Mirror, mirror on the wall

Samples of 'PerSlovaks' created by exhibition visitors.

Native Jerusalemite Yoav Horesh makes the viewer a creator, with his photography exhibit 'PerSlovak 2.0'

• By CARL HOFFMAN

OK, people, listen up. You have exactly four days to get yourselves over to Hadassah College and experience something you have never seen before.

Called "PerSlovak 2.0," it is a photography exhibition in which you, the viewer, play with pieces of portraits and create new people – people who have never actually existed. These new viewer-created people are made with pieces of large-format, black-and-white portraits of the family of photographer Yoav Horesh.

"I was born in Jerusalem to a Sephardi mother and an Ashkenazi father. My mother is of Persian descent, my father is Slovak," Horesh says. My father is the oldest son with three sisters and a brother. My mother is the youngest with four brothers. Both were immigrants, not born in Israel. Both arrived here at a very early age, from Europe and from Central Asia respectively. My father's three sisters and brother all married Ashkenazi east-

ern European Jews. In my mother's family, all four brothers married Persian Jewish women. So both families stayed very homogeneous.

"The only 'melting pot' marriage that happened was my mother and my father. And the only three creatures of the melting pot – the only actual 'PerSlovaks' are my brother, my sister and myself. So in 2008, I started making portraits."

For Horesh, this was the natural thing to do. Born 40 years ago in Jerusalem, he began studying photography at age 13. After a hiatus of picture taking while in the army, Horesh decided to see the world, and travel to New York in advance of a coast-to-coast trip across Africa. He never made it to Africa, however, succumbing instead to the magnetism of New York.

"I rediscovered photography," he recalls. "I saw that there was a whole world of photography that I hadn't been exposed to. Galleries, museums, institutes, history, cultural richness. I stayed in New York for a year and a half, working as a bartender and café manager, and

decided to go to school and take photography more seriously."

Horesh went north to Boston, studied at the New England School of Photography, and later at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Then, it was back to New York for graduate study at Columbia University. A few adjunct teaching positions later, Horesh spent eight months in Germany followed by three years at the fledgling Savanna College of Art and Design branch in Hong Kong, founding and then directing its photography department. After all of this, he decided to return to Israel, he says, "to see if I could live here again after being away so many years," having returned only for brief visits.

"I arrived in Tel Aviv two years ago. And since then I have been photographing here, exhibiting here, teaching here, and still trying to get used to living here. But I don't know if it's possible. I feel like a complete stranger. It's not the same country I left 17 years ago. Also, my natural habitat of art and photography education is not here. It was done in America,

it was influenced by American friends, mentors and culture, and it's a very different atmosphere. It's kind of rediscovering everything I know about photography, art and human interaction. It's more than just hard for me. I'm more of a stranger here than I am in New York. Here, I'm kind of like a frog from a different swamp."

He started photographing in south Tel Aviv's Naveh Sha'anan neighborhood a year or so ago, shooting mostly portraits with his large format 1954 Linhof Technika 4x5-inch plate camera, mounted on a tripod. This is the kind of camera most of us have seen only in movies or old photographs, where the photographer first goes under a cloth curtain to set the exposure, and then stands beside the camera to take the picture, squeezing a rubber bulb at the end of a wire. Horesh walks around with this thing on his shoulder and asks the people of Naveh Sha'anan – people of every nationality, age group, occupation (and no occupation) imaginable – if he can take their picture. "I moved down to the neighbor-

The exhibition at Hadassah College. (Photos: Courtesy Yoav Horesh)

hood two months ago, to be closer and more involved. I like the neighborhood, I trust the neighborhood, and I make work there." Horesh currently has 12 black and white portraits of Naveh Sha'anan people in a group show at the Israel Museum, called "We the People," which runs through March.

When he wasn't wandering the streets of Naveh Sha'anan, or teaching photography at the Holon Institute of Technology, Horesh was traveling the length and breadth of Israel, photographing members of his large and widely dispersed extended family. "I took very close-up portraits with my large format camera, in order to understand my family, in order to map my family, and in order to maybe know them a little better. I photographed a few people every time I visited Israel before moving here. I stayed within my parents' generation and my generation. So that means only aunts, uncles and cousins. There are 62 of these family members; I photographed 55 of them."

Horesh's extraordinary interactive exhibition at Hadassah College, PerSlovak 2.0, is based on these 55 family portraits. "When I was approached by

Hadassah College a year ago, they said we are a photography department, but we don't want just pictures on the wall. We want to move forward with photography. We want you to figure out a way that will make an exhibition that will talk about the direction that photography is going.

So I thought about it and got together with two friends, one the curator of the exhibition and the other a computer scientist and an artist. My idea was to scan all of the portraits, and with Photoshop, separate the eyes, nose, mouth and face. That means that from each face I have four parts. My friend the computer programmer built a console, I built a podium. On the podium are four silver buttons. When you're standing on the podium, and you see a projection on the wall in front of you, and start changing the face, the eyes, the nose, the mouth, and the overall face. Each knob turns both ways, endlessly. When you commit to a face, you press a black button. And from the podium there's a slot. An A4 print of the face you have made comes out. The viewer takes this print and puts it on the wall. This creates a new family of 'PerSlovaks' that never existed. There are now

hundreds of them on the wall. From 55 portraits, you can create more than nine million different individuals, possible new faces of people that never existed."

