

Israeli Art On Its Way to Somewhere Else

Avraham Levitt

*Confined on the ship, from which there is no escape ... he has his truth
and his homeland only in that fruitless expanse between two countries
that cannot belong to him.*

Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*¹

So accustomed are we by now to hearing Israeli painters and sculptors pouring ire and brimstone on their country, that one could almost imagine that the Jewish state and the plastic arts were somehow inherently inimical to one another. Yet things were not always this way: At the same time Zionism's political founding fathers were preparing the diplomatic and physical soil for a Jewish state, Jewish nationalist artists in Europe and Palestine were already working towards what they believed was to be a Jewish national renaissance in art, and even created Israel's first academy for national art in the days of Theodor Herzl. At first, it seemed as though these great Zionist artists would succeed in fulfilling their vision, and such a renewal did indeed get under way. But the effort withered after only a few years, and Jewish art in the land of Israel plunged into a seemingly inexorable process of decay, passing through five distinct stages: From (i) the

national, historic and religious consciousness of the early Zionist immigrant artists; to (ii) a preoccupation with the Jewish land itself; to (iii) an obsession with the material of the land, stripped of any connection with a people; to (iv) an overt campaign to destroy any traces of Jewish nationalist sentiment; the final stage, the calm after the battle to destroy the Zionist heritage had largely been won, produced artwork distinguished by (v) a powerful sense of human rootlessness, wandering and the preparation for departure from the land. Thus less than a century after its inception, the art of Israel had carried out a complete about-face: At first a celebration of the reentry of the Jews into history in their ancient homeland, Israeli art has now become a celebration of their exit. The story of how this reversal came about is the tragedy of a culture. And in some ways, it is the story of the Jewish state itself.

The history of Israeli art begins with a Bulgarian-Jewish sculptor named Boris Schatz, whose life and work were transfigured by the revival of Jewish national strength at the turn of the twentieth century, as dramatically represented by the Jewish agricultural settlement in Palestine and Herzl's Zionist Congresses. As Jewish nationalism gained momentum, Schatz became a devout Zionist, friend to Herzl and Ahad Ha'am; his work, too, came to be dominated by images of Jewish national power, as reflected in sculptures such as *Mattathias* (1894), in which the Hasmonean warrior-priest is depicted crushing the body of a fallen Greek soldier underfoot. While his later work focused increasingly upon more religious subjects, these continued to express his admiration for the strong and vital in the history of the Jews; his *Moses with the Ten Commandments* (1918), for example, portrayed the prophet as muscular and spirited, gripping mightily the two tablets of the law.

Following the Fifth Zionist Congress in 1901 (which had been devoted in part to a debate over the issue of Jewish cultural activities), Schatz approached Herzl privately with the idea of a school of Jewish art in Palestine. According to Schatz's account, Herzl responded enthusiastically, and

together they agreed on the name for the school: “Betzael,” said Schatz, “after the first master craftsman who built us the sanctuary in the wilderness.” Herzl responded: “Yes, a sanctuary in the wilderness.”² Schatz set to work building interest in his new art school, publishing articles and giving interviews in the Jewish papers. Schatz’s fundraising efforts carried him across Europe and to America, and as a result the Betzael Academy of Art and Craft formally opened in Jerusalem on March 1, 1906. Its faculty was hand-picked by Schatz from among his associates in the Zionist movement, and the school was founded explicitly on the principle that “nationalist art is art which comes from the heart and works in harmony with the heart of the nation.”³ Accordingly, the curriculum featured instruction in the production of Jewish ritual objects, and both its faculty and students often served as illustrators for Zionist literature and propaganda.

Among the school’s leading instructors from its first years was Ephraim Moshe Lilien, whose works had already been featured at the Fifth Congress, and who had designed the memorial postcard issued by the Congress that year. Lilien’s drawing on the card shows a broken old Jewish man, collapsed in despair behind thorns and barbed wire. His attention is directed by a tall prophetic figure pointing to the sun—which rises beyond a pair of oxen being driven by a religious Jew. This image of exile and redemption is accompanied by an inscription taken from the traditional daily prayers: “And our eyes will behold your return to Zion with mercy.” Other illustrations by Lilien carefully undergirded the ongoing national efforts with images of the glorious Jewish past, employing Herzl’s likeness, for example, in illustrating biblical figures such as Moses and various redeeming angels (Fig. 1).⁴ Zev Raban, who arrived at Betzael in 1912 and headed its illustration department beginning in 1914, produced a formidable body of Zionist works as well, including some of the original posters aimed at attracting Jewish tourism and business to Palestine.⁵ In Raban’s illustration for the cover to Schatz’ novel *Jerusalem Rebuilt*, Schatz can be seen sitting on the roof of the Betzael building—in front of its famous menorah, itself designed by Raban—in conversation with a biblical prophet. Artists at Betzael also

worked to create Bible illustrations based on what they saw around them, drawing upon their daily experience to depict the characters and landmarks of the biblical narrative. The great Bible illustrator Abel Pann was a Betzalel student who worked almost exclusively from the likenesses of local Jews in their surroundings in Jerusalem.

The first two decades of Jewish artwork in Palestine were virtually without a trace of criticism against Jewish efforts to build a national home. Artists of darker temperament turned their attention instead to the exile; most important among these was Samuel Hirschenberg, a Polish painter who came to study at Betzalel in the last year of his life. His painting *The Wandering Jew* (1899), completed while he was still in Poland, occupied the most prominent position in the Betzalel museum. It portrays a bearded figure running terrified, his arms outstretched, through a forest of looming crosses beneath a stormy sky. At his feet lie the emaciated bodies of his fellow Jews, lying in pools of their own blood—a horrifyingly prophetic glimpse into the fate of European Jewry within a generation. Aside from its impressive technical accomplishments, the painting was so well-regarded at Betzalel because it so powerfully drove home the idea that national reconstruction in Israel was the only solution to the bitterness of life in the dispersion; Schatz frequently brought guests to be photographed in front of it.

The artistic pioneers who first built Betzalel devoted all their energies to finding the voice and technique with which to express their hopes and aspirations for the redemption of the Jewish nation. As a result, the artists of this period exuded an idealism and romanticism of Jewish identity which would not be seen again. They approached every subject with the desire to create and express a uniquely Jewish perspective—an effort which Schatz expressed in his personal life by becoming increasingly observant as the years went on. And while the Zionism of Betzalel's students seemed hardly to decline over the two decades of Schatz's stewardship, these

students gradually came to espouse a national vision which differed substantially from that which had been championed at the establishment of the school.

