

ZIGI BEN-HAIM



THE DANCE

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art
Cornell University Ithaca, New York

FOREWORD

Once in a while an opportunity arises to install a very special new work of art, to devote an entire gallery to a single creation by a significant contemporary artist. We experienced such an opportunity recently when Zigi Ben-Haim completed **The Dance**, a large four-part sculpture of concrete and metal that could easily command the space of a large gallery. Inspired by the compositions of dancing figures by Matisse, Ben-Haim's abstract circling figures appear frozen in the midst of a joyous celebration of life. The appeal of these lumbering organic forms was irresistible, and we scheduled an exhibition of the piece in the Johnson Museum at the first available time, January 17 through February 12, 1989. Twenty-five sketches and preparatory drawings and a set of bronze maquettes accompany the sculpture in the gallery.

This exhibition was only possible, of course, with the full collaboration of the artist. Zigi Ben-Haim selected the drawings in the show, directed the assembly of the sculpture, and designed the installation. He and his wife, Tsipi, were most helpful in every stage of preparation and provided all the information we needed for education and publicity. We are deeply grateful to William Zimmer, a writer and longtime friend of the artist, for the essay in this brochure and to Michele McDonald for designing the brochure and Houragency for producing it. We are also indebted to Jill Hartz of the museum staff for editing the text and to Nancy Harm, museum registrar, for handling the countless details of shipping and insurance. Without a generous grant from the Frederick Weisman Company, the entire project could not have been undertaken. Mr. Weisman's enthusiasm for Ben-Haim's work and his active support of living artists in many different ways are splendid examples of enlightened corporate involvement in contemporary art.

Thomas W. Leavitt, Director
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art

Cover: Detail of **The Dance**.

THE DANCE

Zigi Ben-Haim is an especially keen-eyed sculptor, and his sharp sense of observation influences his work in unexpected ways. His approach to creating abstract sculpture is different from the one we are used to seeing: He reverses the creative process. Instead of taking a familiar representational form as a point of departure into abstraction, he creates his own abstract figures, unfamiliar to the viewer, and in the process energizes them with a familiar motion, feeling, and energy.

Usually, abstract artists concentrate solely on the form itself. In contrast, Ben-Haim shifts his attention to the quality of vitality achieved when the artist rubs nature and culture together like two sticks. The balance between nature and culture, Ben-Haim's abiding subject, is a delicate one that touches issues of man and his environment at every point. He captures the spirit of the eternal nature-culture dichotomy and injects it into his witty and somewhat surrealistic sculptures. The result at times brings to mind Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

For **The Dance**, his most ambitious work, he has chosen as his inspiration one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century European culture, a series of paintings on the theme of "the dance" by Henri Matisse. Then to this epitome of "calm, luxe and volupte," Ben-Haim has appended an intermediary translation of Matisse—the hefty figures of George Segal. Unlike the previous two, however, this third generation of "the dance," takes an abstract form. A search for "frozen action" drew Ben-Haim to Matisse. But he asserts that he finished by creating "living sculptures which project the energy of life through lifeless material. They earn their existence." These four "creatures" capture the spirit of Matisse's rhythmic line, which connects his figures and creates an inner tension of ongoing action-movement. This circular motion appears in Ben-Haim's other works, including *Chariot of Time* (1988) and *Rolling Rock* (1987); however, in **The Dance** he brings the uncompleted, nonfunctional wheel that symbolizes the continuous process of evolution from the roots of the past into the unknown future.

If **The Dance** is Ben-Haim's most thorough melding of nature and culture, it is because he understands the spiritual side of his source. His aim was to capture the optimistic spirit of the early twentieth-century, the time before 1914, and to make it contemporary. His creatures might be at home in the year 2000 and beyond. Their blocky aspects give the appearance of new mutations of feeling and emotion, if you will. They don't touch, but their nearness gives the impression that an actual contact would let loose a flow of energy. These works seem nothing if not charged like the flow of energy between God's finger and man's on the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

Indeed, every part of the figures is charged with dynamic interplay, inner vitality, and movement that bring them to a new condition, or perhaps stage, of "performing sculpture." Previously, Ben-Haim's sculptures were contained within themselves. Now their inner connections give their setting the ambience of a performing stage.

