



*Photograph by Gadi Dagon  
for a 1988 poster designed by  
Zvi Levin, from the exhibition  
Made to Order: Commercial  
Photography in Israel Today,  
held last Summer at the  
Israel Museum, Jerusalem.*



# CANVASSING ISRAEL

ARTISTS IN THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY  
FIND DIFFERENT WAYS TO COPE WITH  
THEIR COUNTRY'S NEVER-ENDING CONFLICTS.

BY ROSLYN BERNSTEIN

**L**ong before Jerusalem-bound bus #405 careened down a ravine last summer killing sixteen persons—an apparent act of terrorism—the arts community in Israel was debating the effects of the Intifada, the ongoing Palestinian uprisings, in words and on canvas. Throughout the country—at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and the Tel Aviv Museum—there was talk of a forty-percent decline in tourism, with unfortunate trickle-down effects on museum attendance, entrance fees, and contributions by major benefactors. In a land where economics and politics can hardly be separated, the contemporary Israeli art market has struggled to find its own identity, suffering frequently from the accusation that it always remains just a few paces behind New York.

Over the years, particularly during the late 1970s, the Israeli art market experienced moments of pros-



*Detail from David Tartakover's 1987 poster shown in Made to Order: Commercial Photography in Israel Today.*

perity, but the fact remains that Israel is a country where guns swivel from the shoulders of young soldiers and officials routinely inspect handbags and packages at movie theaters. Israel is a country where art is not an important part of commercial life, where art remains for most people a luxury, albeit one that still commands fairly modest prices. While a 100% cotton towel sells for \$20 if you can find it, and a hamburger can cost \$8, big sculptures here often sell for \$5,000, and paintings by younger artists who have already had solo shows in one of the country's two-and-a-half museums sell for \$3,000 to \$4,000. "Nobody makes a living from their art, ever," says Ilan Wizgan, Assistant Curator of Israeli Art at the Israel Museum, which will celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary in the fall of 1990 with the opening of a new \$12-million, three-floor, 45,000-square-foot wing.



Curator of Contemporary Art Suzanne Landau has already begun to develop the concept for the new wing's opening exhibition. Its emphasis will be on the 1980s, and works of art will be displayed along with objects of various origins. Landau is intrigued by philosopher Jean François Lyotard's idea that the postmodern museum will be an environment in which aesthetic, non-aesthetic, and even anti-aesthetic objects coexist.

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But September 1990 seems far away. This summer, museum director Martin Weyl will have to keep a close eye on his budget as well as on developing talent and supervising construction of the new wing.

"A young museum can only make a statement if it is involved in contemporary and modern art," says Weyl, who believes that very few people around the world are sensitive to the Israeli aesthetic. "Most people see Israelis as soldier-farmer types, the opposite of being sensitive." The dilemma for contemporary Israeli artists is how to make the local universal. "Someone once said that all national art is bad, but all good art is nationalistic. It has to have some relationship to politics, to social life, to identity problems," Weyl says.

