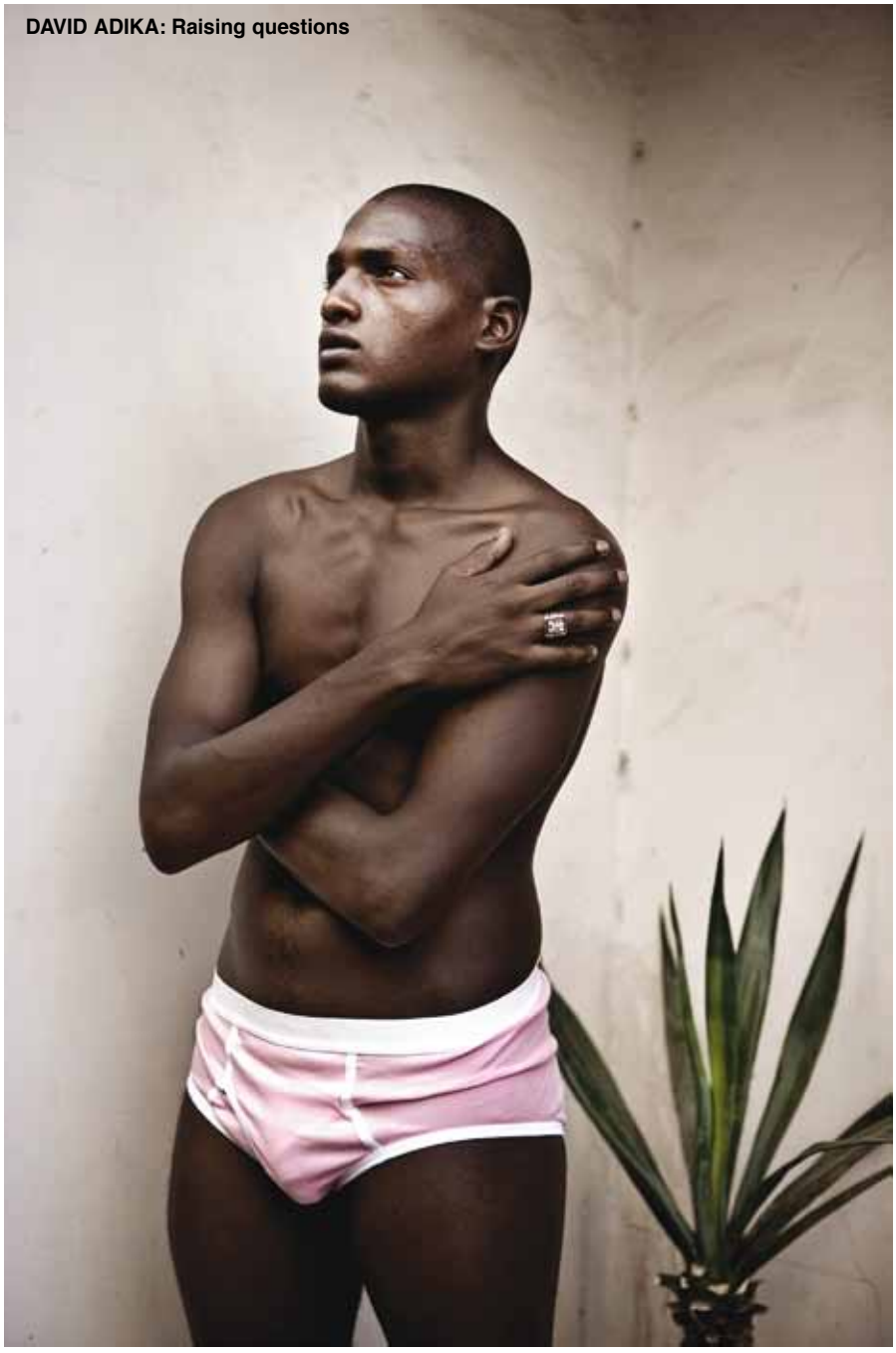

DAVID ADIKA: Raising questions

Show and Tell

The 'Living Room' photography exhibit at the Tel Aviv Museum examines discrepancies between objective and subjective reality

Bernard Dichek

THE LIVELY AND OFTEN provocative photographs on display at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion of the Tel Aviv Museum can be expected to stimulate strong reactions from visitors. But perhaps no response was more telling than the body language of the two gallery attendants on a Tuesday afternoon earlier this summer. The two middle-aged Russian-speaking women stared at each other and occasionally glanced at visitors but did all they could to avert their gaze from the photos on the walls around them. Those photos included life-size images of naked men, some engaged in sexual activity, photographed by Uri Gershuni.

