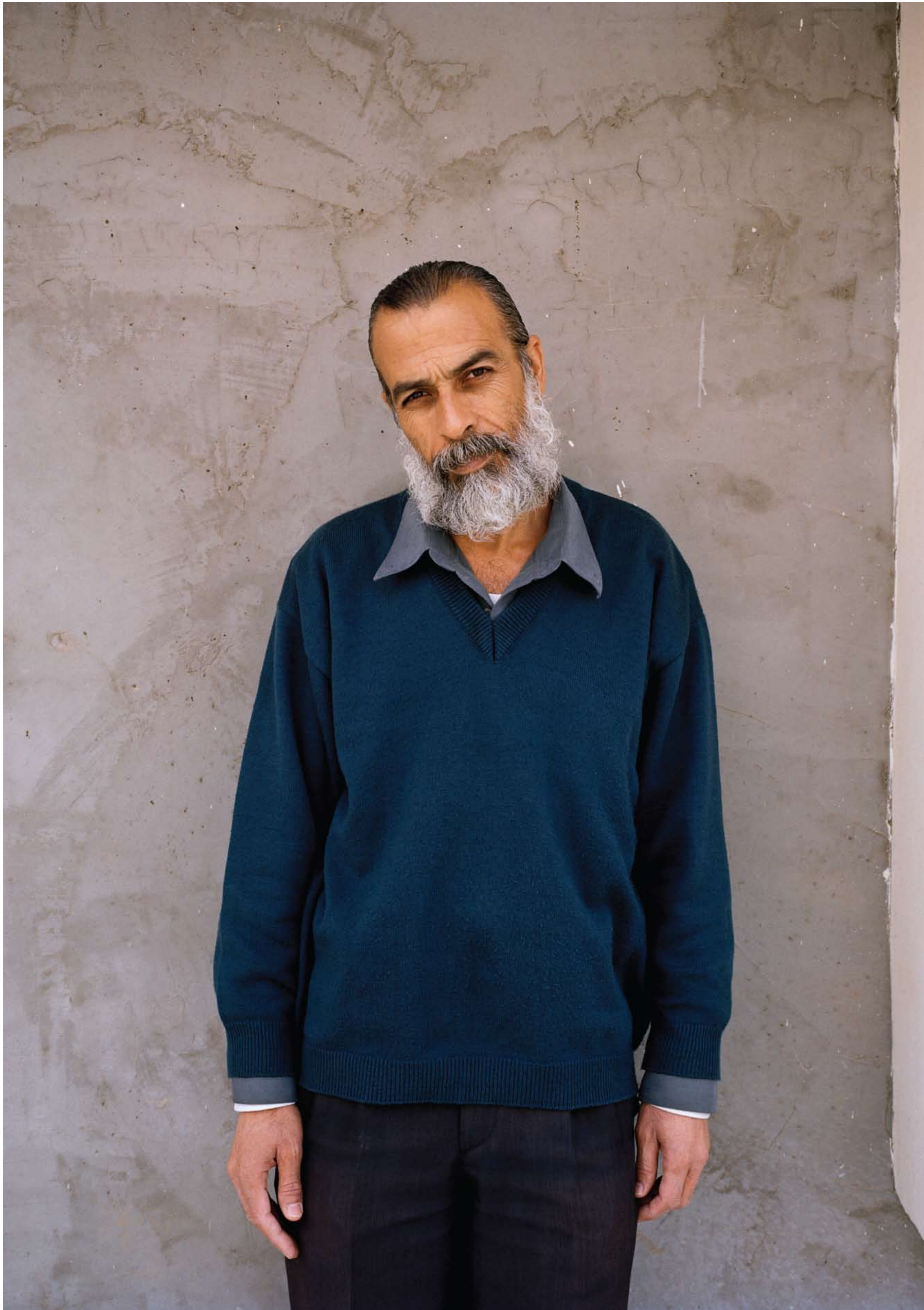
The deadpan portrait questions the notion that we can know someone by the physical details of their face or assumes that there is a truth about the person that photography has the power to reveals to us. It suggests that if there are truths they are focused on the subtle signs of how people react to being photographed and as a record of this encounter.

The Dutch portrait photographer Rineke Dijkstra images fit in with this formal structure. Her subjects are often shown standing, facing the camera, against a minimal background. The technical precision of her work and the large size of the portraits direct our focus on the smallest of nuance. It is in these tiny details the subject reveals himself and we feel that intangible quality of humanity. It is that quality that makes her work so powerful.

Even the photographer who tries not to direct the image and observes only what is there in front of him cannot claim to be objective. The choice of where that frame sits and who is inside it will always be governed by his subjective viewpoint. It would be dangerous if when we view an image we didn't not question the authenticity of the images we see.

For me the creative process is one of bringing what is still unconscious inside me to light. The idea for this work came from a moment of inspiration, and only by starting the project and following this urge have I started to learn what the work meant to me. While I was photographing the first set of portraits the strongest experience I had was not of the Israeli/Palestinian situation but of being a woman facing a man and the sense of my own power as I took them to the wall to shoot them. When I look at the images I am aware that the men look feminine and have a vulnerable quality. While intellectually I wish these men to see each other as human beings, emotionally I may have to face that my anger at their aggression has turned my camera into a gun and I too would rather identify with the persecutor than the helpless victim. This process of 'coming into awareness' and bringing oneself into consciousness happens through the photographic process and the further development of the imagery.

