Yaakov Israel was born in 1974 in Jerusalem, Israel where he lives and works. He has a BFA from the Department of Photography at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem. Since 2004 he has been teaching photography at some of the most prominent art and photography schools and colleges in Israel.

His work has been the subject of solo and group shows which were exhibited in museums and galleries in Israel and internationally. Solo exhibitions venues include: Centro de Arte Alcobendas; Czech Centre, Prague; Impressions Gallery, Bradford, England; Fifty One Fine Art Photography, Arnhem; Margaret Street Gallery, London; La Maison de la Photographie, Toulouse; ostelli contemporary photography, Basel; The Architecture House Gallery, Jaffa; The Open Museum of Photography, Tel-Hai; and the Halls Museum of Art.

He was selected Winner of the PHotoEspaña Descubrimientos PHE12 Award, as one of the three winners of the Conscientious portfolio competition, and a Critical Mass finalist, Top 50 by Photolucida. His photographs are in the collections of The Knesset (Israel’s house of parliament), Halls Museum of Art, The Open Museum of Photography at Tel-Hai, and Ostelli Art Museum. His first monograph The Quest for the Man on the White Donkey was published in 2012 by Schilt Publishing, Amsterdam. Yaakov Israel is represented by Fifty One Fine Art Photography, Arnhem and Ostelli contemporary photography, Basel.
II

There is complexity, of course, in all places deeply considered. Yaakov Israel’s home-place, however, wears its complexity very much on its sleeve. This, after all, is a territory so charged that we cannot quite know its name: the State of Israel, Israel-Palestine, Palestine, Eretz Israel. Naming here is an act fraught with politics, a lightning rod around which this place flashes black and white.

Yet, the name of this place matters to us. It looms large in our consciousness. These lands are evocative as well as material places. Sacred to so many traditions for millennia, more recently this land has been woven, too, into narratives about geopolitical parables and beacons of democracy. It is a place that can shade more or less into our way of being, layering in new complexities still.

In this light, this is a territory where our political lexicon morphs and is irrevocably changed. It is here that we learn to think in terms of road maps leading to the most prized destination of all: peace. Here, the verticalization of space means that now we need to map territory in three-dimensions, to account for bridges and sewer systems weaving together otherwise-disconnected component pieces of the future two-state solution. The national territory is settled along ethnocratic lines just as nineteenth-century Europeans controlled space to commandeer entire continents from America to Australia.

Unsettled, then, by large currents of history, boundaries have shifted here at least since the Great War, whose centenaries we will continue to celebrate in coming years. Compounding this is a series of subsequent conflicts of greater and lesser intensity, indeed even over summer 2014 as this essay is finalized. Such upheavals add to the intensity of this place, imbuing it with ever more meanings, pulling it again and again into our orbit, into our consciousness.

It is tempting to mark it as aorny place, where barbed wire springs like a spring from the ground, on a spectrum of hardiness from coarse grass, through wire, to the desert itself, reflected in the eroded hills in the distance. The sky is inscrutable in this photograph. A hint of red and we could be in Mars. In many of the portraits here, environmental determinists would chalk somber expressions down to lives lived in a Mediterranean landscape always in range of the looming desert.

Yaakov Israel rebels against that impulse. His eye is drawn to the quotidian lived experiences in the fabric of his land. His narratives run counter to big stories about his homeland. Those somber faces are a reflection of the strained circumstance of chance meetings with strangers in the hinterlands, and the subjects’ resignation to Israel painstakingly frames and prepares his large-format photographs. His view-camera and process are extended homelands; most of us are more rooted still. Our materiality makes it so, and even the most apparently disembodied cyber experiences are anchored in places—at server farms, in low earth orbits, and, of course, in the momentary places we stand tethered, ogling.

Furthermore, Israel deliberately seeks out the laying of history in his land. The very title of his project, The Quest for the Man on the White Donkey, comes from an encounter with a Palestinian farmer mounted just so, echoing a sacred prophecy that thus would the Messiah return. Always, then, for Yaakov Israel, comes from an encounter with a Palestinian farmer—never erasing it—so that it can manifest itself in the landscape and in his photographs. The large-format camera is intrinsic to his purpose. The resulting images allow for such detail that each time and, ideally, transfer his moments of clarity to his negatives. Each portrait is an archetype for people encountered over years of such journeying; each landscape momentarily revealed is, above all, metaphorical.

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