

HAARETZ **magazi**

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"When I photograph, I'm a different person, practically without inhibitions, which is something I always wanted to be but couldn't," says photographer Michal Chelbin. "I'm still kind of a little girl when it comes to the moment of the photography itself. I want it right now, without compromises, without waiting. I can photograph for an entire day without eating or drinking. My husband, Oded, teases me and says that since our daughter Danielle was born, he's a father of two girls."

The three of them live in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in a spacious apartment that also includes a darkroom and serves as the base from which they set out on photography assignments around the world. It used to be just the two of them, with Oded acting as Michal's right-hand man. Now, with six-month-old Danielle, they're planning to continue as a threesome. At home, they are practicing: Michal, dressed simply, devoid of all mannerisms and with a shy look and smile, bursts out laughing when Oded takes Danielle out of her crib, places her on his shoulder and marches back and forth with her.

Next week, Chelbin, who has lived in New York for the past two years, will open an exhibition of her photographs at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, having won the museum's Constantiner Award for Photography for 2007. The exhibition, entitled "Strangely Familiar," including photographs she took in Ukraine, Russia, England and Israel over the past five years, will mark another step on the path to making a name for herself as a world-class artist. In the spring, she became the first Israeli artist to have a book released by Aperture, the prestigious New York photography publisher. In addition to the exhibition in Tel Aviv, photographs from the book will also be shown at the Andrea Meislin Gallery in Manhattan.

Chelbin's subjects are mostly circus performers and eccentrics from society's fringes; after forming a connection with them, she photographs them. Her photographs are seductive and enigmatic. As her livelihood, she works as a photographer for The New York Times and The New Yorker, among other publications. Not bad for a 34-year-old from Haifa

She is drawn to Eastern Europe, and to Ukraine in particular. She first encountered Ukraine in old portraits of her father's family. "I found them when I was poking around in some old boxes, and they thoroughly captivated me. The subjects' direct gaze into the camera and the riddles they presented - questions like: Who are these people? What happened to them, and why were they photographed in this particular way? I couldn't get them out of my head."

Did you ask your father for answers?

"Around my father's family, who were originally from a small village near Rovno, which is now part of Ukraine, and perished in the Holocaust, there was a conspiracy of silence. When my father was 16, a neighbor told him that the man he had called 'Father' wasn't his real father. He was my grandmother's second husband. She met him in the camp in Germany after the war, when my father was six. His real father was killed. My grandmother was a strong woman, a real survivor. She fled on her own with my father and hid with a Czech farmer. One of her stories that has stayed with me is about how my father, who was a year old, got lost in a cornfield when she was working for the farmer. She found him by following the sound of his continual crying."

But what brings you, as a native Israeli and a New Yorker, to Eastern Europe?

"I find a lot of fascinating contrasts there, a combination of old and new, civilized and wild, comic and tragic. Granted, it's a particular population, but I look for the way it contends with universal subjects like adolescence, family relations and the attraction of glamour. I try to create this by means of the staging of the picture and the different elements that I combine - the casting, the lighting, the location."

How do you stage a photograph?

"There are subjects that I don't need to exchange a single word with. They just know how to be photographed, they understand the camera and me, even if we speak different languages. Then there are those that require a number of hours of what I call 'attrition' of the subject, which is the time that passes until he or she reaches a sort of inner calm that enables the 'moment' to take place. It's said about Diane Arbus that everyone she photographed - whether it was a dwarf or transvestite or just a regular magazine portrait of an actor or businessman - they all projected the same expression, her expression. The moment I look for is also a moment of devotion, in which the subject somehow takes off a mask. He peels off a layer, bares his self. Sometimes it doesn't happen that quickly. An entire relationship develops in the time that the peeling back occurs."

Is the pronounced sexuality of the subjects a consequence of this?

"Yes, it's part of the intimacy this encounter creates. But this is just one possible reading, out of many ways of reading the photographs."

Her works are not digital. She uses film and makes a manual print from the negative; the pictures take up an entire frame, without any cuts or changes. She prints the black-and-white photographs herself and the color photographs together with a professional printer. "I don't use digital technology, first of all because I've yet to see a digital print that compares to the quality of a manual print. The other reason has to do with the set itself. For me, there's something too easy about the digital format, in which you see the result immediately. It may sound old-fashioned, but film forces me to think and to be exact, because I know that afterward I won't be able to change the frame. The encounter with the subject on the set must be absolute. It's even more extreme with me, because I usually know right away if I like what I'm seeing or not. I think that Richard Avedon once said that if he only could, he would like to photograph directly with the eyes. I understand that. The camera is a means for reconstructing my way of seeing."