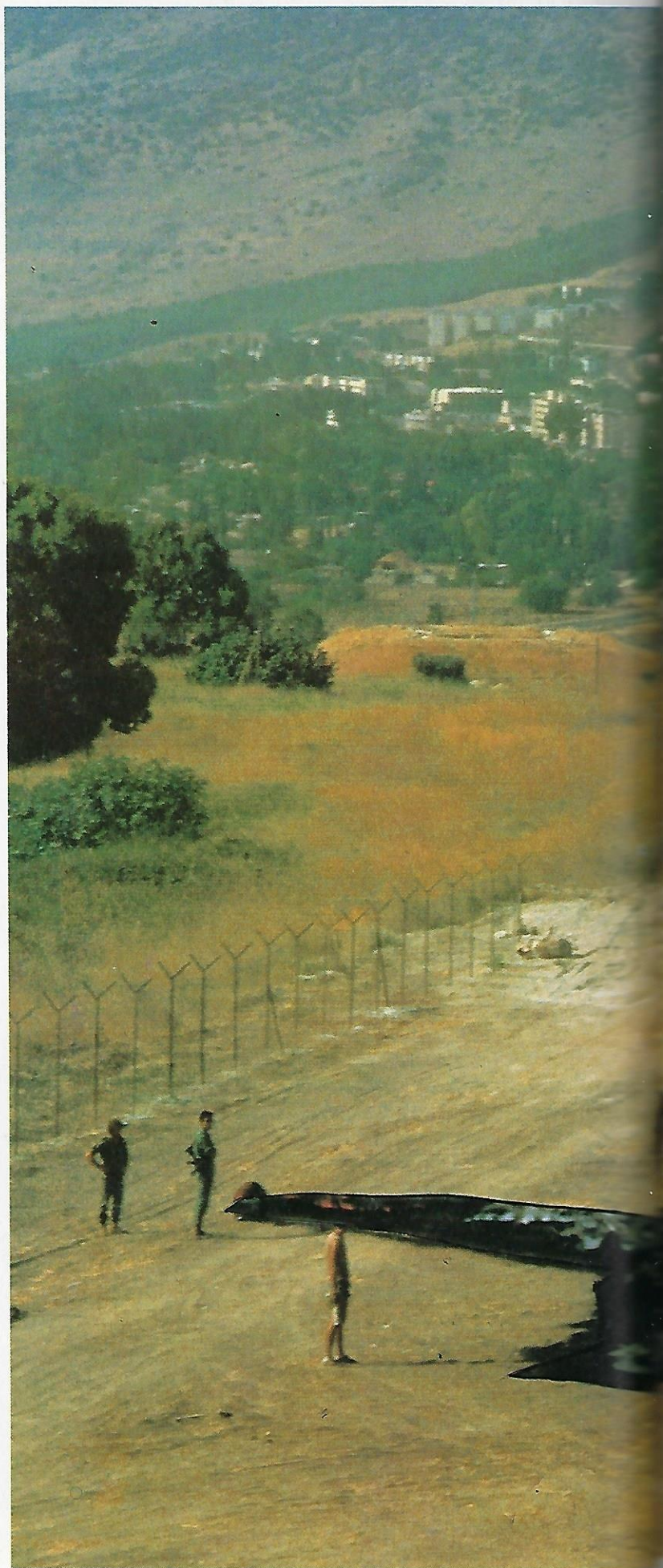
"People who are not here don't know the light, the stone, the people."

"Americans see contemporary art very much from an American angle; Europeans see it from a European angle. We see it from both angles," says Weyl, who concedes that Israel has yet to build a real constituency of collectors. "There's no art market here whatsoever," he says. Maybe that's the reason why sculptor and video artist Buky Schwartz divides his life and work between Israel and SoHo. Schwartz says that he needs New York because it is the center of the art world. But he adds that the contemporary Israeli art scene is more international than local.

Painter Pamela Levy, whose recent figurative work has been compared to Eric Fischl's, came to Israel from Iowa nearly fourteen years ago. Levy, who has shown at the Gimel Gallery in Jerusalem and the Artifact Gallery in Tel Aviv, says that she became a "Jerusalem artist" the minute she moved into her Talpiot warehouse studio. Although Levy's favorite subject is women and children, almost all of her recent paintings involve building and deconstruction. Her paintings sell for \$3,000. "It would be \$10,000 in the United States," she says, adding that she supplements her income by doing portraits. "We are the establishment," she says, "but we're paid peanuts."

A few studios away, artist Gabi Klasmer describes himself as a conceptual artist who paints. At age thirty-nine, Klasmer has an impres-

*Joshua Neustein, Nature Morte (Still Lives), 1983. Burnt tires and earth on the Lebanese border, 22.86 x 27.43 m (75 x 90 feet).*









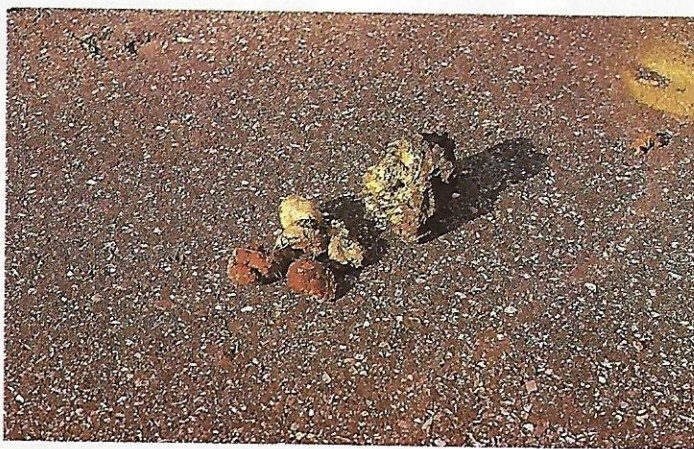




sive resume, with several shows at the Gimel Gallery, a joint show with David Reeb in the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion of the Tel Aviv Museum, and a solo show at the Israel Museum. Before 1979, Klasmer's projects attracted considerable attention for their boldness and political power. In 1975, Arab workers constructed a stone wall one meter high which Klasmer entitled, *Avodah Aravi*, Hebrew for Arab work and slang for a sloppy job. "It was a puzzle of stone, just by chipping raw stone and balancing it—only Arabs can do it," he explains. Some three years later—long before the Intifada began—Klasmer showed photographs of people throwing stones. Since 1979, he has concentrated on paintings, most recently on portraits, although this work too is indirectly political. "Everything in Israel is political," he says. "It's very difficult to do a political work; the events are much more dramatic. If you comment on an event, you're no different from a daily paper." Klasmer finds it hard to obey the expectations of being Israeli—to be political, to be local. "People expect you to draw camels or religious Jews." Known for his puzzling word sculptures in which Hebrew words are spelled out in English letters, he stubbornly refuses to be associated with any one style. At his last major show, *Hotel Palestin* in 1988, Klasmer hung his works in the middle of the gallery, creating corridors. "I sabotaged the art; you were too close to see them," he says.

