
The publication of curator Yigal Zalmona’s newest book, *100 Years of Israeli Art*, coincides with the reopening of the Israel Museum (2010). The book does double duty as a catalogue of the Museum’s new permanent exhibition of Israeli art, curated jointly by Zalmona and Amitai Mendelson. This volume is a historiographical gem in the field of Israeli art. It is exceptionally lucid—not unusual perhaps in art historical literature, but not at all typical of writing by artists, curators, and theoreticians.

**Between Art and Reality**

The book is, to a great extent, a superior recapitulation of canonical writing and core theses on Israeli art composed to date. As such, its target audience is mainly art lovers among the general public rather than exclusively scholars and experts. Accordingly, the sparse references cited refer readers almost solely to standard literature in the field.

The discussion focuses on what is commonly termed “high art,” to the exclusion of architecture, graphic design (mentioned only as historical background), industrial and ceramic design, graffiti, animation and comics, fashion and jewellery-making. Israeli cinema, poetry and literature are occasionally mentioned in order to provide an understanding of the cultural context in which the artworks were created.

This prompts the question of whether distinctions between art, on the one hand, and crafts and industrial design, on the other, are still tenable; while these other activities share their content with the world of art, the differences are often slight indeed.

The format follows that of the *60 Years of Israeli Art* project: exhibitions held at major museums in Israel, each covering one specific decade. Each catalogue in this series opened with a chronological overview of key events in Israeli society and politics, as the sociocultural setting for the art created during the relevant period. Although Zalmona does not maintain the rigid division into decades, he does adhere to the concept of starting with cultural and social background, followed by a detailed analysis of artistic activity, its sources and its influence.

Similarly, at the launching of the Israeli Art Wing at the Israel Museum in 1985, also curated by Zalmona, a sound-and-light show presented the development of Israeli art in its historical, social and cultural context. Nonetheless, the interconnection between art and reality should not be taken for granted, nor the view that art frequently draws its meaning from the social and political reality in which it is enmeshed. In the wake of modernist thought, the field of art often prefers to differentiate itself from other cultural domains, and to relate to its products solely in and by itself. The premise that the sole reality which grants art its validity is art itself still reigns among many artists, curators and theoreticians. In fact, the most salient overviews of Israeli art to date have not explicitly confronted art’s connection to sociopolitical reality, a fact perhaps all the more surprising given Zionism’s roots in Marxist thought and labor politics.

**Politically Incorrect**

Like the Museum collection, this volume too comprises almost only the hegemonic canon: that is, artists with shows at major museums, and whose reception has placed them at the center of the discourse. The book makes no mention of several artists whose work was a landmark in the history of Israeli art, yet who were not received into the center of the canon. Thus, for example, the catalogue entitled *Landmarks in Israeli Art*, an exhibition Zalmona curated in the 1980s, makes note of the artist A. S. Schor, one of the few members of the Bezalel circle to strive for realistic pictorial depiction of Israel’s landscapes; Ze’ev Ben-Zvi, whose works the

---

1 *60 Years of Art in Israel* was a joint project by Israel’s six major museums. The exhibitions, shown in late 2008, were accompanied by catalogues: *The First Decade: Hegemony and Multiplicity*, curators: Gideon Ofrat and Galia Bar-Or; *Ein Harod Museum of Art: The Birth of ‘New’: The Sixties in Israeli Art*, curators: Yona Fisher and Tamar Manor-Friedman; *Checkpost: The Eighties in Israeli Art*, curator: Ilana Tannenbaum, Haifa Museum of Art; *In the End We Die: Young Art in the Nineties in Israel*, curator: Doron Ravina, Herzliya Museum for Contemporary Art; *Real Time: Israeli Art 1998–2008*, curators: Amitai Mendelson and Efrat Natan, Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2011
Also available online – brill.nl/ima

DOI: 10.1163/187180011X604481
catalogue describes as the first example of modern sculpture in Israel; and Yaakov Agam’s abstract geometrical creations. These and others receive no mention in the new book. The same is true of those “fringe artists” who were included in surveys of this type in the 1980s and 1990s but are generally absent from Zalmona’s list. As the curator himself said in an interview (Ha’aretz, June 17, 2010), he believes in cultural natural selection: those who have succeeded are also apparently the best artists. This pragmatic approach is problematic, particularly as current research grows increasingly aware of power relations, the politics of the gaze, modes of free market economy and its impact, with its economic and political underpinnings in the field of art being as important as essential considerations of aesthetic quality.

Moreover, Zalmona openly chooses not to conform to accepted standards of equitable representation of female artists, and his references to gay culture employ outdated terminology. Thus, for instance, his treatment of artistic activity in Israel’s early decades features only two women (Lea Nickel and Aviva Uri), despite the fact that research in recent years has revealed other notable women artists who were active in or in proximity to the dominant male circle, “Ofakim Hadashim” (New Horizons); they seem to have disappeared precisely because they were women. Zalmona makes only brief mention of artists occupying Jewish-Oriental space (Arab Jews, to use the term coined by sociologist Yehuda Shenhav) and barely analyzes works that propose—drawing upon an “Oriental” stance—a cultural aesthetic alternative to the Eurocentrism dominant in the world of Israeli art.

Zalmona’s repeated use of “homosexual” is outdated, and considered inappropriate nowadays by the gay community, as a term formerly employed in literature on mental health for denoting a pathological state. Similarly, the stereotypical affinity of “gay” with “feminine,” also repeated several times (329, 405, 407), reveals a very limited understanding of the range of sexuality in the queer community. The acknowledgment of “the shadow of sterility accompanying the lives of homosexual men” (405) attributed to artist Adi Nes, even if it held true in the past, has long since lost its relevance in a technological and cultural reality offering options for parenthood (figs. 1, 2). Furthermore, whereas current sociological approaches avoid identifying new

---

Fig. 1. Adi Nes, Untitled, 1996. C-print, 140 × 140 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.

---