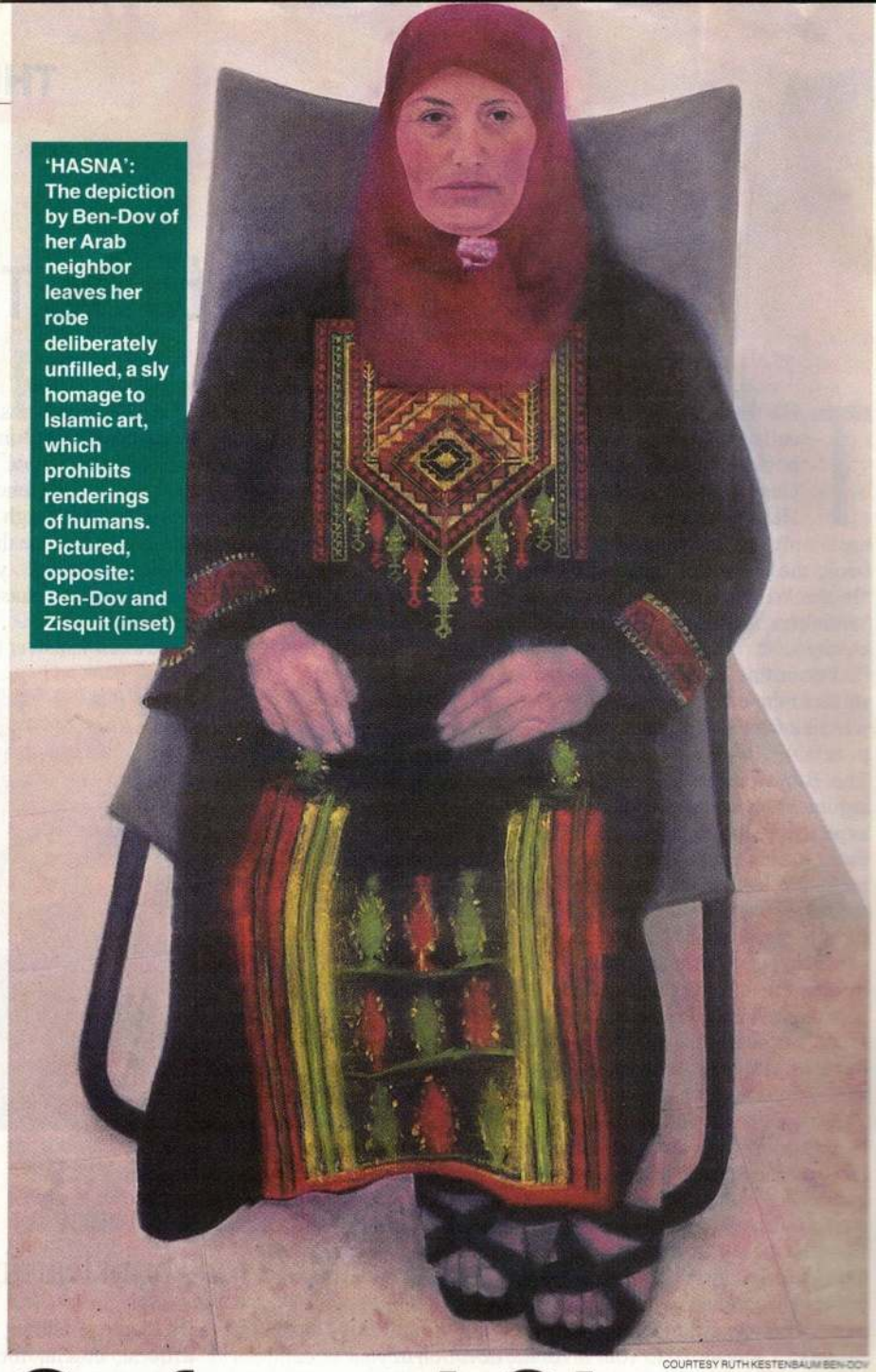


'HASNA': The depiction by Ben-Dov of her Arab neighbor leaves her robe deliberately unfilled, a sly homage to Islamic art, which prohibits renderings of humans. Pictured, opposite: Ben-Dov and Zisquit (inset)

COURTESY RUTH KESTENBAUM BEN-DOV

Soft and Clear

With a determined absence of trendiness, American-born painter Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov produces realistic but elusive canvases that reflect the tension between Western art and the Jewish prohibition on graven images

Sara K. Eisen

THERE IS NO MISTAKING HER gentle, incisive brush in the nine paintings. Six women and three men, with very little in common other than the gray camping chair they sit in and the tenderness with which they are committed to canvas, welcome many admiring guests to Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov's latest exhibition in Jerusalem. Keeping company with Ben-Dov for weeks, each of the subjects selected her or his own clothes, poses and expressions, and often commented on features they'd like to see softened or thinned, in 10 or more collaborative portrait sessions with the artist, who had chosen them from her Western Galilee surroundings.