While Martin Weyl maintains that there are no camps among Israeli artists, Joshua Neustein disagrees. Neustein counts Gabi Klasmer as a second generation "from

our people," referring to a group of artists including himself, Beni Efrat, Micha Ulman, Pinchas Cohen Gan, and Nahum Tevet, who reached out to show internationally and found that they did not receive support from the Israeli art community. "It's provincial terror," says Neustein. "We get caught between that and our own insecurity about the American art community's not embracing us either." The consequence for Neus-



above: Joshua Neustein, *Gold Shit*. Courtesy of the artist.

facing page: Gabi Klasmer, *Portrait*, 1989. Courtesy of the artist.

tein: he lives in Israel and New York and "follows his work back and forth like a sheep herder." Neustein says that the idea of displacement and its repercussions runs through all of his work. During the 1980s, however, his art became more overtly political, with maps, the true Jewish landscape, often joined to objects that insinuate art-historical agendas such as pieces of glass and dots—a way of making space, perhaps instead of color. Last year, Neustein spread gold-coated dog feces all over Israel. "That was my Intifada piece," he says. "Very internalized, but it hit at the gut of Israel conscience. It's not the enemy at the border. It is gastric, at the center. It's shit."

Neustein was in New York when the summer shows opened at the Israel Museum on 4 July. *Made to Order: Commercial Photography in Israel Today* and *Self-Image*, two exhibitions which showed hundreds of examples of stationery, posters, and other printed material by graphic designers from five continents, drew big opening crowds. Curator Nissan Perez selected from some 350 working photographers in the country and

Ivan Schwebel was not at the Israel Museum opening. In his mountaintop retreat in the Judean Hills, Schwebel, who was born in New York and studied with Philip Guston, is critical of the Israeli art establishment. "One of the problems with the art movement here," says Schwebel, "is that people rely heavily on outside influences from the so-called center of culture, and they don't respond to their own environment. When German expressionism hit around eight years ago, it flared up here, too."

Last summer, forty-five of Schwebel's paintings were on view at the Teffen Museum, an industrial park near Haifa. Another twenty-five were in the Beersheba Museum of Art.

Recently, Schwebel has turned to book publishing, combining his drawings, paintings, and diary, and basing events on the *Book of Samuel*.

Next spring, Schwebel's paintings will be exhibited in the Sadie Bronfman Center in Montreal. Schwebel is also working on a second book based on his new dragon paintings and the painful loss of his wife, Aviva, to cancer. "For the last three or four years, I haven't communicated with any artists in the country, and they haven't communicated with me," Schwebel says. "It's a political scene. But there's really no difference between New York and Tel Aviv. We're all just as provincial. We all carry our center within us."

Although Schwebel sold a painting to the Tel Aviv Museum a little over a year ago, he was not included in the show *Israeli Art: Recent Acquisitions*, up at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art last summer. Ellen Ginton, Curator of