"We don't like to look at pictures like this," said one of the women, when asked about her impressions. She held her hands up to blinker her eyes and shook her head for emphasis.

Hadas Maor, the curator of the exhibit, views things differently. "We're used to seeing female nudity in art and no one ever complains about that," she says with a grin, in an interview with The Report. Referring to Marcel Duchamps, the early 20th century French-American artist who caused a stir when he included a urinal in a sculpture exhibit, she suggests that examining the borders between art and life is something that is worth doing on an ongoing basis. "Art is part of life and life is part of art."

Maor, 41, worked closely for more than a year with Gershuni and the other four Israeli photographers featured in the exhibit. The five artists, all in their early forties, were part of the same class that graduated from Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design 10 years ago, and continue to meet socially and occasionally work on the same subjects.

Maor chose to call the exhibit "Living Room" because "it represents both a meeting place between the five artists who are all friends and the place where people invite

strangers into their world."

For the occasion of the exhibit, all five artists were asked to develop a series of images in the genre of portraiture photography. The portraits they created differ drastically both in types of subjects and in methodology: Rona Yefman worked with characters that she has known for long periods of time, many of them street people, and photographed them in their own milieu; Gershuni concentrated on young men who posed for him in his studio; Rami Maymon used a photographic style that leans in the direction of the plastic arts; David Adika combined exotic European and Asian faces with studies of still-life objects; and Shai Ignatz based his exhibit on an assignment commissioned by an Australian WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organization) chapter.

Maor notes that the world of photography has undergone a major transformation during the 10 years since the five artists graduated from Bezalel. "They have all witnessed and been part of the transition between analog and digital photography."

She points out that the five are generally well grounded in both the practice and philosophical tradition of analog photography. "Analog photography [based on photographic film materials or slides] has a well-defined position in the world of art. It was understood for there to be a direct connection between the object photographed and reality. But in digital photography there is no material substance involved; it is all mathematical (or electronic) calculations and anyone today can create an image on a computer which may look real but has no connection to reality," says Maor.

Though for the most part the artists prepared their photos for the exhibit using traditional analog cameras and photographic laboratories, Maor suggests that each artist in his or her own way raises issues around the question, "Do we really know what we are seeing?"

RAMI MAYMON: Exploring the material

FOR EXAMPLE, WHAT WE SEE when we look at the photographs by Gershuni, explains Maor, are images of real people who were placed in a situation that the artist created, but also, "a situation in which the subjects decided on the nature of the activities that were documented."

His photographs feature a uniform physical environment: the men are all positioned on or near a bed with a white sheet in neutral lighting. Gershuni did not know any of the men prior to the studio sessions; they responded to an open invitation that he made over the Internet and through friends. "He gave each of them a chance to choose what they did in his studio – what clothes they would wear or disrobe and what they would do," says Maor.

"Various emotions are apparent," she observes. "Some of the men are comfortable being photographed, some are not. Some of the situations are very sensitive, some very sexual."

While Maor goes to great lengths to explain the aesthetic value of Gershuni's photographs, it's easy to understand the displeasure of the gallery attendants. Gershuni may indeed be paying homage to "classical 16th and 17th portraiture of Bacchus and Narcissuss in the Italian Baroque tradition," as Maor suggests, but in many of the photos there is an overriding sense of exhibitionism, vulgarityand self-indulgence.

It's as if Gershuni has seized the opportunity of participating in a major exhibit in one of Israel's most prestigious art centers to echo the anti-establishment gesture that his father, the well-known painter Moshe Gershuni, made in 2003, when he was about to be awarded the Israel Prize. The country's most prestigious national prize was revoked from the elder Gershuni when, in political protest, he refused to shake hands with then-prime minister Ariel Sharon.

SHAI IGNATZ: Ordinary people

A SIMILAR DISPARITY IS APPARent between Maor's lofty interpretation of the offbeat characters photographed by Yefman and the "uncurated" impression that many visitors are likely to come away with.

One of Yefman's subjects is a person called Martha who appears to be an elderly lady wearing a short skirt and a red mask. Maor explains that Martha is really an 80-year-old man who likes to dress up as a woman but only does so at night and while wearing a mask. Yefman has been documenting Martha for more than eight years.

