



Politics of Identity in
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NAOMI LESHEM

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NEW YORK Israeli photographer Naomi Leshem's first solo show in the U.S. consisted of two series of C-prints, both of which explore states of limbo. The first, "Sleepers" (2008-09), shows young people between the ages of 16 and 20, from Israel, Switzerland, Germany, France and the U.S., asleep in their beds amid twisted sheets, bunched-up pillows and blankets, and the occasional stuffed animal. Sleep is a transient, ephemeral state, and adolescence is even more so. Teenagers are, almost by definition, ambiguous creatures, one foot still in childhood, the other in the land of adults. Leshem's subjects embody this metamorphosis: Kristina, a beautiful blonde from Germany, snuggles under her comforter with an Uglydoll; Adam, a boyish-looking American teen, clutches a blue pillow; Tom, from Israel, with his scruffy beard, looks more man than boy even underneath his flowered blanket.

The 36-inch-square images are shot in brightly lit interiors, despite the fact that Leshem's subjects all appear to be genuinely unconscious. (She set up the camera and then left until they fell asleep.) The photos bring to mind Tim Hetherington's 2008 series of sleeping soldiers—young men on tour in Afghanistan. His intimate pictures, which turn anonymous troops into defenseless, individual young men, inspire in the viewer a sense of protectiveness and compassion. Leshem's languorous teenagers are poignant, too, but arouse equal parts protectiveness and desire.

The photographs in Leshem's second series, "Runways" (2007), depict young women, who are about to begin their mandatory military service, standing on airstrips in Israel. The runways are striated with skid marks from landing aircraft, and these lines converge dramatically toward a point on the horizon. There is a uniformity to all of these square-format photographs, bisected in the middle by a horizon line. Bright blue skies occupy the upper half of the frame; a desolate, sun-baked terrain fills the bottom. The unvarying composition may be meant to suggest the uniformity required by the military. Seen from a distance, and from behind, the young women are somewhat abstract, symbols instead of individuals. *Nitsan* (2007) shows a girl, barefoot, running down the black tarmac, hurtling toward the horizon. We can easily imagine her fleeing her responsibilities. The photographs in "Runways," though, occasionally feel forced, as if they're trying to make a