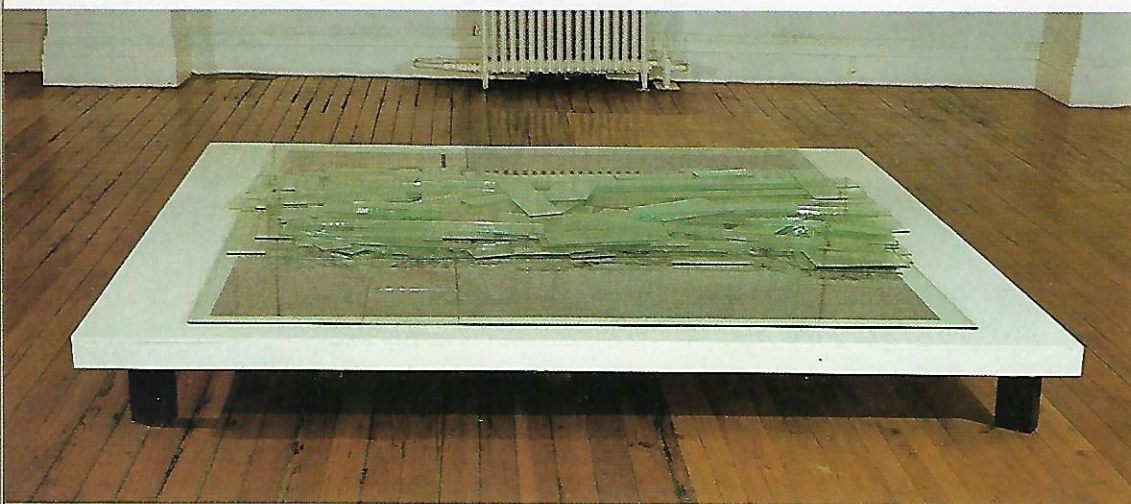


Israeli Art for the museum, walked me through the show, commenting on the artists. There was a plywood work by Raffi Lavie, "our enfant terrible," purchased for \$1,000 in 1987. Lavie inspired a whole generation of Israeli artists with his naturalistic white-wash and undisciplined drawing. She also pointed out a 1988 triptych painting

by Michal Na'aman—"the most important woman artist of this generation"—and the amoeba-like shapes of *Famiglia*, a 1989 oil by Asaf Ben-Zvi, whose solo show is scheduled for September. On the next level was a sculpture by Michael Gitlin, who will soon be having a solo show in the Israel Museum; a map painting by Joshua Neustein; and

a plywood work by Yehudit Levin, a talented disciple of Lavie's who studied with him at the Midrashah, the visual arts college in Ramat-Hasharon. Levin's plywood works and paintings were the subject of a solo show, *From Line to Patch*, at the Museum of Israeli Art at Ramat-Gan last summer.

But the big story last summer at the Tel Aviv Museum was the financial crisis, precipitated by the near-bankruptcy of the municipality that pays ninety percent of its budget. While the Israel Museum in Jerusalem was suffering from the effects of the Intifada and tightening its spending (fifteen percent of the budget of the Israel Museum comes from public support), the Tel Aviv Museum was fighting off tax authorities for not paying benefits to its employees. Martin Weyl of the Israel Museum is not surprised. "Even though the Tel Aviv Museum is one-



Joshua Neustein, *Map of Middle East*. Map on table under glass, 244 x 244 cm (96 x 96 inches). Courtesy of the artist.





A 1985 photograph (detail)  
by Oded Klein for a record jacket  
designed by Rafi Dayagi,  
from *Made to Order: Commercial  
Photography in Israel Today*.

quarter the size of the Israel Museum, they have the same budget," he says. "In Tel Aviv, there's no Intifada, but they like to stage showy exhibitions with big opening dinners. It gives them international prestige." Weyl acknowledges, however, that Director Marc Sheps "put the museum on the map." Now Sheps' problem is keeping it open and fully funded. The bi-national *American Art of the Late 1980s*, scheduled to go up on 20 July, was canceled because of the financial crisis. In the museum shop, an art history student recently assigned to sales is happy to be employed. "Ten part-timers have been fired already," she says. "No one knows what's next."

In the Tel Aviv galleries, there was typical gallery hype about the sales and prospects of Israeli artists. At the Mabat Gallery, a three-panel work by Igaël Tumarkin, now in his sixties,

depicted death, blood, and a hobby horse. In the back-room of the Artifact gallery, Sergio Edelsztejn, who describes himself as the "director, the owner, the hanger, and the cleaning man," brings out works with oriental motifs by Asad Azi and night and day scenes by Yitzack Livneh. At the Givon Gallery, co-owner Noemi Givon has a Moshe Guershuni triptych (each panel priced at \$8,000) hanging. "This work is all about demystifying God," Givon says, "If we are to give the account, what will it be?"

Gordon Gallery's Shaya Yariv, who started public auctions of Israeli art, now holds sales twice yearly. Nearly five hundred people showed up for an auction in May 1989 that topped \$1 million, including the ten percent buyer's premium. A previous sale brought in revenues of \$800,000, with some forty percent of the works selling above their

estimates. Yariv disagrees with Martin Weyl concerning the presence of significant collectors in the country. "A work by Arie Aroch that would have brought \$3,000 to \$4,000 ten years ago just sold for \$50,000," says Yariv. "Since I started auctioning, some artists' prices have risen. Yosl Bergner, Marcel Janco, Joseph Zaritzky, and Uri Lifshitz have all begun selling at Christie's, and Sotheby's is holding half-yearly sales—they bring in Chagalls from abroad and sell them here to foreign collectors."

"I'm the only serious one, though," says Yariv, who sells mainly to Israeli collectors but has seen increased interest from foreign collectors. "I'm waiting for the Japanese to emigrate," he quips.

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