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How I see myself when depressed...

This is a difficult question. In truth I don't think I see myself particularly differently to the way I see myself when not depressed but I think depression heightens and sharpens negative perceptions and perspectives that are already there:

**Hirsute:** I see myself as non-bald. But subject to baldness, that skin condition. Until a cure is invented I will not look like myself: much older and much uglier. I refuse to accept this for the reason that it is someone else. But I always see myself as the person I am normally (with hair), even when not depressed. However, the identity crisis, from being absurd and a technical issue requiring a solution, turns blacker and labyrinthine.

**Judgement:** when depressed I am convinced that every decision I have ever made has been wrong. That my flat is crap, no-one would ever want to live in it, teams of architects and tens of thousands of pounds will be needed to put it right because I have messed it up. That every initiative I take will turn to dust, never be the right one. I will only ever know the right things to do when it is too late.

**Friends:** when depressed I certainly feel a particular thing: that I am, fatally, not part of a subculture. And that everyone must believe in a subculture, have a passion for fly-fishing, say, or calligraphy, or football. The people I could loosely call my "friends" or "friendly acquaintances" are few. And they all seem to be different. If they all met at the same time it would be like matter and antimatter. Total confusion and incomprehension.

**Constraint:** I see myself as constrained by the past, by my emotional history, by my impossible choosiness when it comes to women, and very much by the baldness question (see above). Also by the idiocy and lack of sensibility of, seemingly, most people whom you might meet in the street in this city (or any other probably). So many seem like blocks of wood, unresponsive, without a nerve in their bodies; at such times I feel I have nothing in common with them at all, that I am isolated utterly. Constrained by a commercial culture that reflects the mentality of those who respond to it so readily: poorly educated, easy to manipulate. Liking loud noise. Everywhere. Constrained by money and by choices I have made. Constrained by indecision. By the weight of everything which has gone before: at such times I want more people to understand the shocking truth as it appears: so much has been written, painted, photographed that originality is becoming illusory, with whatever this implies for artistic endeavour. Constrained by the relentless anonymity of London, and the charmlessness, discourteousness, uncommunicativeness and sheer gormless stupidity of so many of my fellow beings!

## SUSAN ANDREWS

### Albatross

Alice Miller states in 'The Drama of Being a Child' that Narcissus is deceived by his own reflection, "since it shows only his perfect, wonderful face and not his inner world, his pain, his history. His back view, for instance, and his shadow remain hidden from him; they do not belong to and are cut off from his beloved reflection."

This work explores the changed perceptions of those who have experienced depression. They have been photographed from behind in open spaces of personal significance to them. The landscape represents the external world that offers solace, suggesting a potential release from internal turmoil. However, it is meaningless in the depressed state and compounds the subjects' isolation. The camera, that has become a tool for the minute analysis of our physical appearance, takes the role of both enemy and friend. Friend, in that there is opportunity for reflection, and enemy in the critical mirror that it holds up. In this work, the back of the figure does not challenge the viewer, nor can the viewer challenge or scrutinise the subject but both look at the same landscape, suggesting a quiet connection between photographer, subject and viewer. The text explores the internal world and is supplied by those photographed, in response to the question, "How do you see yourself when depressed?" It operates in conjunction and opposition with the image and reflects the dissonance between an objective reality and subjective perception.

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## ULKA KARANDIKAR

The series 'Halls' consists of large-scale colour photographs of individual rooms taken within student 'halls of residence'. All the photographs are taken from the same vantage point, with the door as frame. The work explores the objects that people surround themselves with to consciously and subconsciously fashion identity at this transitional stage of life. Between childhood and adulthood.

Saturated in consumer culture the occupants of each room have fashioned a space in which their identity is on show. Adorned with posters, magazine cuttings, books and the paraphernalia of the everyday, the rooms are portraits of each individual in a time of change. Closer inspection of each room reveals this transition more acutely, the photographs of family and childhood on the wall, bed linen from home coupled with makeup, contraceptives and maps to navigate independence in an unknown city. This identity in flux extends from the personal to global, various flags and political causes are represented, and in a modern age of global communication what is needed, at the very least, is a show of global cultural and political awareness.

The occupants of each room are not present to be photographed, however, when they are seen, it is via a photograph on the wall. The physical person is not important. These media savvy occupants know the pitfalls of representation, and instead it is image that is all. They have edited their photographs and lives and placed them within their larger self-portraits.

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## SPENCER ROWELL

### Memories of Childhood (1963-1966) 2009 Work In Progress

These photographs depict a series of memories from childhood, which for many years had been repressed. The work explores these early reminiscences, giving them expression and form. Whilst I see the images as being a type of self-portraiture, as I am the subject in the frame, nostalgically, they also reference image and text from comics and storybooks in the 1960s.

www.spencerrowell.com





Spencer Rowell - Memories of childhood (1963) - Medium: C-type Print - Year: 2009

**Photo-space Gallery**  
**06-28th November 2009**  
**Part of the East End Photomonth Exhibition**

Open 6th-28th November (Wed-Sat, 11am-6pm)  
Preview Private View Thursday 5th November 6pm-9pm  
Venue Photo-Space Gallery, 530 Commercial Road, London, E1 0HY (near Limehouse DLR, buses 15, 115,135)

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