In the years that followed what became known as the “Betzael Revolt” in 1927, the academy’s students led, by Menahem Shemi, shrugged off their keen awareness of Jewish history, faith and nationhood in favor of works more sympathetic to a new and local Jewish identity. This identity was connected less with the Jewish tradition, which was felt to be a part of the exile, than with the immediate physical locale and terrain—an increasingly materialistic view which closely paralleled the rise of Labor Zionism and the idea that agricultural labor on the land was itself the Jewish redemption. The foremost local Jewish painter of the 1920s and 1930s, Nachum Gutman, reflected many years later that the students of Betzael were united by only one thing: “Love of the landscape.”⁶ As a result, the years after World War I saw a Jewish national art that came to be dominated by sweeping landscapes, such as Aryeh Lubin’s *Landscape* (1924; Fig. 2), and by depictions of heroic workers whose physical labor was the one human element that could transform the earth into a reclaimed Jewish land. Paintings such as Moshe Matus’ *Building Tel Aviv* (1931) showed beautiful, muscular men literally dragging the city out of the ground, while the idyllic life of country and kibbutz was portrayed by others such as Shemi and Gutman. These decades also witnessed the birth of massive memorial sculptures such as Abraham Melnikov’s *Tel Hai Memorial* (1926), a roaring lion in memory of the legendary Jewish fighter and settler Joseph Trumpeldor, who had fallen defending the farming settlement against Arab attack six years earlier.

The new sensitivity to the land and its human redeemers brought with it an increased appreciation for the local cultural flavor. Orientalism and stylized depiction of Arabs and Arab themes began to invade the Jewish artistic consciousness. The artists attempted to assimilate the new influence in much the same way that many local pioneers began to adopt Arab habits and dress. While the artists continued to depict Jewish biblical heroes, they now preferred to employ the local Bedouin in their portrayal of the Jews of

ancient Israel, the observable present reshaping the image of the Jewish past. Simultaneously, local Arabs began to figure prominently in their own right in works such as Nachum Gutman's *The Shepherd* and Israel Paldi's *Jaffa Boatmen*, both of 1926. The orientalism of the late 1920s and early 1930s constituted more of an attempt to harness local culture than an actual desire to merge with it, but it nevertheless marked the first time that non-Jewish elements began to invade what had once been an effort to create an entirely Jewish artistic consciousness. The deterioration of Betzalel's founding ideology was already well under way when financial difficulties forced the school's closure in 1929. Boris Schatz died in America three years later, while trying to find the resources to reopen his beloved school.

The tendency of Betzalel's second generation to exalt a Jewishness which inclined toward the local and physical could well have been a constructive moment in the development of a vital Jewish national art, had it not been for two great forces emanating from outside Palestine. These two forces were, on the one hand, the immigration in the 1930s of large numbers of highly educated German Jews with only mixed sympathies for the earlier Jewish national effort; and on the other, the "export" of an increasing number of Palestinian Jewish artists to France, where they became exposed to a much larger art world with an agenda very different from their own—an agenda which they brought back with them to Palestine. Each of these influences was to have a permanent effect on the tiny community of artists in Palestine, at first radicalizing the already extant tendencies towards the local and material world, and eventually obliterating the Jewish nationalism from which these tendencies had originally grown.

In Jerusalem, where Schatz's Betzalel had been founded, it was the rise of Hitler in 1933 which proved decisive. Central Europe's descent into barbarism brought a flood of German-Jewish immigrants to Palestine, among them a large number of accomplished intellectuals and artists. But many of these came as refugees, and their relationship with any form of Judaism—

let alone with the Jewish nationalism of the Zionist movement—was often questionable. Leaving their beloved Germany for fear of their lives, many of these Jews found in Palestine not the land of their dreams, but rather an uncultured backwater whose Jewish inhabitants, dominated by the often strident nationalist workers from Eastern Europe, they found to be untutored chauvinists. While the Germans found integration difficult in most areas of life in Palestine, their unquestioned credentials in the arts and sciences allowed them to attain hegemony in many of Jerusalem's cultural institutions, including the Hebrew University and the reopened Betzalel.⁷ German artists arriving in Palestine at this time made Jerusalem their center, establishing galleries there and congregating in the city's cafés. The graphic artist Anna Ticho, who had lived in Jerusalem since 1919 in relative obscurity, began to host regular meetings of Jerusalem's German elite in her home. In these cultural strongholds, the few German Jews who had arrived earlier gained sudden prominence, their biting criticisms of the Zionist Organization, the local Russian-Jewish leadership, and the very idea of Jewish nationalism reinforced by the eager agreement of the newcomers. It was in this atmosphere that the Betzalel academy was reopened in 1935 under the tutelage of a German Jew, Joseph Budko. The new Betzalel had an overwhelmingly German faculty, the vast majority of its students were German,⁸ and German was the primary language of social and academic intercourse.

Upon Budko's death in 1940, the German painter Mordechai Ardon became head of Betzalel. Ardon exemplified the universalism and impatience with Jewish nationalism which was the most enduring legacy of the German presence in Israeli art. Although he was enchanted by the idea of a Jewish cultural reawakening, Ardon never fully reconciled himself with the implications of Jewish statehood. The two Jewish elements which Ardon did employ were the symbolism of Jewish mysticism and prophecies regarding the eternal brotherhood of man. Typical of the utopian anti-nationalism of his work are the enormous stained-glass windows which he prepared for the National Library at Givat Ram in Jerusalem (completed

1983), which illustrate a historic process beginning with images of war between nations and destruction; progressing through an abstract Jerusalem to which many roads wind, each inscribed in a different language; and ending with a field on which the weapons of war are seen broken, symbolizing the ultimate eradication of national differences.

Yet the dominant feeling introduced by German Jewry was not the hope of a mystical redemption, but the darkness and cynicism of individuals fleeing a great country they had loved and arriving in a small one which offered little consolation. The German painter Meron Sima, who frequently painted refugees and refugee camps, said that he “came to a bright, joyous land, building in full force, people danced in the streets.... I was the only one who did not smile. My heart was heavy with recent events in Germany.”⁹ Anna Ticho and Mordechai Ardon produced bleak Jerusalem landscapes, with either very little color or else jarring and cacophonous colors. Leopold Krakauer drew thistles and writhing olive trees bearing an unsettling resemblance to human figures. In these works—described by Martin Buber as depicting “the anguish of solitude”¹⁰—the inspiring land of Zionist redemption simply disappears, replaced by a land of desolation, without meaning for the Jewish nation, or any nation.

