



David Foster Wallace wrote in his essay “Federer Both Flesh and Not” that “beauty is not the goal of competitive sports.” For Israeli photographer Noa Klagsbald, though, the link between beauty and sports has always been evident. “I always attended both sports and art classes,” she says. “I grew up living this inherent relationship.”

Her latest exhibition, “Jaffa-Lod,” displays photographs in collaboration with Hapoel Bnei Lod, a soccer team from the ethnically mixed Jewish and Arab city of Lod. The exhibition is being held at the Mazal Dagim 5 Gallery in the heart of Jaffa’s Old City, where a raft of galleries are scattered among timeworn stone alleyways. As visitors leave the world outside, they’re met with photographs featuring subjects not typically encountered in contemporary art: soccer players.

Soccer has always been an integral part of life for Klagsbald. Attending games was a family tradition; she remembers going to a Hapoel Tel Aviv match at Bloomfield Stadium when she was 6 and discovering “that surge of adrenaline when you enter a stadium.”

The art project with Hapoel Bnei Lod, part of a larger effort called “Goal,” isn’t the first time Klagsbald has delved into soccer imagery. She says the use of soccer in her work has

A LOCKER ROOM WITH A VIEW

Photographer Noa Klagsbald uses sports as a theme to investigate broader issues in her work, now on display at her exhibition ‘Jaffa-Lod’

Ben Sharoni

let her address broader issues.

“The principles upheld in sports blend well with works of art,” she says. Her previous projects explored themes of gender and power dynamics using sports. “Goal” revolves around unity, being part of something bigger, and co-existence. With her camera, Klagsbald shines a light on the intricate social structures of Israel’s mixed cities.

Chaos in Lod

Two years ago, Israel saw its worst intercommunal riots in decades. Clashes between police and Palestinians at Jerusalem’s Temple Mount and in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood sparked further violence, which rippled through Lod and other ethnically mixed towns during the 11-day air war with Gaza.

“Civil war has broken out in Lod,” the BBC quoted Mayor Yair Revivo as saying during the riots. The scenes captured in these cities shocked Klagsbald, who was studying at the Royal College of Art in London at the time. “I remember being at home and thinking, ‘God, what’s happening? Where has this come from?’” she says.

Lod is home to around 82,000 people, about 30 percent of them Arab Israelis – 24,641 residents, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics. Hapoel Bnei Lod was founded in 1997 in a merger between two teams. The team’s



captain, Bantyho Damene, believes that the roster's diversity reflects the ratio of the Jewish and Arab communities in Lod and the nearby ethnically mixed town of Ramle. "The team correctly reflects the blend of Arabs and Jews in the region," he says.

In May 2021, the team's delicate fabric remained untouched during the riots. "It never came up; everything remained normal. We were surprised by it," Damene says. "The moment we stepped onto the field with our uniforms, shoes and protective gear, all our troubles dissipated." For the players of Bnei Lod, their coexistence served as a sanctuary from the outside world.

A female gaze

Klagsbald's new project includes portraits of players and a staged photograph "capturing" a moment of celebration in the locker room. Other photographs allude to some of the most famous paintings in history, replacing celebrated figures with the team's players, who rarely get any media exposure.

Even though Klagsbald's presence was initially met with skepticism, it had a unifying effect, Damene says. "Before the project, we would each go our separate ways after practice, but suddenly we began spending more time together once practice ended," he says. "[Her presence]



Clockwise from left: Photographer Noa Klagsbald and several photos from her exhibit "Jaffa-Lod," based on a collaboration with Hapoel Bnei Lod, a soccer team from the ethnically mixed Jewish and Arab city of Lod.

Daniel Hanoch, Noa Klagsbald



brought us closer as a team."

Several photographs in "Jaffa-Lod" pay tribute to some of the world's most famous paintings. In "My Olympia," Klagsbald uses Eduard Manet's famous portrayal of a nude, reclining woman to examine notions of sexuality and gender.

While Manet's painting displays a sexualized female figure, Klagsbald recontextualizes the image, restaging it in a soccer team's locker room and featuring Damene as her own version of "Olympia." Positioned on a massage table, wearing the Hapoel Bnei Lod uniform and holding a bouquet of flowers, the team's captain gazes directly

into the camera. Klagsbald effectively subverts the power dynamics inherent in the original artwork, presenting a male figure as the object of desire.

Klagsbald's artistic vision not only entails men reenacting traditionally feminine scenes, it also introduces a distinctly female perspective into the intimate space of the locker room. Reflecting on her choice of this unconventional location, she says: "I step into the locker room and transform it into a set. I coexist with the team within this space, but once I enter, everything suddenly changes."

Klagsbald says that with the locker

room as her backdrop, she could create an environment where the players felt at ease, allowing her to mold and sculpt their presence according to her vision.

Klagsbald joined the squad mid-season, which might have been a little too late. Hapoel Bnei Lod was eventually relegated to a lower league, and most of its players moved on. But the exhibits serve as a meeting point for teammates who once shared the same locker room. Damene thinks the demotion was simply the result of unfortunate timing. "If Noa had joined us at the beginning of the season, we might have avoided relegation," he says.