

Art imitating (national) life

Much more than a coffee-table album, Yigal Zalmona's survey of Israeli art's first 100 years offers an insightful look at the changing values of Israeli society itself. In his narrative, the larger world 'makes frequent appearances'

Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov

"A Century of Israeli Art," by Yigal Zalmona (English edition edited by Anna Barber), Lund Humphries, in association with the Israel Museum, 512 pages, 45 pounds sterling

Though one may enjoy simply leafing through the high-quality reproductions in "A Century of Israeli Art," by Yigal Zalmona, it is worth the challenge of reading the text, which offers an incisive look at Israel's visual arts and how they reflect a changing society. The original Hebrew version accompanied the 2010 opening of the first permanent exhibition of Israeli art at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, where Zalmona, who is also an art critic and historian, served for decades in various senior curatorial positions.

Both the exhibition and the book are players in a larger ongoing cultural enterprise involving the mapping of what may be called the canon of local art. The past five years have been good ones for this effort, as can be seen – in addition to the Israel Museum's new Israeli art galleries – in a series of shows and catalogs in six different museums, on the occasion of Israel's 60th year of independence (with each museum responsible for a decade); the recent opening of the Israeli art wing at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art; and now the excellent English translation of Zalmona's book.

Heavy both in literary and figurative terms, the text describes local art through the lens of the discourse of identity – or more accurately, identities – in an attempt to follow the development of complex and often contradictory trends that combine to form a distinct Israeli culture. Thus, art, society and historic events are viewed here as intertwined. In the opening words of the author, "Our story will be told with particular attention to the ways in which art derives and receives meaning from its socio-political context. The world, therefore, makes frequent appearances, even if art is our main protagonist."

It is interesting to discover that the thinking behind this assertion is revealed as having been a source of dispute among Israeli artists – over the New Horizons movement (in 1950), which supported the autonomous nature of local art, after decades of ideologically charged work in the service of Zionist nation-building – although such a declaration, too, also reflects an aspect of Israeli reality that strives toward normalcy.

The conflict between personal expression and the demand for socially involved art can also be an inner one, as touchingly described in the sections on Marcel Janco (1895-1984), whose artistic personality somehow managed to incorporate disparate images and styles deriving from the avant-garde European Dada movement, heroic Zionism, tragic views of war and displacement and pure abstraction.

Attitude toward the East

A core theme that runs through Zalmona's book is the changing attitude of Israeli

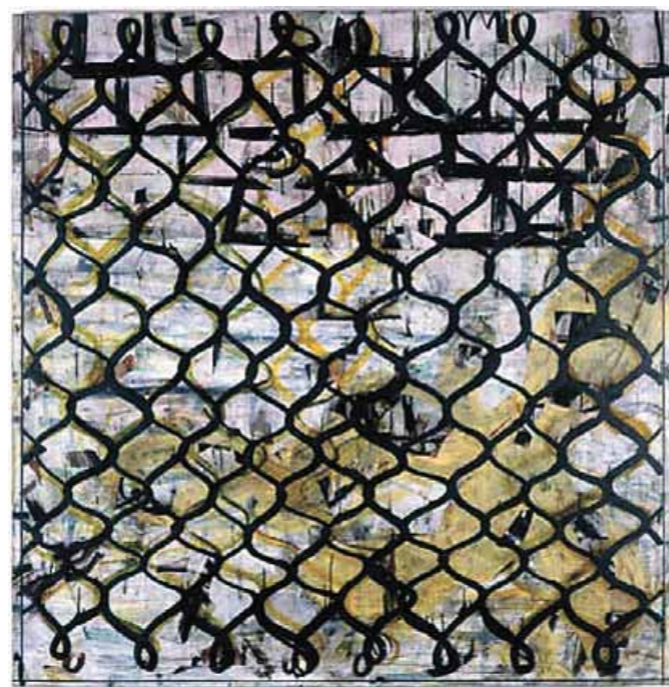
artists toward the East, and in particular toward the image of the Arab, versus their relationship with the West. Discussing this issue in relation to the earlier works in the book, Zalmona writes: "In some respects, the Zionist view of the East is a specific example of Orientalist ideology, that is, of a Western perception of the East. At the same time, however, the East is the ancient source of the Jews' history and ultimate destination as they return to that source ... And to complicate the question of who identifies with whom even further, the Jew knew that in Europe, he himself was the Semitic Other. In other words: For Christian Europeans, the East was just 'there'; for the Jews, it was simultaneously 'there' and 'here.'"

The descriptions and analysis of numerous artworks in the book refer to this tension. For example, in "The Four Matriarchs," by Abel Pann (1935). This European-born painter imagined the biblical foremothers as a group of Bedouin women, natives of the East, yet portrayed them using Western realistic painting techniques.