In addition to the shift in emphasis to a land without Jewish meaning, the Germans also brought with them the shift of emphasis from a Jewish orientalism to an outright preoccupation with the Arabs themselves. A leading example is the work of Jakob Steinhardt, probably the most important German artist in Palestine of the 1930s, who opened a studio adjoining Betzalel and became one of the academy’s most popular and influential instructors. Although Steinhardt came to Palestine out of idealistic motives and devoted much of his work to biblical images, these images were mustered not for the exploration of national Jewish themes, but rather to express his anguished desire for reconciliation with the Arabs. Steinhardt’s biblical woodcuts thus included numerous representations of Jacob embracing his brother-turned-enemy, Esau; and these were outnumbered only by his treatments of the story of Hagar, mother of Ishmael and of the

Arabs, banished to the wilderness by the Jewish patriarch Abraham.¹¹ Throughout his life Steinhardt continued to use his art to agonize over the Jewish exercise of national power in the establishment of the state of Israel, executing portraits of biblical heroes gripped by remorse and regret. Of these, the most important are *Saul* (1956), who covers one eye—a probable reference to army chief-of-staff Moshe Dayan—to escape the sight of the enormities taking place at his behest, and the ensuing loss of his kingdom, and *Moses on Mount Nebo* (1965), depicting an ancient, distressed and exhausted Moses surveying the Promised Land he will never enter. Over his lengthy career, Steinhardt continued to express himself through the medium of the woodcut, working his ideas into dark, brooding reverse-prints filled with sorrow and angst over the results of Jewish settlement in Israel.

But the most powerful and enduring trend to emerge from the efforts of the German immigrants to connect themselves with their new location was the artistic movement known as “Canaanism.” Canaanite art was an effort to create a direct relationship with the land, bypassing historic Jewish connotations—hence the suppression of the name “Israel” in favor of the land’s primordial name. The major pioneers of the Canaanite esthetic were Yitzchak Dantziger, the son of German immigrants, and the husband-and-wife team of Rudi Lehmann and Hedwig Grossman, who arrived from Germany in 1933 and settled in Jerusalem a few years later. Lehmann himself was not Jewish, and he never mastered Hebrew,¹² yet he and Dantziger were almost exclusively responsible for the training of Israeli sculptors until they both died in 1977. Among the students of Rudi Lehmann are such leading artists as Igal Tumarkin and Menashe Kadishman, while Dantziger boasts Yechiel Shemi and Binyamin Tamuz as pupils.

Canaanite works bear a deliberate resemblance to the sculpture and ritual art of early civilizations of the Middle East prior to Judaism, emphasizing austerity in form, both in terms of shape and the use of color, and always with an eye to the fusion of man and the land itself. In a plaster mold cast in the 1950s Rudi Lehmann inscribed, backwards, the quotation from

Tchernichovsky: “Man is nothing but the shape of his native landscape.” Dantziger described his epoch-making sculpture *Nimrod* (1939; Fig. 3) as “a human animal joined with a hawk, a fusion in sandstone of a particular myth with a particular place, people and desert rock”—that is, a biblical ruler, but a decidedly non-Jewish one, whose essence is the stone and the earth of the land itself.¹³ Dantziger, who dedicated his life to the molding of figures which emulated the form of his native landscape,¹⁴ ultimately gave up sculpture entirely for a kind of landscape design involving the “rehabilitation” of “wounded places” such as quarries. One of Lehmann’s students describes his devotion to precise, geometric forms: “These are the archetype of sculpture,” he would say, “and anybody who does not know how to use them together properly does not know what sculpture is.”¹⁵ The impact of the technical aspects of Canaanism can still be felt in contemporary Israeli sculpture, where the interaction of simple shapes continues to be a mainstay of large-scale public displays.¹⁶

Canaanism did not begin as a consciously anti-nationalist movement. For Dantziger, returning to ancient middle-eastern themes was rather the opposite: An attempt to break away from western European and German influences and return to his local identity. For the non-Jewish Lehmann, who could not truly feel a part of the Jewish rebirth in Palestine, Canaanism was a means of establishing new roots while divorcing himself from his German heritage.¹⁷ While their works were in many ways a logical continuation of the land affinity of the previous generation of Zionist art, their creation of a new, non-Jewish identity built upon the soil and stone of Canaan bore an inherent appeal for the anti-Zionist. In place of Zionism, Canaanism offered communion with the land, stripped entirely of any Jewish meaning.

While the early years after independence found Dantziger and Lehmann teaching in Jerusalem and the artists’ village at Ein Hod, a competing community of artists began to flourish in Tel Aviv, outside the orbit of Jerusalem’s German influence and the new Betzalel. The Tel Aviv artists, primarily of

Eastern European extraction, had been for the most part insulated from the German immigration of the 1930s, and operated principally under the influence of trends imported directly from French expressionist painting. Many of the local painters had studied in Paris during the 1920s, among them Avigdor Stematsky, who opened a studio in Tel Aviv in 1931. The following year Yosef Zaritsky opened his own studio specializing in the reproduction of works by French masters such as Cézanne, Matisse and Braque. In 1948, Zaritsky organized an exhibition which was dominated by Tel Aviv artists and colorful abstract painting in emulation of French technique. The title of the exhibition, “New Horizons,” rapidly came to describe the preoccupations of the entire Tel Aviv artistic community. Characterized by an emphasis upon bright torrents of color and a predilection for abstract lines and patterns, the paintings of New Horizons were frequently presented as a sharp contrast to the mostly drab but highly symbolic figures featured in the sculpture of Jerusalem’s Canaanites.

In Zaritsky’s own work a parallel can be seen to the wider development of Israeli art. From colorful and impressionistic depictions of landscapes and landmarks which he produced in the 1920s, Zaritsky moved into realms of progressively greater abstraction. Immediately after returning from Paris in 1956, Zaritsky executed a controversial canvas in a radical new expressive style. His *Cup of Red Wine* of 1956 explores the effect of small bits of red—the wine—moving on a field of vivid blue marked with yellow. The particular shade of blue mixed in with glimpses of white clearly suggests the bright summer sky over Israel, with the yellow representing the sun. The work thus evokes a powerful visual recollection of the landscape, however remote from figurative representation. The inspiration for *Cup of Red Wine* was Rembrandt’s masterpiece of 1636, *Rembrandt and Saskia*, to which Zaritsky returned more directly in the later, 1960 version of his painting (Fig. 4). In *Cup of Red Wine* of 1960, the immediate effect of the wine within the composition is much more significant, and the somewhat anomalous yellow is absent. The colors are more muted and the figures more sharply defined, in

a style which owes a closer affinity to the Rembrandt original than to the local sky.

The technique which Zaritsky pioneered in his 1956 *Cup of Red Wine* profoundly influenced the development of abstract painting in Israel, its flirtation with shades of local sky and sunlight becoming a motif that recurs continuously into the 1970s. Similar attempts to capture the effect of Mediterranean sunlight on the Israeli landscape abound in the paintings of the New Horizons group. As painters trained in predominantly French technique, the artists of Tel Aviv were concerned with the faithful communication of the effects of lighting in composition. Yet the artistic challenges presented to them by the overwhelming effects of the sun on the Israeli landscape were unique, and Tel Aviv's artists sought to define themselves with regard to these challenges. By and large, they did not emulate Zaritsky's return to classical sources, concerning themselves almost exclusively for many years with attempting to capture their radically new visual universe.