Before she left Israel, Chelbin had two solo shows at the Rosenfeld Gallery, "Vitalina and Friends" and "Lazarova," and afterward, two solo shows at the Herzliya Museum of Art, "The Chapels" and "Uniforms & Costumes." She gained international exposure when she was still a student, with works shown at galleries in New York and Los Angeles, as well as in American magazines. Chelbin's next book, due out in the fall of 2009 from Twin Palms publishing, will contain photographs of athletes.

In the U.S., her photography took off right away, and for good reason. "I'm a devotee of an American tradition of photography that serves me in different dimensions in my work," she says. "I'm influenced mainly by photographers like Diane Arbus, Mary Ellen Mark, Sally Mann. I also like the British photographer Juliet Margaret Cameron, who belonged to the 19th-century pictorialist school and photographed young girls in a very sexual way. She basically was the inspiration for Sally Mann."

Chelbin was born and raised in Haifa. "When I was growing up, Haifa was more of a village. I remember that we spent a lot of time outside, climbing trees, going to the sea a lot," she says. "To this day, I still can't quite adjust to big cities. I recall myself as a very shy, insecure, dreamy child with a lot of imagination. In fact, I'm still the same way, when I'm not doing photography."

She is the youngest of three girls; her father worked for the Zim shipping company and her mother was a nurse. No one in the family showed any artistic tendencies, but when Chelbin reached middle school, she decided to transfer to the WIZO school in Haifa to study photography. After high school, she served as a photographer in the IDF Spokesman's Unit. "Even at that point, I remember that I wasn't satisfied with documentary photography and I would try to stage scenes. I had soldiers trooping back and forth in riverbeds until I got the frame I wanted."

After her army service, she returned to WIZO and worked toward a bachelor's degree in the photography department. To support herself she worked for a while as a news photographer in the Haifa area, a job from which she was fired because of a series of "tragic" incidents, as she describes it.

"I hated every minute. I couldn't photograph people in their anguish, crying in hospitals or courthouses, and besides, I was always late. Once I was in court to photograph a murder trial that had the country in an uproar at the time. All the photographers shoved their way forward, took pictures and left. I was the only one who didn't push, and I ended up standing closest to the family, and when one of the siblings turned around and got angry at the photographers, I was the one who got such a kick in the behind from him that I couldn't sit for a week afterward. Another time, I was sent to photograph Rabin's visit to the village of Zarzir. I got lost on the way and luckily I saw a police car parked on the shoulder. I pulled up next to it to ask for directions and the policeman gave me a ticket for stopping on the shoulder. I never made it there to photograph Rabin."

She began a new career as a wedding photographer. "It actually went pretty well, but apparently I brought bad luck because a high percentage of the couples I photographed separated or divorced not long afterward." It was during this period that she met Oded. At the time, they didn't imagine that her photography would turn into a joint enterprise.

"We met when he was the commander of a Dabur patrol boat and I was assigned to photograph the company. Later on, he studied photography at the Sam Spiegel Film & Television School. We've been working together for almost 10 years now."

Your case is quite rare, both in terms of your collaboration and in the fact that it is Oded who acts as your support rather than vice-versa. How does it work?

"Oded produces all the projects and the travel arrangements. On the set we work together, with me photographing and him acting as a sort of super-assistant who does everything. He helps me with casting the subjects, with scouting the location, with coordinating things, organizing the flights, and he also deals with the galleries and with sales. After many years together, we have this kind of blind understanding. We work quickly and hardly need to speak. The most serious problem is that neither one of us is very good with money, and all the money goes to fund the projects, so the bottom line is that there's never any money."

The move to New York must have helped with the financial side.

"In New York I'm able to make a living from photography, which is impossible in Israel, and I've already published one book and the second is going to be published a year from now. On the other hand, now that I have a child, I'm sometimes very confused and torn about this choice. It's very hard for us, alone, without family. Life here is less spontaneous. You need to make a 'play date' weeks ahead of time just so the kids can meet and play together. I live with a strong feeling of detachment everywhere. I'm conflicted about it. When I come to Israel, I want to return to New York, and when I'm here, I cry from homesickness. The funny thing is that even when I lived in Israel, I was also a bit of a strange bird who didn't fit in. The criticism against me was always that I was doing something that was 'non-local' or 'non-Israeli.' These are concepts that I still don't quite understand."