

Earning *his wings*



Photographer Toby Cohen goes to
remarkable lengths to capture the right shot

BIBLICAL proportions

Several years ago, a stranger asked Toby Cohen why he doesn't photograph God. And this is what the 32-year-old former photojournalist has been trying to do ever since

• BY CARL BRIDGMAN

Stated simply, Toby Cohen is obsessed. What else would you call a man who dreams of photographing a flying saucer, recruits a small but faithful coterie of fanatically dedicated assistants, builds a saucer and then is careful to suspend the saucer in midair, spends weeks driving around Israel to find the proper shooting location, schleps people, equipment, saucer and scaffold to the location, waits patiently for the exact sunlight effect he wants, somehow quickly fills the saucer with fake smoke, lifts it and then cranes it up into the air, and then creates a colorful, enormous panoramic photograph that captures every inch in minute detail?

Or how about a guy whose intense infatuation with a 19th-century painting—Marcey Gottlieb's famous *Jesus Preaching in the Synagogue in Beth Azzur*—drives him to spend more than a year and over \$10,000 to photograph an identical scene? This ultimately involves renting a theater in Herzliya; hiring an artist to build and paint a set, including friends, relatives, a former girlfriend and even his pieces—Down in from London at high expense—to “play the characters” in Gottlieb’s painting; rummaging around the flea market in Jaffa for old prayer books, old synagogue furnishings, and old material for costumes; and finally creating a photograph so uncannily expensive of the original painting that the Tel Aviv Museum of Art now displays a video of the making of the photograph just a few feet away from the actual painting?

Cohen is either obsessed, or possessed by a demanding artistic muse that allows no cutting of corners and brooks no compromise.

The able young art photographer started out normally enough, from his London 32 years ago, grew up largely unaware of any hidden talent, concluding university with a major in marketing, he found himself “quite by accident,” he says—bravely engaged

as a press photographer. He soon became a successful paparazzo, with photographs on the front pages of such Fleet Street icons as the *Daily Express*, *News of the World*, the *Mirror*, the *Evening Standard* and the *Independent* by the time he was 21. His work took him all over Europe, to India and the Arabian Islands, and to Israel, until it eventually landed him in a hot tub at the Daniel Hotel in Herzliya for a chance but dramatic encounter with an old man who called himself Musa.

As Cohen remembers it, the somewhat belligerent Musa asked him what he did for a living. When Cohen told him he was a photographer, the old man demanded to know whether or not he believed in God. When he replied, “Sometimes,” Musa shot back with the question that changed the young photojournalist’s life: “Okay, if you’re such a great photographer, why don’t you photograph God?”

Cohen has been trying to do so ever since, by capturing people in the act of connecting to God, photographing them in the midst of the starkly beautiful desert landscapes of the Holy Land. His first exhibition, almost two years ago, featured spectacular panoramic photographic productions like *Flying Jabbak*, as well as his work of homage to Giotto, entitled *Day of Absence*. Other panoramas, like *Mischa and Samira at Masada*, blend landscape photography with portraiture to create studies of people in moments of rapture, following the Sabbath, in Jerusalem to try to cling closely to God.

And now, Cohen is back with his second exhibition, called “Project Abrahams,” on display at the Engel Gallery in Tel Aviv.

“When my last exhibition finished and everything died down, I started to search for more artistic images,” he says. “This time around, I’ve used a lot of Gustave Doré’s illustrations for inspiration, as well as Rembrandt and J.M.W. Turner. And among the Doré images, the one that grabbed me the most was



“Moses” is the result of 30 photographic images stitched seamlessly together. (Toby Cohen)

the idea of shooting the scene of Abraham holding the three angels in the desert (Abraham and the Three Angels [1860]).”

How does one shoot Abraham holding the three angels in the desert? Cohen relates an anecdote that provides a sense of how he works.

“At the time, I had a Volkswagen Golf. I kept trying to get to the desert in it, and I kept smashing it up,” he recounts. “So then I thought, right, time to buy a jeep. I bought the Jeep and then I started looking for trees. I’d get in the car and go off for two days to find the right tree. If you study the Midrash, you’ll notice that the tree that Abraham sat under had certain specific attributes. The branches were very wide and they offered Abraham’s guests shelter, depending upon the quality of his guests, whether they were good or bad. So yeah, I bought the Jeep to find the tree to take the photo,” says Cohen, who says he lives off savings from his career as a photojournalist and the proceeds from the sale of the photographs from his first exhibition.

“The first tree that I found was in a nature reserve, because I wanted very much to build a tent there. I met with the nature reserve guy, and he just wasn’t

having it, and he wasn’t making an exception. So that kind of bugged me. Six months later, I was going crazy because I still hadn’t found a tree. I mean, I checked so many trees. Because it wasn’t just the tree, it was the tree and where it sat in the landscape where the sun hit the horizon. I’ve become obsessive about details. Everything had to be perfect in my head.

“Anyway, just as I was about to give up, I heard from a friend of a friend, who was also a nature ranger. He told me about this tree in a valley that wasn’t in a nature reserve. The fact that it wasn’t in a reserve meant that I could do what I wanted to do. Anyway, as I got to this tree in this valley and I saw how it sat in between these two rock faces, I knew that this was the tree. And then I set about the task of putting it all together—finding the Beduin who would have the right kind of camel-hair tent, figuring what I was going to put where, the costumes, and so on.”