Reuven Rubín celebrated the birth of the Zionist pioneer as the "new Jew" in "First Fruits" (1923), using the Christian format of the triptych to lend sanctity to the scene, yet eschewing Western perspective in favor of a simpler and more innocent Eastern (including Eastern Christian) view of the landscape and its inhabitants. The latter include the muscular and partially undressed pioneering man and woman, bearing the fruits of their labor. To their left is a modestly dressed Yemenite Jewish couple with a naked baby, who are also presented as part of the middle panel, reflecting the central theme of Jewish re-connection with the land. Their Easternness renders them "authentic representatives of the pre-exilic



"First Fruits," by Reuven Rubín (1923). Collection Rubín Museum, Tel Aviv © Estate of the artist.



"Keffiyeh (Homage to Asim Abu Shakra)" (1992). Collection IMJ, purchase, Recanati Fund for the Acquisition of Israeli Art © Tsibi Geva.



"DeadSee," by Sigalit Landau (DVD, 2005). Collection IMJ, purchase, Dov and Rachel Gottesman Fund © Sigalit Landau.

Israelite nation," contrary to many images of Diaspora Jews of European origin, often depicted in the period's works as sickly and frail, such as is in Rubín's own self-portrait from before his immigration to Palestine. The two side panels of the triptych portray the Arab inhabitants of the land; they are extolled for their perceived physicality and harmony with nature, yet, in contrast

to the Jewish pioneers, they are passive and unproductive, either herding sheep or merely sleeping.

In the sculpture named after the biblical hunter Nimrod (1939), Itzhak Danziger turned to pagan and mythical figures of the ancient Near East, circumventing the image of the Arab through what Zalmona calls a "cultural bypass," to create a new Hebrew icon

that severs its connections to the Jewish past.

Many pages and decades later, Tsibi Geva's handling of the keffiyeh pattern in the traditional Arab head-dress ("Keffiyeh: Homage to Asim Abu Shakra," 1992) is described by Zalmona as evoking a myriad of diverse political, cultural and artistic identities: for Palestinians, a symbol of resistance to Israel;



"The Four Matriarchs," by Abel Pann (1935). Collection of Itiel Pann © Estate of the artist.

for Israelis, both a threatening signifier of violence, yet also a reminder of a not-so-distant past when it was worn by sabra farmers and fighters as a sign of belonging to the land and region. The dialogue with the keffiyeh is further deepened when analyzed through an art historical perspective: On the one hand, it is a flat, Eastern decorative pattern that comes from "low" folk art; on the other, a grid, which is the basic template of American modernist abstract art in its search for the sublime. In Zalmona's reading, though Geva realized that he could not escape his Western artistic consciousness, he could comment about himself and his attitude to the East through expropriating motifs such as the keffiyeh and using them in a Western artistic discourse, enabling viewers "to experience the chronic Israeli vacillation between identities."

The above small taste from this extensive volume reveals how Zalmona chooses to tell the story of Israeli art and some of the premises on which the book is founded. The time frame in its title asserts that a distinct body of work called Israeli art came into being with the modern Zionist movement. Since this movement was led mainly by male European Jews with a secular outlook, seeking to build a new identity in the Land of Israel, their ideological and aesthetic preferences dictated the works deemed central to the new culture-in-the-making, and these are the works most highlighted in these sections of the book.

Though local women

receive in-depth consideration. These are specifically the ones presented as overturning the hegemonic Israeli narrative – a change in emphasis that says a lot about the ideological transformation that the Israeli cultural elite, of which the author is a member, has undergone, while also reflecting worldwide post-modern tendencies. Works that are read by Zalmona as representing post-Zionist approaches are now granted center stage, and even regarded as representing the mainstream mindset among today's young Israeli artists. In this context, he presents Adi Ness' photographs of male soldiers as "critiques of the mythology of the Israel Defense Forces," in their subversive stance toward the ethic of self-sacrifice, as well as through their hints of homoeroticism.

It is intriguing to contemplate who the current unfashionable-yet-serious others are, whose work is now being marginalized – certainly not those who forgo complexity and questioning, but perhaps those who reject such a sweeping definition as "the paralyzing ideological charisma of rootedness" (which Zalmona deems one of the causes of today's artists' attraction to previously taboo themes), and who seek new forms of community and belonging. A search for connection may then become visible from within works previously interpreted as primarily deconstructing an existing ethos, such as many of Ness' photographs.

Sigalit Landau's "DeadSee,"

Though women artists are featured, other outlooks and works – pre-Zionist, Eastern, and both religious Jewish and non-Jewish ones – are given marginal attention. When included, they fulfill the role of 'others' in relation to the main drama.

the penultimate image in the book, offers a potent metaphor for re-framing the linear passage from wholeness to disintegration that is traced in Zalmona's account, into a cyclical and unending one, as the circle of floating watermelons and body unravels but is then recreated (and unraveled again).