"Ruth attempts to paint the person sitting opposite her as a subject, not an object... an intimate interaction between the painter and the sitter ensues, in which the two reveal themselves to one another," exhibition curator Shlomi Schwartzberg writes in the accompanying catalog. The show, titled "Welcoming Guests," had its initial showing at the Lady Roslyn Lyons Gallery at Karmiel's ORT Braude College, and will be on view at Jerusalem's Artspace gallery until early June.

Ben-Dov comes through soft and clear, even when her work is unmistakably about the other. Her observations are intensely realistic, including minute details such as jewelry and embroidery, but there is no effort here at oil-on-canvas photography (in fact, says Ben-Dov, "When people tell me it looks 'just like a photo,' it annoys me..."); the artist's use of paint is deep and personal, textured like a spiritual fog through which she almost caresses her sitters.

Most striking, however, is the series of hairless, earless, close-up faces lining one wall, every one with a nearly identical expression. They belong to the same nine sitters, and matching tightly cropped face to complete painting is a puzzle each visitor inevitably plays. "I took off their head coverings," explains Ben-Dov, "but without lying... that's why I painted only the mid-face. I was putting aside [superficial] differences. And yet, people carry things in their faces that have to do with who they are." Adds Ben-Dov, in her subdued voice, "The big portraits are like novels. The faces are like poems."

Aside from this textual metaphor, Ben-Dov's earlier preoccupation with traditional Jewish texts, and their relationship to art, isn't overtly reflected in the current show, the artist opting instead for a more direct, emotional human encounter, in an effort to reach understanding with the wide ethnic and religious diversity that characterizes her neighbors in the Segev region of the Galilee, near Karmiel.

Raised as a Conservative Jew in Washington, D.C., Ruth, now 41, moved to Israel during her teens, in 1979, and studied at Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem. She is now Orthodox and lives in the successfully mixed religious and secular Galilee village of Eshchar, with her dentist husband and their four young children. The seclusion of

'The Gallery I Wasn't Meant to Have'

ESTEBAN ALTERMAN

LINDA ZISQUIT IS USED TO welcoming guests. Since 1994, she has been opening the back door of her Jerusalem home to visitors to Artspace, a private gallery exhibiting works by Israeli artists.

Although gallery management and publicity take up a good deal of her energies, Zisquit (*inset*) is better known to many as a poet; Sheep Meadow Press will soon be publishing her third collection of original works. But two evenings and one morning a week, she is there in front of the screen that divides Artspace from the living space she shares with her husband, Donald, and those of their five children who are still at home.

Zisquit's passion for beauty, and those who give expression to it, is what led her to open what she calls "the gallery I never meant to have" with a one-time show for friend and painter Pamela Levy in her newly expanded home in the city's German Colony nine years ago. But it was only in 1997, with an exhibit honoring the now-late art dealer Bertha Urdang on her 85th birthday, that it became clear that Artspace could sustain regular shows and attract paying clients for art. "This is a love that grew into a business," explains Zisquit, "and I take it very seriously. I want each of the artists [who leave their work here] to feel that they are well represented."

Today, Zisquit, who represents, non-exclusively, some 15-20 artists, opens a new exhibit every 6 weeks or so. She'll greet visitors to the series of small but magical rooms that is the gallery, introducing them to the newest exhibit and perhaps, if they are interested, taking them through the permanent collection, a tiny back room stacked deep and lined low with works artists like Moshe Kupferman, Larry Abramson, Michael Kovner and Levy, as well as Ben-Dov have left behind for Zisquit to show and sell.

"I love having the art around me," says Zisquit, who separates her life and career as a poet from her art dealer alter-ego by writing in a rented room in the neighborhood. In addition to her own writing and teaching work at several university programs in literature and writing, in 1997 Zisquit published a translation of the work of the late Yona Wallach, the Tel Aviv poet whose compositions flirt with both madness and highly eroticized themes — a daunting task by any definition, but especially impressive given the fact that she began the long-term project only four years after moving to Israel from her native Buffalo, New York, in 1978, with a young family.

However, says Zisquit, the lines between the poetry and the art "merge often," most notably, she smiles, "in me." ●

S.K.E.

COURTESY RUTH KESTENBAUM BEN-DOV

the place, built on a rocky hilltop — with its lush, filmy beauty and silences — points to the same quiet resolve that one senses in the artist, whose vision of her career is guided by a strong internal compass, rather than by the momentary fads and pretensions that tend to prevail in the big city.