Yet despite all the obvious differences between Jerusalem's Canaanite figures and the splashy, abstract canvases of New Horizons, the fact is that the two groups, which together constituted the main impulses in Israeli art in the first years after statehood, were united by an ideological undercurrent more important than the differences in technique which met the eye. For much like the Canaanites, Tel Aviv's artists had broken with the nationalism of their predecessors to identify themselves much more closely with their geographic location. They, too, were deeply involved in attempts to capture the new visual stimuli of the Israeli landscape, devoid of any national characteristics; what the Canaanites had found in the soil of the land, New Horizons found in its light. Both movements devoted great efforts to the manipulation of simple shapes and forms, constantly reevaluating them in an attempt to find the materials with which to build a new symbolic language to befit their circumstances, yet virtually without reference to the most important of these circumstances: The fact that in the meantime, a Jewish national state had been declared. Somehow, it almost seems to have

escaped notice that the life of the nation was headed in a direction utterly at odds with the artists' obsession with form at the expense of substance, with the material elements which comprised the land at the expense of the human drama which was taking place upon it.

One clear result of the implicit rejection of Jewish nationalism by both Canaanism and New Horizons was that Israeli artists coming of age in the early 1960s, whether in Jerusalem or in Tel Aviv, developed their worldview and works entirely outside the ambit of anything that could be called a tradition of Jewish national painting or sculpture. Through lack of exposure to any attractive national ideal, these artists naturally saw Zionism as something which had played itself out long ago, and the continuation of Zionist mythmaking and sloganeering by the political leadership as something shallow and forced. After the Sinai campaign of 1956, these trends gradually intensified, and Jewish nationalism, including even the Jewish state itself, came to be identified with what seemed to be campaigns of pointless violence, and therefore responsible for the continuing hardships of living in Israel. The artists of this period for the first time began speaking of their desire to be “normal”—that is, to be like all other artists, in all other countries.

The wielding of national power by the state quickly gave rise to unflattering historical parallels among those artists who refused to view modern Israel as a legitimate continuation of Jewish history. The most outstanding example is Igael Tumarkin, a student of Rudi Lehmann's who throughout the 1950s produced sculptures recalling the occupation of the land by the Crusaders and their instruments of power. Based on a first-hand acquaintance with Crusader ruins Tumarkin gained while serving in the navy off Acre, this series of works began a career of increasingly explicit criticism of the Jewish presence in the land—that is, with the entire cause of Zionism in general, and with Jewish national power in particular. His penchant for incorporating firearms into his sculptures as a means of protesting against

the state appeared in its full form in *Bring Me Under the Shelter of Your Wings* (1966). Named after a well-known verse from the poetry of Zionist poet Haim Nahman Bialik, the sculpture features a frightening array of weapons huddled beneath a draping of wrought iron, which suggests a protective shelter of sorts. The irony of representing the supplicant as an arsenal makes a mockery of the hope of gentle grace and protection expressed in the poem, brutally accusing Israel of finding salvation only in its own might.

Tumarkin's alienation from the Jewish national effort surrounding him stemmed in part from his own personal crisis of origin. Adopted by his mother's husband in Israel, he was never told by his parents that his biological father was a non-Jewish German actor and that he was born in Germany, not Israel.¹⁸ Yet other leading artists managed to express similar contempt and alienation from the Jewish state and its cause, despite not sharing Tumarkin's unusual background. The painter Arie Aroch, for example, was a leading artist in the mid-1960s whose works suggested the illegitimacy and irrelevance of political power. His *High Commissioner* (1966) features two rudely drawn portraits of the last governor of the mandatory period, portrayed as two comfortably seated, mustachioed gentlemen in isolated miniature, figuring insignificantly on a larger field of gray streaked with black, red and brown, a battlefield of decay and death. The rejection of power and rule, as well as the reminder of the transience of those insolent men who would wield it, is likewise invoked in Aroch's masterpiece, *Agrippa Street* (1964; Fig. 5). Aroch's installation—one cannot really consider it a sculpture in the traditional sense—juxtaposes a sign bearing the name of a street with a wooden board, roughly scrawled upon. Agrippa I was the last king of Judea who, although educated in Rome, nevertheless struggled to preserve the Jewish character of the country. His son, Agrippa II, who never formally ascended the throne, betrayed his father's ways by attempting to persuade the Jews to surrender to superior Roman power, in the end fighting for Rome against the remaining Jewish resistance. *Agrippa Street* again reminds us of the efforts to wield political power, this time in the service of

the Jewish nation, only to suggest that the entire enterprise is futile and ugly: The king's lifetime of effort on behalf of his people is reduced to a name on a dingy city street. What is left of Agrippa is random, ugly, culturally ill-defined and—according to a thermometer which Aroch throws into the image for good measure—uncomfortably hot. *Agrippa Street* is the cultural antipode of Dantziger's *Nimrod*. While *Nimrod* celebrates a powerful hero emerging from the land with which he is closely bound, defining his culture in terms of his origins, *Agrippa Street* depicts the political leader as a foreign-bred intruder, an impotent symbol of cultural and national atrophy.

The style of Arie Aroch had a significant influence on Rafi Lavie, whose unrelenting repudiation of the older roots of Israeli art was the trademark of the "Tel Aviv school" of which he is considered the founder. An instructor at the Ramat Hasharon Art Academy, which rapidly became the epicenter of this movement, Lavie was the first important Israeli artist to declare explicitly that he "never felt the national aspect of being Jewish."¹⁹ Where carefully constructed geometry and brightly interlaced colors had been mainstays of Israeli art until the 1960s, Lavie pioneered a technique of adorning stark boards of plywood with scrapings of pencil and black ink, scattered strokes of white or gray paint, and newspaper and magazine clippings often depicting political leaders. Lavie transformed the subtle if harsh criticisms of contemporaries such as Arie Aroch and Igaël Tumarkin into a snarl of disdain: His near-total avoidance of meaningful symbols, as well as the contempt he holds for political efforts in particular,²⁰ are among the fundamental principles of the Tel Aviv school, and form an integral part of the larger project of emptying the symbolic language of Israeli culture and its Zionist underpinnings of all constructive meaning. That Lavie's art reflects such an effort is far less alarming than the fact that virtually all of mainstream Israeli art since has been spawned directly by Lavie and his disciples. Since the 1960s, the dialogue between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in Israeli art has ended, and the focus has shifted decisively and permanently to Tel Aviv, where students of Lavie's Ramat Hasharon Art Academy have become the dominant force in both the production and criticism of art in Israel.²¹