The primary material of which the sculptures are made is concrete. As the material that built modern civilization, concrete embodies the spirit of the urban landscape to which Ben-Haim continually refers. Ben-Haim is essentially a city boy who has dedicated his whole career to creating his own landscape. But no building blocks have ever undulated and rippled the way his dancers do. They move the way nature moves. In spite of their concrete bodies, they are about to soar in the air.

It is interesting to recall that Matisse employed areas of deep, clear colors in his paintings. Flesh-colored dancers in a circle stand out against uniform green foliage and a blue sky. Ben-Haim recapitulates this clarity by juxtaposing the uniform black sections of the bodies of his figures with areas of open steel mesh. The stripping away of the concrete has a lightening, contrasting effect. If the dancers were weighted with too much concrete, they might appear to lumber.

Early in his career Ben-Haim used the sail as a dominant motif ("Sail Series," 1980), an emblem of flowing energy. A project entitled "The Urban

Forest" (1981) followed, in which organic forms were built from newspaper and concrete. Like concrete, newsprint is a powerful symbol. On the one hand, it is fabricated from nature; on the other hand, as the carrier of daily events, it is transformed into culture. Ben-Haim made of an abundant throwaway something fraught with meaning. This constant adaptation of materials in his work produces a new form of life that stands on its own.

The lively, and to some eyes aggressive, creatures, the dancers have other antecedents, including *Walking Field* (1986), *Urban Peasant* (1987), *Beyond the Halting Step of Deeds* (1987), and *Twilight Avenue* (1984).

Ben-Haim is a sculptor foremost—that's where the lion's share of his energy goes, but he also makes paintings in order to, as he says, "get at what sculpture can't give you." In the late '70s he embedded ropes in layered sheets of paper. Pulling the rope, an action analogous to plowing, revealed the substructure of the two-dimensional work. The process simulated Ben-Haim's observation of nature in winter. When the denseness created by leaves is stripped away, we see the understructure of the woods, and inner, hidden spaces are revealed. This earlier work prepares us for savoring the admixture of organically shaped concrete and rough steel wire mesh projections, like spines, on the dancers. The combination becomes a tribute to the Machine Age—and the little upside-down tree becomes a symbol of nature.

Ben-Haim's forms seem alive. They have always seemed so. This special, nearly magical quality sets him apart from most other sculptors working today. Yet, it is important to cite how his work has parallels with other important pioneering sculptors. Several of them, including John Duff, Jackie Winsor, and John Newman, were grouped by Susan Lubowsky in a recent exhibition.² The most important trait they share, according to Lubowsky, is creating voids, or interstices, in the surface that are just as meaningful as the surface itself. Ben-Haim has always explored and heightened negative space, not only for formal reasons but because living things



Chariot of Time, 1988
Collection of University of Maryland

have insides, have secret places. We are experiencing a time when organic sculpture is capturing wide interest, and Ben-Haim leads the pack as a major contemporary sculptor because of his long history and adaptability. He pushes his work to the limit.

Especially strong and captivating, moving and attractive, **The Dance** is a rich sculptural project, one that reveals the creative process. The grouping is, of course, the centerpiece, but Ben-Haim also made a maquette and study drawings preparatory to the sculptures. This full usage accentuates the liveliness of the work.

A sharp-eyed observer of everything in his work, Ben-Haim is also a canny thinker who knows that to be compelling his themes have to take new forms. But however quirky or novel these forms are, they are most of all vessels of motion and energy. These human attributes bring **The Dance** to our level and make the figures our peers. Off the pedestal, they let us share in their foresight and cadenced joy.

William Zimmer

Mr. Zimmer is an art critic and reviewer for *The New York Times*.

¹This is the title of a related work by Matisse.

²*Enclosing the Void: Eight Contemporary Sculptors, 1988*, Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center, New York, New York.