The above discussion of meaningful voices from past and present that are absent from "A Century of Israeli Art" does not discredit its content but rather opens the door to different ones. Documenting a relatively new canon of art should be done via the acknowledged artists and movements within it. It is then the role of those unseen and unheard to question that canon and tell their alternative stories.

In terms of structure, "A Century of Israeli Art" progresses chronologically, divided in large part into chapters devoted to individual decades. Thankfully, this structure is not adhered to strictly, and cross-cutting themes, short biographies of individual artists, and in the case of the statue "Nimrod," a definitive work of art, are allowed to deviate from the form. Though at times this reader felt that an obligation to include all "famous" Israeli artists threatened to weigh down the book, for the most part it manages to transmit an enormous amount of information while relating a deep art-historical saga. This feat is accomplished by maintaining a close connection with the visual experience throughout, giving great respect to the artworks themselves, and drawing insights from their detailed study. Indeed, there are moments in the book that remind us that alongside awareness of the socio-political context of art there remains the basic and personal experience of a viewer being moved by a single work, such as the two loving and poetic pages devoted to Yehezkel Streichman's 1951 "Portrait of Tsila" – a study of the makings of home, family and painting itself, all in an intimate Tel Aviv interior.

Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov is a painter living in the Galilee. Her website is at www.ruthkbd.com.

The Israel Symphony Orchestra Rishon LeZion

Romeo & Juliet

Concert No. 1

Andris Poga, conductor (Latvia)
Boris Gilburg, piano

Verdi - La Forza del destino, overture
Grieg - Piano Concerto in A minor op. 16
Ravel - Piano Concerto in G
Prokofiev - Romeo & Juliet Suite

Rishon LeZion, 2,3,5 October 2013
Tel Aviv, 7 October 2013

03-9484840
www.isorl.co.il



TRAIN

Continued from page B4

Ullman, who taught etching, drawing and multimedia, feels that the suppression of the rebellion was very violent. "The convening of an external committee seemed like a very aggressive act toward the department. In essence, problems within Bezalel were solved by force, just as problems outside Bezalel were solved by force. From the moment they brought in an external investigating committee, they introduced tanks into the campaign. Bezalel's senate appointed the committee because they were afraid the spirit of protest would affect the other departments."

He sees a direct link between the suppression of that rebellion and other Israeli protests that have been suppressed, the most recent being the social protests in the summer of 2011. "Outside of Bezalel, aggression was rampant. Most of the public believed in force, and this was manifested by Likud's victory in the [1977] election," says Ullman. "For the protesters at Bezalel, the Yom Kippur War functioned like the Vietnam War. But unlike other student uprisings, the one at Bezalel was a complete and total failure.

The failure stung, but its effect on art, says Ullman, was dramatic both for himself and his students. "Personally it was very hard, but for the art it was empowering and clarifying," he reflects.

"The art became much more existentialist. I'd been digging pits since 1970, and the events only deepened them. It was also a milestone in the students' work – this connection between life and art. It was existential learning with an unforgettable lesson. In that sense, the rebellion was a success. Two years later [in 1980] I was at the Venice Biennale with Gershuni. The two rebels."

In addition to the very male activity at Bezalel, there were prominent female artists in the 1970s – most of whom were not Bezalel graduates – who also created art with explicitly political features. "All the art of the '70s was a product of the war, whether the artists had themselves fought in the war or were just starting to

create art at this time," says Direktor. Deganit Berest, who completed her studies at Bezalel just before the war, dealt with maps and borders. After the war, Michal Na'aman created "The Eyes of the Nation," in response to a televised statement by a soldier in the Golani Brigade, who had said that Mount Hermon was "the eyes of the nation." She took two poster boards and wrote on them "The Eyes of the Nation" [in Hebrew] and placed them on the beach in Tel Aviv.

Another typical feature of '70s art, says Direktor, was the presence of the fragile human body, especially in installation art. "Both men and women were showing the body in moments of weakness or distress. It wasn't a sexual, sensual, tempting body, and

this was connected to the deep residues left by the war. Even Motti Mizrahi's dough, which seemed so risqué and sexual, was not an ideal or healthy sensuality. There was no joy de vivre in these exposed bodies.

"It's true," Direktor adds, "that in the 1960s, Yigal Tumarín had already created bleeding bodies in bronze, but Tumarín's work was a paradox between its antiwar messages and the very aggressive physical presence of the statues, themselves a forceful means of artistic expression. The artists of the '70s had greater congruence between their messages and expressive means, which were weaker and somehow meager. There wasn't a lot to document; everything was perishable and fleeting."