The loathing of Jewish national power had already become a trademark of important artists by the mid-1960s, but it took the Six Day War of 1967 to turn anti-nationalism into a central fetish of the Israeli art world. It is after this war—in which much of biblical Israel was for the first time brought under Jewish control and the state reached the height of its strength relative to the Arab states—that there began a concerted campaign among Israel’s leading artists overtly aimed at shattering the myths which held the state together. Igal Tumarkin stood at the vanguard of this effort with his landmark *He Walked in the Fields* (1968; Fig. 6). Sculpted amid the euphoria of Israel’s greatest military victory, this work sets out to destroy forever one of Zionism’s most precious images: That of the heroic Israeli soldier. The sculpture is a vicious parody of Moshe Shamir’s classic Zionist novel of the same name, which had become a fixture of Israeli national culture, inspiring important adaptations in both theater and film.²² Tumarkin’s sculpture rears up against this entire collective memory, depicting a soldier returning from battle, his body bursting with military ordinance which emerges from his gaping chest cavity, while his helmet has been driven into his abdomen. His mouth and throat have been torn open to expose his trachea and extended tongue, both painted bright red. The figure’s pants are also wide open, his member hanging out in a manner echoing his lolling tongue. The impression is immediate and visceral, at once revolting and humiliating—and it is this revulsion and humiliation against battle which quickly saw victory in the country’s cultural discourse: Reference to *He Walked in the Fields* came to mean Tumarkin’s metal nightmare first, and the old myth weaved by the novel only second.

The artist Yoram Rosov was the first to depict the toll taken by Israel’s military campaigns on civilian life; his response to the Six Day War was no less toxic than Tumarkin’s, and similarly devoted to emptying the symbolic content out of Israeli myths. In a drawing entitled *Ingemisco Tanquam Reus* (1968), he examines how the resort to violence has stripped the Israeli identity of its innocence. The work positions a satirized “sabra”—the heroic

native-born Jew of Israeli myth—hanging on a cross. The crucified figure is a bloated, middle-aged and lazy rendition of the traditional sabra, complete with floppy worker's hat. Yet from the hat extends the muzzle of a tank, and across the sabra's chest lies a large rifle; the Israeli is accused and punished for the malicious use of power for self-aggrandizement. The Latin title literally means "With the bound I groan," suggesting that the Israeli perceives himself, like Jesus, as an innocent sympathizer with the oppressed; but the Latin *reus* ("the bound") can also mean "the accused"—the hypocritical Israeli power-monger really only sympathizes with the accused and truly guilty. A year later Rosov followed this image up with *The Fall of Goliath* (1969), also depicting a sabra, this time as a repulsively obese giant felled by rocks and sticks, some of which poke comically from his hat as he comes crashing to the ground.

A more elegant harnessing of the same contempt for Zionism appears in the works of Yosl Bergner, which systematically strip the first Jewish settlers on the land of their heroism. In drawings such as *Ship of Fools* (1963), showing Jews immigrating to Palestine, and *The Funeral* (1977), which depicts the result of their efforts, he portrays the pioneers as a rabble of false idealists who descended on the land only to corrupt it with their presence. In *The Idealists* (1978), he presents a huddled group of faceless, awkward figures gathered around a leader who represents the artist's deceased uncle, who was an early settler; his garb suggests a traditional prayer shawl. In these works and others like them, the Zionist pioneers are not depicted as monstrosities, but rather as pale, wide-eyed herd animals, pathetic in their weakness and folly. Bergner compares them to flowers, "night flowers which live for a day, water-lilies, swamp flowers, flowers with no name.... And perhaps all the stories too about the generation of founders are merely the fruit of our imagination and our longing for romance, poetry, mystery?"²³ And indeed, the effect of his works is to demonstrate that these fruits of the national imagination are nothing more than that—the false adulation of men and women who were not heroes, but only weak people lost in the delusion

of sacrificing themselves in order to build a Jewish state. Bergner's bottom-line message is perhaps best epitomized in *After the Show* (1972), a sketch of a herd of empty chairs ringed around a tall post with a rag nailed towards the top. The chairs, which feature prominently throughout Bergner's work as hollow stand-ins for their human occupants, are gathered around a meaningless rag on a stick—the national flag, itself also hollowed out of any meaning worth noticing. The purpose of *After the Show* is brutally clear: The show of Zionism has ended, the actors have left the scene and all that is left is the props—even if these are human props totally unaware that the show has ended (Fig. 7).²⁴

The empty chair, representing fallen, empty people (and frequently, because of its associations with the empty Davidic throne, a fallen and empty kingdom), is a favorite symbol of Israeli artists in their rejection of the Jewish past. Another artist employing it systematically is Micha Ullman, who often situates the chair buried underground or lying on its back in a subterranean crypt. For Ullman, the false national rebirth represented in the empty chair is a sham, “essentially Jewish, a longing for what can never come true, like the coming of the Messiah.”²⁵ Indeed, so successful has this symbol been as a stark critique of the aspirations of traditional Zionism and Judaism that by 1991 an entire exhibition could be held at the art museum of Tel Aviv University devoted to the empty chair in Israeli art.²⁶ The depiction and celebration of a Jewish past rendered as utterly meaningless had become a fixture of the nation's artistic culture.

In the same year that Tel Aviv University ran its exhibition dedicated to the empty chair, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem mounted a massive retrospective of Israeli art entitled “Routes of Wandering”—whose message was not the irrelevance of the past, as much as the resultant condition of rootlessness that the destruction of the Zionist myth implied for the future. The idea of the exhibition, according to its curator,

originated with the recognition that “the awakening from the Zionist dream has left deep traces upon Israeli art.” The exhibition was intended to chose works signifying

rootlessness and wanderings away from fixation in any defined territory or form: Works that formulate the myth of the exodus from Egypt not as a beginning of the voyage to the Promised Land, but as a text of the desert generation.... The language and syntax of these works emphasize the aspect of expulsion implicit in the inscription “Get you gone” [Genesis 12:1], rather than the promise “For unto your seed I will give the land” [Genesis 12:7].²⁷

The attitudes which precipitated this exhibition at Israel’s largest and wealthiest public museum had become so fully articulated in the 1970s and 1980s that by 1991 they no longer surprised anyone: Having jettisoned the Zionist attachment to the land, the Israeli art community constructed a new myth, one which glorified wandering and devalued place as a matter of principle. In this, the final stage in the dezionization of Israeli art, they were abetted by such characters as the French-Jewish existentialist thinker Edmond Jabés, to whom Tel Aviv’s artists made frequent pilgrimage during their sojourns in Paris, and who explicitly advocated the view of the Jew as essentially a nomad: “[W]e don’t progress.... The place is always a place in which you are there, but without being, and from there you have to go on to somewhere else.”²⁸ Tumarikn, too, contributed much to the articulation of rootlessness as a chronic condition, describing himself as “a citizen of this country but loathing most of its inhabitants and yet feeling so utterly attached to every chord of its light and scenery. I do not feel a Jew, and yet I am from here. Not from there. I feel no bond with Germany—the country, the landscape, the people. Yet my culture is mostly from there, not from here. Where have I come from? My Jewish mother? And where shall I go in exile? To my German father?”²⁹ Exile from the land, which Zionism had depicted as a terrible aberration from the normal life of a people, began to assume the dimensions of an unalterable fate, and perhaps even an ideal.