Ben-Dov is now teaching drawing and painting to a mixed class of Jews, Druse, Muslims and Christians at the regional college in nearby Safed, having done graduate work in art and art history at the Hebrew University and Jerusalem's Kerem Institute, but she is mostly occupied by work at her Shorashim studio.

She is best known on the art scene here for her serious engagement with the limitations of the sacred texts versus the limitlessness of Western art. The paintings in a series shown as "In the Body of the Text" at the Janco Dada Museum, at the artists village of Ein Hod, south of Haifa, in 1999, were characterized by the juxtaposition of a traditional text with a realistic object or a startling self-portrait.

In the diptych "Reading Faces," for example, the artist's own face, her blue eyes reflecting some terror, look in the direction of the panel to the right, which depicts a page of Talmud, silk-screened by a colleague onto a wood board that Ben-Dov had made to look like paper. The page, from Tractate Avodah Zarah, discusses the prohibition of portraying a realistic human face. The dialogue between the artist's eyes and the text that would have those eyes disappear, and between the canvas and the "paper," writes curator (and Ben-Gurion University lecturer) Haim Maor, "denies the relationship of absolute negation, the prohibition of any contact between the two."

Another piece from this series — using medieval texts from a legal debate on the permissibility of reproducing the human form if it is done in two dimensions — shows two faces: one a convincing self-portrait, which belies the liberal claim in the adjoining halakhic copy that this very medium could not possibly render a realistic likeness and is therefore permissible; the other a "legitimately" (according to the more conservative of the two texts) unclear, murky and barely discernible image. The power of the second image points to the more powerful emotional pull elicited by the hidden, the unseen.

THE ALLURE OF THE IMAGINED that departs from where the real leaves off is a theme running through much of the series. Ben-Dov enters many layers of subtext in her work entitled "Badim" — Hebrew for the poles that were used to hold the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple and whose shape was suggested through the curtain that obscured the ark, but also for the word "canvases." In an extensive interplay between feminine imagery, notions of curtains, and the hidden aspects of the erotic in the Temple's Holy of Holies, the artist comments not only on imagination and law, but also on the images of the Cherubim — the gold-hewn pair of winged babies that stood face to face on top of the Ark, guarding the very texts that would ostensibly forbid their depiction.

It is this dialectic, the tension between what is and what should or should not be, and the inherent, seemingly contradictory connection between the physical body and Judaism's spiritual rituals, that drives Ben-

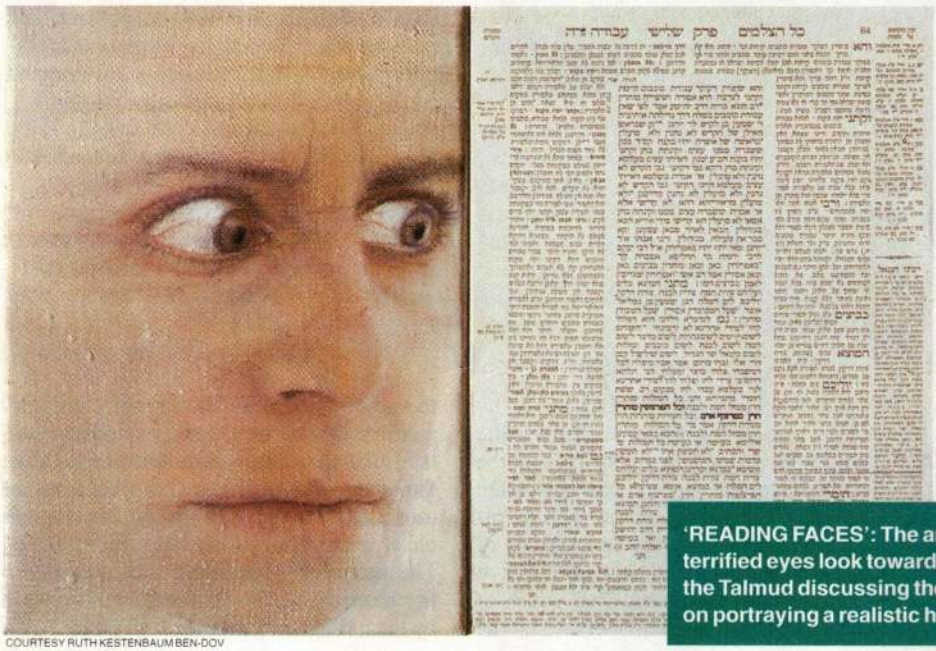
Dov's art. And yet, notes Maor, she is never caustic or pejorative. "Her work is a serious attempt to remain within the permissible in Judaism — she plays tricks with the paint to make things realistic, while also making it very clear that she is using paint and canvas," he told The Report by phone.