The technology is interesting, but what is the point? Horesh says, "When you stand someone in front of a projection, and ask them to use their aesthetic sensibility to create a face, and they start asking themselves whether this is an Ashkenazi eye or a Sephardi eye, a Ashkenazi nose or a Sephardi nose, and what kind of mouth works with the rest of the face. As soon as they commit to that, they have made new 'PerSlovaks,' each new, each unique, each one created by the viewer, each a PerSlovak that never existed. You're asking people about their aesthetic sensibility and what they think about the ethnic melting pot. And I think it's an interesting view of ourselves. And as soon as they press and print one, I get the picture they made. And then automatically every three hours, it goes on a dedicated Facebook page, PerSlovak 2.0." For the duration of the exhibition, a new PerSlovak has been born every three hours, uploaded on line, and shared with the world.

As if this weren't enough, there is another part of the exhibition – this one non-interactive – that involves a series of panoramic videos in the living rooms of various members of his far-flung family in Israel. These videos, Horesh says, were taken in family living rooms in villages, settlements, kibbutzim, cities and small towns in the desert, central Israel, the northern region and in Judea and Samaria. "At the end of every panoramic, it merges into a new panoramic. And the viewer gets an endless panorama of different living rooms. And again, when the viewer sees different kinds of things in each living room – a set of Talmud, or some paintings and other artworks, the viewer is called upon to wonder what kind of people live in each space. Are they Sephardi or Ashkenazi, religious or secular, do they read Freud or writings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I'm not giving them the answers, I'm calling for the viewers' own preconceptions of ethnici-

ty. I think this is something we do here all the time, and this part of the exhibition confronts us with that."

So why is a relatively young photographer confronting 21st-century issues with a 20th-century camera that uses 19th-century photographic technology? Why not use a nice new digital camera instead? Horesh says, "Well, I've been working with that tool for the past 17 years. This tool affords me a different connection with people. I like working with the large negative. It looks different, and it feels different. When I'm using it to photograph someone or something, there's more synergy, more of a connection that I have with what I'm photographing – whether it's a wall or a person. I'm not photographing a lot, because it's very expensive. I'm more careful with what I do. I don't like the instant gratification to see what I've just done. Usually it takes a couple of weeks before I go into my 'shower,' which is my darkroom, to develop my plates. I like working with my hands. It's a process. It's not only how it looks. It looks different. It feels different. And I don't need batteries, ever."

Asked for his opinion about the fact that everyone now has a camera in his or her smartphone, and that everyone now has become a "photographer," Horesh says, "Photography is more accessible now. It's all around us. But the profession itself is being diluted. The cameras are idiot-proof. You don't have to understand anything about technique to make a picture, because the camera does that for you. People are taking pictures, but it's not good photography."

So what, then, is "good photography"? Horesh replies quickly, before I finish asking the question. "Good photography moves something in you. Good photography does something that life cannot do. It can rebuild the scene, and the content. Good photography can teach us something new, or remind us strongly of something we already know. Good photography allows us to see something we can't see otherwise. Good photography has a narrative that is much more interesting than life itself."
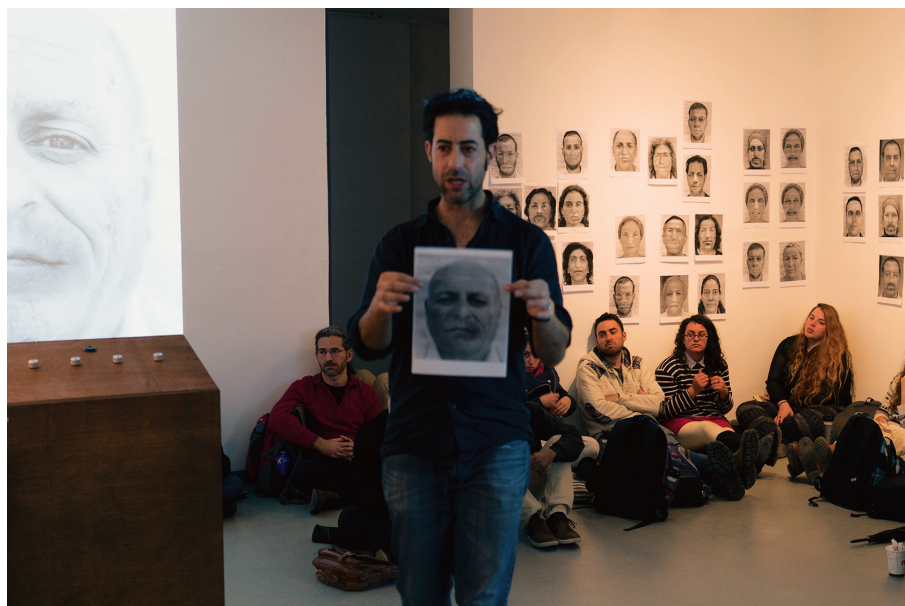
Yoav Horesh surrounded by his handiwork. (Doron Altaratz)