Among the many Israeli artists who have in recent years embraced nomadism as a Jewish principle is Michael Sgan-Cohen, who has produced an entire series of autobiographical drawings exploring his crisis of identity. In one, *Wandering Jew* (1983), a bird-like anthropomorphoid stands with a hand pointing to the back of its head, as if it were holding a gun. Another hand extends from heaven, suggesting the divine origin of the curse. The message differs little from early Zionist depictions of the tragedy of exile, but with one salient difference: The condition of exilic wandering is unmitigated by having settled in Israel. A related image of unending Jewish nomadism is found in Michael Druks' folio collection *Flexible Geography: My Private Atlas*. Among these works is *Uganda-Brazil* (1979), which consists of two maps chosen at random from around the globe. With black ink Druks blots out all of the land surface except for a coastal strip shaped exactly like the modern state of Israel. The work reminds the viewer of the time, a century earlier, when the Zionists were desperately searching for a location for a Jewish place of refuge, and were willing to consider a whole host of strange locales, most infamously Uganda; in the final analysis, it suggests, the present-day location of the Israeli is in any case arbitrary, exchangeable for any other. Similarly, the works of Jennifer Bar-Lev make frequent use of English words and phrases to imply that the Jew is only at home when he is on the road. In *Wandering* (1989), the title stands alone on a brightly painted board. In *The Gypsy Carnival* (1990; Fig. 8), strings of paste-up letters give voice to Bar-Lev's fantasy of being carried off by the paradigmatic nomadic people: "The Gypsies have painted their eyes black," reads one sequence. "They offer to paint mine too."

Like their Jewish nationalist predecessors, contemporary artists in Israel do not hesitate to invoke biblical motifs to get their message across; yet now the message is that there is no promised land, only dispersion and wandering in the desert. Among the many examples are the works of Bracha Ettinger-Lichtenberg. In her *Eye of the Compass: Lapsus* (1990), she presents numerous photocopied and inscribed sheets of paper installed in a formation which constantly draws the attention of the observer away from its

center, out to the periphery and beyond. In the middle appears God's command to Abraham: *Lech l'cha*—"Get you gone." A more sophisticated exploration of the same theme is Igal Tumarkin's *Land Without Water* (1984), a crude arrangement of iron bars and cloth suggesting a primitive shelter or an altar, on which is emblazoned the slogan (in Latin characters) *Lekh lekha lamidbar* ("Get you gone to the wilderness"). While the inscription refers to Abraham, the title is an allusion to the biblical passage in which the Israelites, wandering in the desert, have lost their only source of water. Faithless and embittered, they turn against Moses for having led them into the wilderness—but in the context of Tumarkin's work, it is the state of Israel itself which is now understood to be a parched desert, in which the people cry: "Why did you bring the people of God to this wilderness, that we and our cattle should die here? And why did you take us out of Egypt to this miserable place, not a fertile land of figs, grapes and pomegranates, and there is no water to drink?"³⁰

Over the past twenty years, Israel's artists have also exhibited a predilection for "installations" and "projects" which cross artistic media, in search of ever-more striking ways of depicting the crisis of the Jew who is settled in Israel, and therefore removed from his natural environment. In 1974, Pinchas Cohen-Gan mounted his *Dead Sea Project* in which freshwater fish were sent out onto the Dead Sea in a semi-permeable boat filled with fresh water. As the water gradually turned brackish, the fish died; in his published notes, taken while working on the project, Cohen-Gan compared the fish to the Jews of various nationalities relocating to Israel. A similar use of fish, plants, and other acutely mislocated and suffering objects to represent the situation of the Israeli Jew can be found in one work after another, including Avital Geva's *Greenhouse Project* (1985), in which the artist and prominent art critic inhabited a greenhouse in order to sympathize with the artificially transplanted shoots, and Benny Efrat's *Eclipse of Achievements* (1992), in which live plants and fish were brought to live in claustrophobic drums, which allowed in air and light only through apertures in the lid. Uri

Katzenstein's *Installation for "Postscripts"*³¹ (1992) likewise features a large motor scooter—yet another symbol of rootlessness and mobility—which has somehow been marooned in the fork of a tree. By sympathizing with the suffering of transplanted and nonviable entities, the Israeli artist identifies himself as just such an entity, a perennial nomad trapped in an artificially constructed homeland.

Nor does this parade of wandering stop at abstracted expressions of misplacement or rootlessness; only sixty years after celebrating the arrival of the Jew on his land, Israeli artists have become chroniclers of his *departure*. Thus Pinchas Cohen-Gan's *Green Card* series of 1978 is devoted entirely to reproducing questionnaires, maps and other paraphernalia related to the test administered to prospective United States residents. Similar themes are explored by Ido Bar-El's numerous compositions featuring suitcases (1988-1990), and Benny Efrat's *Quest for Air, Spring 2037* (1989), which features a suitcase open on top of a bed, the entire assembly enclosed in a metal cage. The artist Joshua Borokovsky has produced an impressive body of work dedicated to the depiction of great ships at full sail and enormous expanses of ocean with the representation of land driven to the periphery. In such works as his *Triptych* (1989-1990), Borokovsky combines both images, heightening the sensation of participating in a great journey. And Moshe Ninio's *Sea States* series (1978-1984) offers an array of views from the rear of a ship that has left shore—all that is left is the wake of the boat on a flat gray background. In one of them, the caption "In case of unexpected disaster" appears, recalling Nasser's promise to drive the Jews into the sea.³² In another, the word "Exit," in English and in Hebrew, is superimposed on one corner of the image. The ship is ready to set sail, says Ninio, and all one has to do is get on board.

And what of the national past? What of the Israeli artist's identity as a Jew who has come home to his land? A string of homely English letters in Jennifer Bar-Lev's *The Gypsy Carnival* spells out her answer: "I am just passing through on my way to someplace else."

Boris Schatz hoped to build an artistic community in Israel that would provide the Jewish nation, newly returned to its land, with a “sanctuary in the wilderness.” Yet only a few generations after the initiation of this great dream, Israeli art offers the soul of the Jewish nation no place of rest and no sanctuary. Indeed, precisely the opposite is the case: Israeli art has itself been consumed by the wilderness. The decades-long campaign waged by Israel’s artists against every aspect of the Jewish national home has by now left nothing standing of what the early Zionist artists sought to create. Far from coming to rest, the Jewish artists of Israel have vomited out the land of their fathers from their hearts; even where their bodies and works have yet to emigrate physically, they have departed from the land in spirit.

Perhaps this constant rehearsal of departure is a harbinger of good, and the depths of national self-abasement which flow from Israel’s studios are only preparing the ground for a reaction, a revolution in the culture of the Jewish state yet to come. But if not, if the show is, as we are told, indeed over, then all that will be left for future observers is to sweep the stage, turn off the lights and write one final retrospective, whose conclusion is clear: Here was born, here developed, here atrophied and died a noble movement in art.