Pieces from the "Body of the Text" series will be on display from late June in an exhibition called "Thou Shalt Make: The Revival of Judaism in Contemporary Israeli Art," at Tel Aviv's new "Time for Art": The Center for Israeli Art. Directed by the critic and philosopher Dr. Gideon Ofrat, the gallery presents changing exhibitions, each on a different theme relevant to Israeli art. Ofrat says that "the moment I thought about putting on this exhibition, I thought of Ruth Ben-Dov." He explains that when he first saw her work, at Ein Hod, he "felt her pain as a Jewish artist," with all of the implied contradictions that can exist between the two identities. Her work did not shy away from the real conflict that exists between the Hellenistic tradition in Western art and Judaism's own tradition.

The dreamlike mist that covers all of her work, both in the "Text" series and in "Guests," accentuates the elusive, real-but-barely-there effect referred to by Maor. Says Artspace owner and poet Linda Zisquit (*see box, p. 41*), who first met Ben-Dov in the mid-80s, when they were both involved in an arts program for U.S. teens visiting Israel, "A veil always seems to cover the compelling image, as if it were ultimately out of reach, beyond one's grasp, perhaps a way of representing what is for a moment, and then gone."

After exhibiting, in 1998, Ben-Dov's "Shema" portrait, which shows a woman whose eyes barely peek out from behind the hand that covers them, as is customary when reciting the "Hear, O Israel" prayer, Zisquit was unable to part with it, and it now hangs in her living room. Ben-Dov's sensitivity to the tensions between seeing and not seeing, the prohibited and the permissible, resonate with her strongly, says Zisquit. The small painting stirred up images of her small son saying the intensely felt prayer before bedtime.

The tensions Zisquit mentions have been somewhat left behind in Ben-Dov's current show — Schwartzberg writes that he sees Ben-Dov as having been liberated here from the heavy task she assigned herself in the previous series — but Zisquit notes that they still exist, this time in the guise of external, cultural and societal conflicts. The show includes portraits of an Ethiopian immigrant as well as two from the former Soviet Union; two very different Israeli Arab women; secular, traditional, and ultra-Orthodox Jews, as well as a Buddhist one; young alongside old; middle alongside working class. The artist attempts to close these gaps by revealing the similarities in the distinct faces, and by quite literally having all of her Galilean subjects sit in the same, gray-colored chair.



COURTESY RUTH KESTENBAUM BEN-DOV

'READING FACES': The artist's own terrified eyes look toward the page from the Talmud discussing the prohibition on portraying a realistic human face

"WELCOMING GUESTS," EXplains the artist in an interview, explores "the preciousness of each individual. It is a basic, direct human encounter." Against the backdrop of a horrible couple of years where life has been made cheap, the artist sees this intimate association with her subjects as juxtaposition enough; there is none of the intentional cleverness of her earlier work. "I wanted something less ambiguous. Something that explained itself."

But Ben-Dov has not left behind her interest in the dichotomy of things, an obsession that began early in her career when she found herself painting an old family portrait into a rear-view mirror in what was supposed to have been a simple landscape. This transformation of neutral environment into internal scenery was a turning point; opposing views became central to Ben-Dov's art, and is present even in her most "direct" work.

For example, "Hasna," one of the nine portraits, depicts a stately, middle-aged Arab-Israeli woman wearing a head covering and a traditional embroidered robe of her own choosing. On close inspection, it becomes obvious that there are really two paintings here: one of the woman, and one of the intricate geometric design of her robe — purposely not filled out with Hasna's form but instead ever so subtly standing alone, flat and unsoftened (and therefore, ironically, unrealistic) — a homage Ben-Dov allows to Islamic art, which does not permit rendering of any kind. Here, Ben-Dov relates mischievously, is her private connection to what she had been doing before.

In fact, having recently audited a course on Islamic art at Haifa University, she intends her next project, about which she is typically cryptic, to deal with that art form as it relates to Judaism, and constitute, she hopes, a dialogue between these two cultures in general. In her region, Ben-Dov relates, relations between Jewish and Arab communities have been strained since the start of the intifada and the subsequent shooting of 13 Israeli Arabs from the area by police during violent demonstrations. But to a visitor, attitudes toward "the other" seem more positive in the bucolic North than they do in the country's congested center.

Far from the art scene in Tel Aviv, and even, Ben-Dov herself notes, in many ways removed from the geographically nearer Ein Hod, this contentedly rural, maternal artist has nothing contrived or chaotic about her. "I'm a long-distance runner," she says, gently. And you believe her, surmising that, as in her paintings, behind the almost whispered statement, there is strength and determination, great care and utter clarity. ●