

INTERVIEW

Video against intermarriage angers ex-pat Israeli photog

Artist Yael Ben-Zion, shocked by a harsh Hebrew-language clip against mixed marriages, began documenting families in her diverse NY hood

By CAROLINE LAGNADO | 24 January 2014, 2:50 am



Family, 2012, by Yael Ben-Zion (detail)

NEW YORK — It was a [thirty-five second video](#) produced by the Israeli government that spurred [Yael Ben-Zion](#) to begin her recent series of photographs. The clip compares intermarried Jews to missing persons, their faces plastered on ominous “Missing” posters in several languages.

“When I saw it back in 2009 I was surprised as, at the time, I wasn’t aware of how common intermarriage was among American Jews,” noted the photographer in an email interview with the Times of Israel. “I was also taken aback by its message.”

Ben-Zion, an Israeli-American lawyer-turned-photographer, is herself intermarried to a man from France.

For four years Ben-Zion interviewed and photographed intermarried families in Washington Heights, the neighborhood in upper Manhattan where she has lived for the past five and a half years. She aims to explore the social and political implications behind something as personal as choosing a spouse from a different race or religion.

She chose to complete her project in her own backyard, the historically Jewish Washington Heights neighborhood, since it is a uniquely diverse section of New York City. The families she focused on were a self-selected group who responded to a query she posted on a local online parents forum.

In “Intermarried,” Ben-Zion’s curiosity focused not only on a mingling of faiths, but also of races and other societal divides.

“Other than the access I gained through the parent group (which now has more than 3,000 member families) and the ease and enjoyment of working within my own community, Washington Heights is one of the more diversified neighborhoods in New York City and intermarriage is quite common here,” Ben-Zion said to the Times of Israel.



Papers, 2012 by Yael Ben-Zion (detail)

A new book entitled “Intermarried” ([Keher](#)) is the culmination of four years of Ben-Zion’s time and work. Her previous works include 2011’s “[5683 Miles Away](#),” a book of her photographs that asked what “normal life” is in Israel.

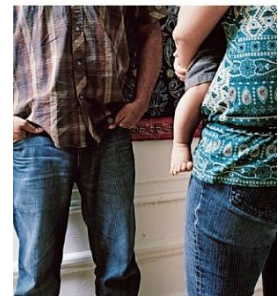
Ben-Zion’s subjects granted her intimate access to themselves; she went into their homes and photographed their children and their belongings. In the book, Ben-Zion interspersed images of these intermarried families with snippets of their responses to a questionnaire she prepared.

The photographs show the stuff of everyday life. The scenes do not appear to have been staged, the people look relaxed, engaged with each other and unselfconscious in the camera’s presence. They drink coffee, they lounge, they hug.

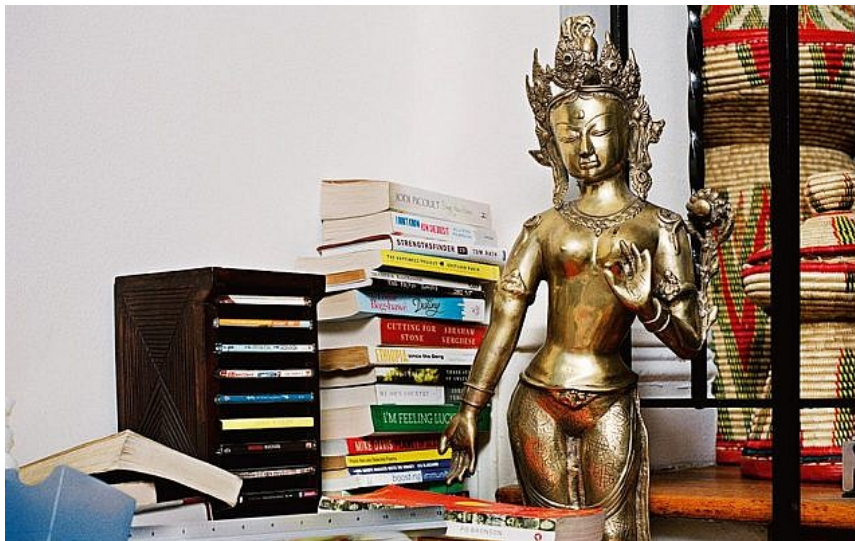
Their homes — their mementos, religious items, family photographs, pop culture posters — reflect a mixing of cultures. In their written responses, some speak of difficulties with their families and friends due to their choice of partner. Some mixed couples discuss wanting to incorporate elements of both spouses’ backgrounds into their blended family life, others mention similarities in their backgrounds that transcend cultural differences.

One respondent named Sarina wrote of her marriage, “We are from different backgrounds, continents, races, languages, and actually are the only such ‘mix’ that we know of (Ethiopia/Nepal). Still, there are many commonalities coming from traditional cultures, developing countries.”

INTERMARRIED
BY YEL BEN-ZION



“Intermarried” by Yael Ben-Zion



I'm Feeling Lucky, 2012, by Yael Ben-Zion (detail)

This quote is shown across from a photograph called “I’m feeling lucky” that features a Hindu statue amidst stacks of books and CDs, a pair of woven African pieces stand in the background.

Opposite a photograph called “Mohel’s instruments,” which features the tools of circumcision spread out on a table, Ben-Zion writes that it was difficult for her and her husband to choose whether or not to circumcise their twin sons. She does not say what they ultimately decided.

Ben-Zion came to the project and to her subjects with her unique Israeli-American sensibility: “I think that because I didn’t grow up in the US it was easier for me to connect with my subjects and talk to them about personal issues that sometimes are still very charged here. It was also very interesting for me to compare how the concept and implications of intermarriage vary between Israel and the US.”



The Little Prince, 2012 by Yael Ben-Zion (detail)

“Intermarried” opens with a forward by Amy Chua, Professor of Law at Yale Law School, author of “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,” and wife of fellow law professor, Jed Rubenfeld, a Jew. She writes, “In essence, the work compels us to question our own attitudes towards intermarriage.”

“Being myself intermarried, the [Israeli government’s] campaign made me think of the many challenges faced by ‘mixed couples,’” wrote Ben-Zion. “As I am secular, I was not interested merely in interfaith marriages but in the more general question of why people choose to share their lives with someone who is not from their own social group and what are the issues they have to deal with.”

Works from “Intermarriage” are being exhibited at La Galeria at Boricua College in Washington Heights through February 3, 2014.