Avraham Levitt is a Graduate Fellow at The Shalem Center in Jerusalem.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 11.

2. Boris Schatz, *Betzalel: History, Essence and Future* (Jerusalem: Snunit, 1910), p. 8. [Hebrew]

3. Attributed to Schatz in Binyamin Tamuz, *History of Israeli Art* (Giv'atayim: Massada, 1980), p. 14. [Hebrew]

4. Note especially illustrations from Morris Rosenfeld, *Lieder des Ghetto* (Berlin: B. Herz, 1902); the illustrated Bible (Braunschweig: G. Westermann, 1908); and the bookplate prepared by Lilien for Boris Schatz (collection of the Israel Museum). Lilien had also frequently photographed Herzl before his death; his photograph depicting Herzl standing at a balcony has become one of the most famous images of the Zionist movement.

5. Raban designed the cover of the World Zionist Organization's *Golden Book* (1913), the doors to Bikur Cholim Hospital in Jerusalem (1920s), and advertisements for Jaffa Oranges in the 1930s.

6. Nachum Gutman, *Two Stones Which Make One*, cited in Tamuz, *History*, p. 46.

7. Cf. especially Gideon Stachel, *The Jewish Immigration from Germany to Israel 1933-39*, Hebrew University doctoral dissertation, Jerusalem, 1995, *passim*.

8. Stachel, *Jewish Immigration*, p. 155. The figure cited is 70 percent.

9. Cited in Tamuz, *History*, p. 103.

10. Buber, a friend of Krakauer's and himself a refugee from Germany, described these works as depicting not national achievement, but individual loneliness and alienation: "The solitude within Krakauer met with the solitude of this landscape.... Only as the artist of the solitude and isolation that is in Jerusalem's landscape, did Krakauer become all that he was." Martin Buber, "The Anguish of Solitude: The Art of Leopold Krakauer," *Ariel: A Review of Arts and Letters in Israel* 9 (Winter 1965), p. 5.

11. Notable among these are *Jacob and Esau* of 1950 and 1965, *Hagar* (1951), two entitled *Hagar and Ishmael* (1957), and especially *Abraham Banishes Hagar and Ishmael* (1965-66).

12. Indeed, Lehmann spoke German in his classes and workshops. "He knew that one of the distinguishing marks of belonging to a culture is the language, but he never became fluent in Hebrew.... In the lessons he gave there was always an 'interpreter.'" Annie Goldenberg, *Man is Nothing but the Shape of His Native Landscape*, exhibition catalogue (Tefen: Open Museum, 1994), p. 145. See also Igaël Tumarkin, "My Teacher and Master, Rudi Lehmann" in *Tziyur Ufisu* 4 (Summer 1973), p. 27: "He said to me, '...Ja.' I attempted to speak several sentences in German, and he said, 'Gut ... at least you speak German.'"

13. Yitzhak Dantziger, interview conducted by Ben-Ami Sharfstein, "Conversations with the Artist," in Mordechai Omer, ed., *Makom* (Tel Aviv: United Kibbutz, 1982).

14. See especially, *Negev Sheep* (1951-64), the series of *Sheep-folds* executed through the 1960s, and the *Shepherd King* (1964-66).

15. Tumarkin, "My Teacher," p. 27.

16. See especially Shemi's *Memorial at Ben Gurion Airport* (1972), Tumarkin's *Arad Panorama* (1962-68), and Tamuz's *Pilots' Memorial* (1949).

17. Lehmann did not return to Germany in his lifetime, and often refused offers to exhibit there.

18. Tumarkin's father did not serve in the SS as is commonly and mistakenly believed, although Tumarkin's uncle did.

19. Rafi Lavie, quoted in Ruth Debel, "What Does it Mean to Be an Israeli Artist," *Art News* 77:5 (May 1978), p. 55.

20. When asked for his opinions on the cultural symbols employed in his works, and on "leaders in general," Lavie replied, "They're all schmucks!" Cited in Sara Breitberg-Semel, *The Want of Matter: A Quality in Israeli Art*, exhibition catalogue (Tel Aviv: The Tel Aviv Museum, 1986).

21. According to the artist Oded Feingersh, in private conversation with the author, November 18, 1996.

22. The novel in its original form was also turned into an extremely popular play. In 1967 a movie was produced based on the play, directed by Joseph Millo and starring a youthful Asi Dayan. A scene was added to the film in which the hero's son serves heroically in the Six Day War.

23. Yosl Bergner, cited in Shlomo Shvah, *Pioneers and Flowers*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Aberbach Fine Art, 1980).

24. Compare Bergner's elaboration on *The Idealists*: "The pioneers are actors taking part in a play... the audience, watching, sees the new scenery, but not one of them dares tell the actors that they are acting in the wrong play." Bergner, cited in Shvah, *Pioneers*. A similar point is hammered home with especial poignancy in Bergner's *Destination X* (1974), which depicts an endless procession of the same empty chairs stretched across a desert landscape recalling Sinai. The chairs cannot know that their weary march leads nowhere.

25. Yigal Zalmona, "Micha Ullman: Root and Metamorphosis," in *Micha Ullman: 1980-1988*, exhibition catalogue (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1988), p. 10. Ullman is best known for his digging of holes. The digging of holes and the subsequent removal or displacement of earth redefines nature while at the same time emptying it of its content. By emptying spaces of their content Ullman leaves them open to be reconsidered, to be refilled with new meanings and significance. In 1972 Ullman switched the dirt from holes which he had dug in Kibbutz Metzger

and a neighboring Arab village (Messer) “as an act of political and existential unity.” The dirt and the documented reactions of the inhabitants of the respective villages were displayed at a later exhibition. Zalmona, “Micha Ullman,” p. 6.

26. *The Presence of the Absent: The Empty Chair in Israeli Art*, The Genia Schreiber University Gallery, May-August 1991, exhibition catalogue (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1991).

27. Sarit Shapira, “Waymarks: Local Moves,” in *Routes of Wandering: Nomadism, Journeys and Transitions in Contemporary Israeli Art*, exhibition catalogue (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1991), pp. 235, 241.

28. Edmond Jabés in an interview with the artist Bracha Ettinger-Lichtenberg, “This is the Desert. Nothing Strikes Root Here.” *Routes of Wandering*, p. 246.

29. Igaël Tumarkin, “Identity,” *Tumarkin 1981-1982*, Neve Tzedek Theatrical Center, 1982 exhibition catalogue (Tel Aviv: Arieli Press, 1982). Translation is Tumarkin’s and can be found in *Tumarkin Sculptures 1957-1992* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum, 1992).

30. Numbers 20:4-5.

31. “Postscripts: ‘End’—Representations in Contemporary Israeli Art,” another fascinating exercise in nihilism and despair in modern Israeli art, was a 1992 exhibition at the The Genia Schreiber University Gallery of Tel Aviv University.