He set about recreating the “actors” to play the various personages in the Bible story—Abraham, Sarah, the three angels and Ishmael. A video posted on YouTube shows Cohen putting the shoot together, managing actors and equipment, and looking



'Day of Atonement,' displayed at Cohen's first exhibition, is a homage to Matisse's 'Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur.' He spent more than a year and \$10,000 creating the scene. (Toby Cohen)



together — finding the Beduin who would have the right kind of camel-hair tent, figuring what I was going to put where, the costumes, and so on."

He's not about recruiting the "actors" to play the various personages in the Bible story — Abraham, Sarah, the three angels and Ishmael. A video posted on YouTube shows Cohen putting the shoot together, managing actors and equipment, and looking very much like a movie director. He is, in fact, a director, creating a lavish still photograph instead of a film. The resulting photograph, *Abraham Meets the Three Angels*, is both enormous and vividly detailed enough to allow viewers to see virtually every pebble and clump of grass, even part of a tiny green "Jalla Oranges" supermarket sticker deliberately left on one of the oranges Abraham offers as part of his hospitality.

In addition to this work, the exhibition includes other panoramic photographs, such as *Abraham's Tent*, in which Cohen stages the scene of Ishmael washing the angels' feet, and another variation of *Abraham and the angels*, this one inspired by an 1897 Tissot painting.

Says Cohen, "The setting for these

photos was Nahal Dimona, about 20 minutes south of Atad, and then another 20 minutes off-road in the jeep. The most wonderful thing about the place is that there's no telephone reception."

He is fortunate in having attracted a retinue of devotees whom he calls his "mad collaborators" and who apparently think nothing of dropping whatever they are doing to join him in the wilderness for days on end.

For example, he says, "most of the stuff in this exhibition was shot on a very expensive camera called a Leaf Aptus 80, an 80-megapixel medium format digital camera. I rent it out from a store. And because the camera is so expensive, the deal is that it has to go with a person from the store. The man who runs the store is named Koren, who became very excited about the project and jumped at the opportunity to leave his office for three days and come out to the desert with us."

Not all of the pictures in this exhibition have desert settings, though. There are several individual portrait photographs of the biblical figures — i.e. Cohen's actors in costume — as well as a photograph called simply



'Abraham Hosts the Three Angels.' The photo is vividly detailed enough to allow viewers to see virtually every pebble and clump of grass, even part of a tiny green 'Jalla Oranges' supermarket sticker deliberately left on one of the oranges Abraham offers as part of his hospitality. (Toby Cohen)

and making them fly would be a lot easier than it actually was. In hindsight, even with a good harness around someone's waist, it's very, very difficult to have them looking comfortable and natural when they're up in the air, suspended off the harness."

Unlike his earlier homage to Gottlieb, in which he is more or less the starring actor, Cohen does not appear in any of the photographs in this exhibition.

"I decided that I didn't need to be in any of these pictures," he says. "It would be a little too self-indulgent to do it again and again. But I'm sure I'll get the occasional opportunity in the future."

In the final photograph of the exhibition, he gives us a striking glimpse into his next project. Moses, perhaps his most ambitious work to date, depicts the great lawgiver standing on top of Mount Sinai, holding the Ten Commandments. The photograph, colossal in size and perspective, is the result of no fewer than 30 photographic images stitched seamlessly together.

Once again, his account of how the picture was made illustrates the adage that nothing good comes easy.

"I thought we were going to die making this picture. Yet again, I became obsessive about searching for my location. I had an image in my head of what I wanted. Around Eilat there are some mountains, and there is a mountain called Mount Shlomo. My nose took me there last December. So I climbed up this mountain on my own one afternoon. It's like a two-hour climb. When I got to the top, I knew that was the spot, so I went

back to Tel Aviv and told the team what the plan was. I also got two young 'Sherpas' to help us schlep gear up to the mountain top.

"So we get to the location with all the gear, and the army tells us, 'No, forget it, you can't go up the mountain.' I said, 'Don't be ridiculous. I was here just two weeks ago.' They said that there had since been an incident and that no one could go up. So I've got a awful of gear. I'm freaking out, and I said to the team, 'Let's just sit and wait until something happens. I've got a feeling.'"

"Twenty minutes later, a general appears. One of the team grabs one of my business cards, goes over to the general and says, 'Listen, this is Toby Cohen. He's a serious artist, we came all this way, he spent all his money getting here. Can you help?' He says, 'Wait there.' He gets on the telephone. Fifteen minutes later, he says, 'Right. No problem. We're for the arts. Go up the mountain, have a great time.'"

The resulting photograph, taken at sunrise after Cohen and the team spent a numbingly cold night on the mountaintop, presents us with a stark juxtaposition of fiery light and threatening darkness that words cannot describe.

Cohen appears to be deeply rooted, for the foreseeable future, in Bible themes and Israeli landscapes. When asked whether we are likely ever to see a Toby Cohen photograph of, say, King Henry V at Agincourt or General Custer at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, he replies, "No, but I do have some contemporary ideas that have to do with



'Angels.' For this work, Cohen rented a circus to get the harnesses he needed to suspend the angels in the air. (Toby Cohen)

the question 'What if?'—like, what if Albert Einstein had become the president of Israel, what if we had gone to Uganda instead of coming here. But in the meantime I'm still heavily focused on the Bible. Assuming I can raise enough money to keep producing, there's no end in sight."

"Project Abraham" is showing until May 27 at the Engel Gallery, 26 Gordon Street, Tel Aviv; Sunday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., and Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. (03) 522-5637. For further information about the artist, visit <http://www.toby-cohen.com>.