Many of Yefman's other characters, like Martha, are reminiscent of the subjects depicted by Diane Arbus, the late American photographer known for her studies of people with unusual appearances. Among Yefman's photos are those of her brother Gil. Yefman documented him during a period when he began and then stopped the process of undergoing a sex change. Other subjects include musicians, figures associated with local pop culture, and bakers and café owners familiar to people acquainted with the Tel Aviv scene.

"Yefman's gaze at the other is non-judgmental and non-patronizing and her depiction of him [her subjects] is respectful, and marked by yearning and identification, rather than voyeurism," says Maor, who has a master's degree in hermeneutics (the principles of interpretation). "Yefman's message is a very humanistic one: There is something about everyone that is special and that is not always connected to how they look on the outside."

IGNATZ, ON THE OTHER HAND, chose subject matter that contrasts sharply with the fringe subjects and taboo activities featured by Gershuni and Yefman. Instead, he offers an intriguing exposition of ordinary people documented in ordinary ways.

Ignatz's photos were the spin-off of a job he carried out for Melbourne WIZO. His assignment was to take photos for a book commemorating the local volunteers who are part of the worldwide group that raises money for charitable causes in Israel. It was a seemingly straightforward task, with Ignatz asked to photograph some 80 women. He was given about 20 minutes to work with each subject and he initially photographed all of them against a neutral grey background.

But Ignatz did two things that were unexpected when he was given the original assignment, explains Jo Gostin, the president of WIZO Australia, in a video interview that accompanies Ignatz's portraits. Ignatz insisted on not tampering, whether through Photoshop or airbrushing, with any of the facial features of his subjects – wrin-

RONA YEFMAN: Shanghai Kate

kles and all. "I agreed to give him a free hand," says Joslin, adding that Ignatz followed up with a number of the women and also photographed them in their home settings.

The result is fascinating. The women come across in a very natural and open way, showing a wide range of feelings. There is an occasional background object such as a bottle of Coca-Cola or a fireplace, which draws attention and suggests something about the subjects' personalities, but it is the expressiveness of their faces that is riveting.

One visitor to the gallery, Lise Beck, a Swiss tourist who had never heard of WIZO, remarked, "There is something down to earth and inviting about these women. They're great."

THE POIGNANCY AND DIRECTNESS in Ignatz's photos also contrasts with the somewhat contrived attempts at philosophical statements made by the other two photographers, Maymon and Adika, whose works round out the exhibit.

Maymon, suggests Maor, is interested in exploring the material nature of the photographic medium and the nature of the transition between analog and digital photography. For example, several of his photographs show portraits of people that have been crumpled into sculpture-like figures and then re-photographed.

As Maor notes, his work addresses "the tension between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality, between photography and sculpture, between documentation and staging." However, the subject of the illusory nature of digital photography is not raised in any serious way. His most engaging photos don't relate to this subject; they are simply standard-style colorful portraits of undisclosed people from various walks of life.

URI GERSHUNI: Overriding sense of exhibitionism

LIKE MAYMON, ADIKA ATTEMPTS to raise questions about the nature of the photographic medium. But rather than focus on methodology, Adika explores issues surrounding the sometimes misleading content of photography. "What you see is not always what you might guess it to be," is how Maor summarizes his contribution. "He is dealing with questions of identity. Is identity something that you are born with or that you acquire?"

Accompanying each person in Adika's portraits is a still-life study of an object. One of the paired photos represents an aspect of Western culture, the other signifies the East. Western symbols include chocolate in the shape of the Eiffel Tower and a plateful of apples – the fruit that has been ubiquitously portrayed in European art. The East is represented by a man wearing a Moroccan cap and an African immigrant in Paris.

Juxtaposing the African man with the Eiffel Tower and the Moroccan with the apples, Maor suggests, causes us to reexamine our perception of what each symbol stands for. "For example, the black man is photographed in a very beautiful way. He is like a Greek god, a statue with perfect aesthetic features. This is in contrast to the simplistic image of the Eiffel Tower, the epitome of Western culture, which is made out of bitter chocolate. How we deal with these skins or outer surfaces connects to the tensions that exist between East and West and challenges the viewer to ask questions about identity, immigration, refugees and the meeting of East and West."

The "Living Room" opened in March of this year and continues until mid-September, making it one of the longest-running exhibitions staged this year by the Tel Aviv Museum. The duration of the show and the large space it occupies reinforces Maor's suggestion that the work of the five artists, taken as a whole, are a representative summary of contemporary, mainstream Israeli art photography. She compares them to other historic art groups, like the Boston School in the United States in the 1990s and the Dusseldorf group in Germany in the 1960s, both of which have had substantial influence on artists.