32. Shapira, “Waymarks,” pp. 203-204.



Fig. 1. Ephraim Moshe Lilien, *Moses Breaks the Tablets*, 1908.

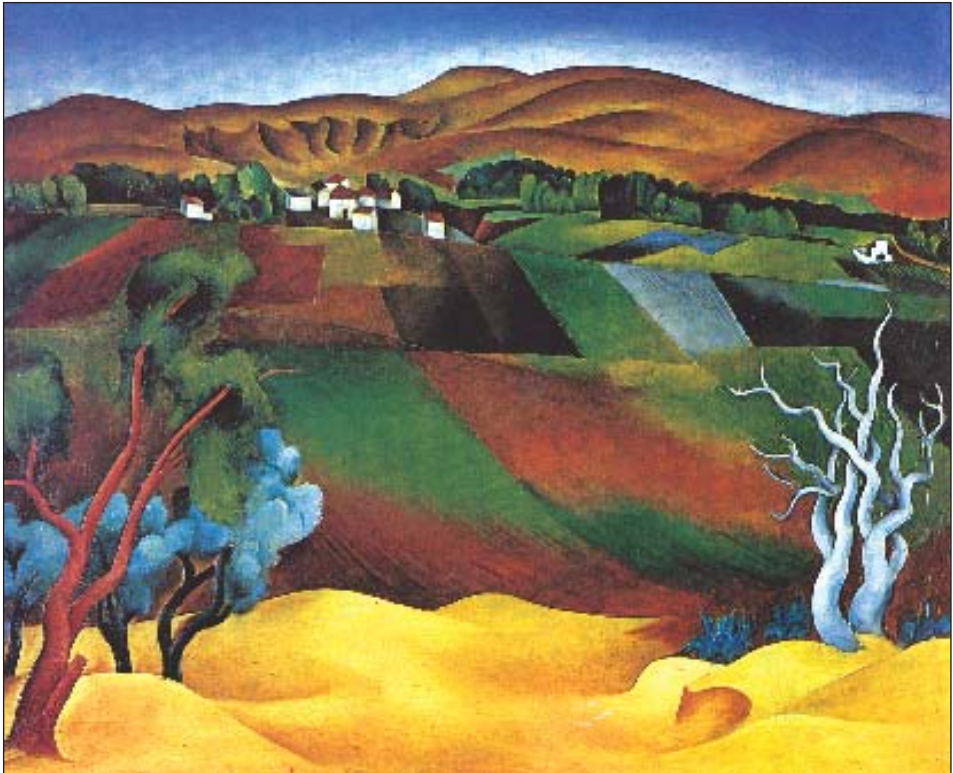


Fig. 2. Aryeh Lubin, *Landscape*, 1924.



Fig. 3. Yitzchak Dantziger, *Nimrod*, 1939.
Courtesy: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem



Fig. 4. Yosef Zaritsky, *Cup of Red Wine*, 1960.



Fig. 5. Arie Aroch, *Agrippa Street*, 1964.

Courtesy: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem



Fig. 6. Igael Tumarkin, *He Walked in the Fields*, 1968.

Courtesy: Tel Aviv Museum of Art



Fig. 7. Yosli Bergner, *After the Show*, 1972.
Courtesy: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

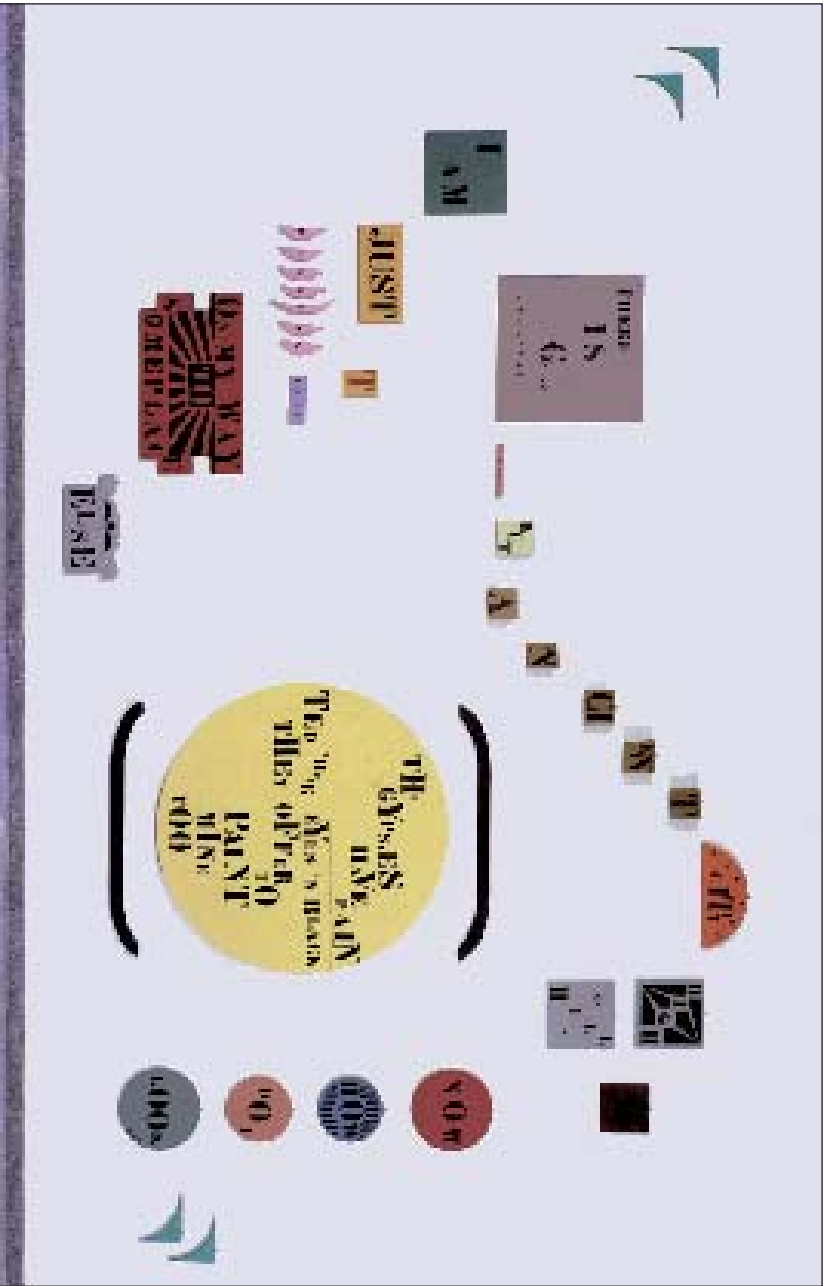


Fig. 8. Jennifer Bar-Ley, The Gypsy Carnival, 1990.

Courtesy: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem