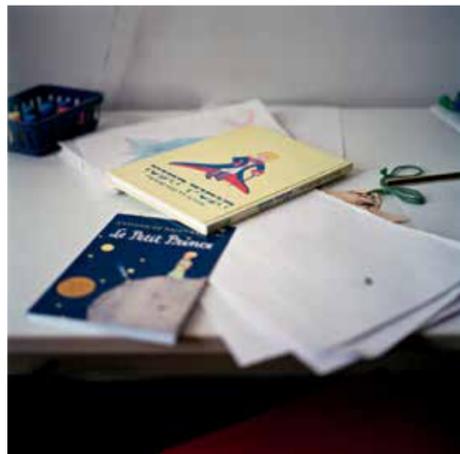


Do you have an interesting photography project? Contact section editor Conor Risch at PDN, 85 Broad Street, 11th floor, New York, NY 10004 or e-mail conor.risch@emeraldexpo.com.



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SOCIAL STUDY JOINING TOGETHER

IN A NEW BOOK AND EXHIBITION, Yael Ben-Zion uses intimate photographs to deliver a nuanced portrait of intermarried couples and their families. BY DZANA TSOMONDO

INTERMARRIED IS Yael Ben-Zion's new photo book exploring the personal, cultural and political implications of "mixed" marriages. Published by Kehrer Verlag in Europe last fall and available in U.S. bookstores this spring, the book is a combination of photography, expository writing and excerpts of interviews with her subjects. *Intermarried* succeeds in large part because of the intimacy that Ben-Zion cultivates throughout the work. These couples' homes, their children and their personal spaces provide a quietly powerful backdrop to their stories. This is domesticity politicized, and

Ben-Zion's careful hand steers around clichés to challenge our assumptions and expectations.

Four years in the making, *Intermarried* was inspired by an Israeli media campaign decrying the "loss" of Jews to intermarriage. As an Israeli-American woman who married a non-Jewish person, Ben-Zion was offended by the short-lived ad, and it triggered an impulse to seek insights into why people choose partners

outside of their "immediate social group." She started by posting on a message board for parents who live in Washington Heights, her New York City neighborhood, seeking couples who self-defined as "intermarried." (This month Ben-Zion is exhibiting the work in the community in which it was made, at La Galeria at Boricua College in Washington Heights.)

From the beginning, Ben-Zion knew that she wanted to do more than just take pictures of intermarried couples. She wanted to know their stories—the whys and hows of their lives together. "I would go to these people and we would talk for a long time before I even took out my camera. I didn't record [audio interviews], I told them that later on I would send them a questionnaire and they could fill out whatever they were

Clockwise from top left: "Patterns," "Family" and "The Little Prince," from Yael Ben-Zion's new book and exhibition, *Intermarried*. "I like to work at the space between candid and posed," Ben-Zion says of the series.



Yael Ben-Zion: "Most people have some kind of opinion or preconception about [intermarriage] and I wanted to try and have the viewer question their preconceptions."

comfortable with," she says.

Despite what she thought was encouraging initial progress, Ben-Zion began to feel that the images she was taking were lacking. More often than not the photograph was of a couple that "either did or did not have the same skin color" seated on a couch. Frustrated, she went back to some of her previous work, trying to ascertain what was missing. Her 2011 monograph titled *5683 MILES AWAY*, an allusion to the distance between her current home, New York City, and the city of Tel Aviv, looks at everyday life in Israel. Ben-Zion made that book with almost unlimited access to people she already knew very well, and that connection was evident. In order to make *Intermarried*, Ben-Zion realized, she would have to collaborate more closely with her subjects.

"I like to work at the space between [candid and posed]. As I used a medium-format camera and lighting equipment, my subjects were aware of my presence. However, we spent enough time together and they were open enough to enable me to capture intimate moments," Ben-Zion elaborates. "Moreover, even in the more constructed images—images that were conceived in collaboration between us based on an experience they went through—the images themselves were not strictly posed.

From top to bottom: "Bulbs," "Four Mothers" and "Grandpa." "I wanted to open a dialogue about these issues that are both very personal and very political," says Ben-Zion, who is herself a member of an inter-ethnic marriage.

Although my subjects were 'acting' for the camera, it was in reference to something they experienced or that was dear to them, and I think this comes through in the images."

These intimate settings and attendant conversations form the heart of *Intermarried* and force us to see its subjects as individuals and families, not "examples." But the book's essays, written by Yale University law professor Amy Chua and art critic Maurice Berger, address the broader issue of cross-cultural coupling, and bring an analytical edge to what is, on its face, a very personal work.

Ben-Zion is actually a former student of Chua's, and was struck by a memorable lecture in which Chua contended that the level of intermarriage was one indicator of social and economic mobility within a country. Given their relationship and Chua's own experience with mixed marriage—she is Chinese-American and her husband is Jewish—she was a natural fit for the project.

And while Ben-Zion didn't know Berger personally, she knew and admired his work, which often deals with race and culture. She approached him with her concept and a slide show of images from the book, and Berger agreed to contribute his writing.

With the essays serving as contextual bookends, Ben-Zion structured the book with a loose narrative arc in mind. The discussion moves from marriage to the couples' children and their upbringings, to challenges the couples face and then on to solutions or "ways that people deal," as Ben-Zion puts it. It ends with the author's own essay, a poignant account of her friendship with a woman named Beatrice Rippy. They met in 2007 when Ben-Zion was a student at the International Center of Photography in New York City, and working on a project about elderly New Yorkers. By then widowed, Rippy had entered into an interracial marriage in the 1950s, when anti-miscegenation laws were commonplace in the United States. When Ben-Zion started working on *Intermarried*, Rippy agreed to participate. Sadly, she passed away only weeks later, before they were able to work together, but Ben-Zion dedicated the book to her and cites Rippy as "a great source of inspiration."

That closing essay is another example of Ben-Zion's ability to take the controversial subject matter and imbue it with humanity and emotional resonance. Instead of a polemic, she gives us a nuanced reflection on interracial and interfaith relationships.

"Most people have some kind of opinion or preconception about this issue and I wanted to try and have the viewer question their preconceptions," she says. "I wanted to open a dialogue about these issues that are both very personal and very political."