



By Luke Quinton  
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Talk for a few minutes with curator Noah Simblist and you'll be convinced that the Israeli-Palestinian divide is the most compelling issue on the planet.

Simblist's exhibit at Lora Reynolds Gallery, "Out of Place," is a sophisticated, cerebral look into Israel's existential crisis.

But instead of a hot-blooded political show, Simblist has accumulated a compelling group of rabble-rousers and cold-blooded rationalists. They ask extremely provocative questions.

The most provocative is a video by Yael Bartana. "Wall and Tower" shows a staged experiment: a group of "post-Zionists" constructing a kibbutz in Warsaw, Poland.

A kibbutz is a communal Jewish settlement built by Zionists returning to Israel. These reverse-Zionists build from a well-known design: a wall and watchtower, fenced in with barbed wire (a disturbing irony).

Once it's constructed, the cheerful group begins "re-learning" Polish and raising a new flag (blending the Star of David with the Polish flag's eagle).

As Warsaw's passersby ponder the structure, the video proposes a difficult thesis: Is Poland not also a Jewish home?

Everyone understands that the conflict and the diaspora (the scattering of Jews outside of Israel) are complex. But Americans rarely encounter the full range of ideas that Jews hold about their homeland.

Born in Philadelphia, Simblist's family has lived in London, Yugoslavia, Connecticut and New York. They found "Modern Orthodox Jewish communities" at each location and summered in Israel. "The wonders of the Jewish diaspora" made it easy to find schools that taught Hebrew, he says.

Simblist's inspiration came from what he perceives as Jewish hypocrisy. During the civil rights movement, he explains, young American Jews felt solidarity with African Americans.

"Jews had come out of World War II, had come out of the pogroms ... and were quite familiar with this whole notion of discrimination and otherness within a dominant culture," Simblist says.

But this empathy has not extended, he says, to another oppressed, occupied people: the Palestinians. The Jewish diaspora spans 2,500 years, Simblist says, "But it was the beginning of the state of Israel that enacted the beginning of Palestinian diaspora."

Edward Said, a Palestinian social theorist, suggested that the condition of exile might provide the missing link for empathy between the Israelis and Palestinians.

Simblist is trying to reclaim some of these links to American Jewish heritage. "If Jews could relate, in the first half of the 20th century, with the civil rights struggle, why wouldn't Jews be able to relate to the struggle for Palestinian nationhood and rights in Israel-Palestine?"

# lora reynolds gallery

The artists are all slightly out of place. Their backgrounds are convoluted, but, regrettably, they also rarely find a place in galleries outside Europe.

"Dahania" is a miniature model of the Palestinian airport that was destroyed by the Israeli Air Force in 2000. It was the "gateway to a nation," Simblist says. Artist Jan Tichy's model is tiny, on a bed of sand, as if it's in the distance; the plans of the airport are framed on the wall, a dream deferred.

Simblist chose the most interesting commentators, regardless of their nationality. So, Irish artist Tom Molloy's "242," a sheet of green paper, is a subtle and elegant statement on the U.N. resolution of the same name. It asked Israel to leave the Gaza Strip, a resolution that was ignored and became elusive, just like the paper that hangs, in limbo, from a string, unreadable because it's being spun in the wind of a fan.

In exile, says Simblist, "Everything seems correct, except for one thing that's off."