

Zigi Ben-Haim

WORKS
1989 - 1994

The William Paterson College of New Jersey, Wayne, New Jersey 07470 • (201) 595-2654/2467/3290

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Introduction

The paintings and sculpture of Zigi Ben-Haim present to the viewer a treasure of contradictions and unexpected encounters. The quirky images often make references to organic life yet are presented in a pseudoindustrial format. In the paintings, traditional canvas has been replaced by aluminum plates and the painted surfaces, while visually varied and rich, are, on close inspection, perfectly flat. It is not texture, but the illusion of texture put forth by these frozen forms. The colors too are a bit icy, blacks and greys and blues, creating a mystery world because of their energy and life. The space within the paintings is divided systematically, making once again a technical/ industrial reference. Yet the images within the space are calligraphic, suggestive of a personal pictograph language devised by the artist. These beautiful, sometimes elegant forms are translated into three dimensions with industrial materials and touches of color sometimes added. The play between Zigi Ben-Haim's paintings and sculpture provides a density and variety of experience for the viewer, an experience these works not only permit but also demand.

Nancy Einreinhofer
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There is a Leaf...

There is a leaf, irregular, and mutable and sometimes barely recognizable, that has drifted through Zigi Ben-Haim's work for many years. As in nature, its appearance is casual, transient. But the unseen tree to which it belongs is one of the most enduring forms of life on earth, and the leaf's character is bound up with this durability, this history, too. Immutable history and its ephemeral trace are, together, characteristic of the duality that impels all of Ben-Haim's painting and sculpture. Sometimes, it appears as a simple two-stroke conjunction of organicism and mechanical form, or of disparate associations conjoined in a work's title (*Stormy Brain*, *Walking Star*). And sometimes, it emerges as a full-blown dialectic in which two fundamental systems are opposed in order to produce a new synthesis.

Most fundamental to Ben-Haim's work are the opposing tendencies toward two- and three-dimensional form. They are expressed not only in Ben-Haim's alternation between sculpture and painting, but also within these mediums, so that in sculpture he uses materials that are planar, or insubstantial, like sheet metal or wire mesh, and in painting, that are recalcitrant, like polished aluminum, which he covers with oil paint and graphite and scrapes back. In both cases, he submits his materials, all borrowed from the industrial world, to an essentially biomorphic vocabulary. Further, the sculptures are usually aggregates of two disparate elements: concrete and metal (*Stony Stream*), copper pipe and steel mesh (*Spike Hole*), steel mesh and a pair of rubber wheels (*Roaring Balls*). The recent paintings are generally organized as diptychs, often implying landscape, though the sky is typically heavier than the land below.

These basic oppositions are compounded with others, including that between clear evidence of the artist's touch and its equally energetic denial. Thus in the paintings Ben-Haim works directly with his hands, his fingertips, a coloratura manner that he counters with a nearly grisaille palette. And there are several references to printmaking and photography, from the specific — the introduction in several paintings of a hardedged strip of graded grays, a notation borrowed from the margins of press sheets — to the most general: an analogy between the painted aluminum plates and emulsion-coated photographic stock, and also between the aluminum plates and intaglio matrices — the inked metal printing surfaces, not meant to be seen, that are way stations between carving and drawing, and between the person of the artist and the mechanically reproduced image.

Within the paintings' intestinal or skeletal or irreducibly abstract shapes — all devolved from leaves — lurk allusions to other graphic languages. An evocation of mapmaking recurs (Blue Print, Night Direction), with intricate contours that suggest the cartographic line's doubled status as trace and metaphor. There also recurs a cryptic, nearly alphabetical mark that, like a heiroglyph, lies somewhere between image and text. Fluent in more than one language, but also, more pertinently, in more than one alphabet, Ben-Haim, who came to the United States from Israel, has a well-developed appreciation of writing as a visual form. Beyond these several binary references, Ben-Haim describes a more essential duality motivating the aluminum paintings: they speak for the plane of simple experience — of experience at once unitary and transcendent — and also its particularization: the aluminum, which is an always intact, luminous surface visible through and under the paint, stands for light and air, while the imagery that takes shape on it is the text inscribed by contingent nature and its human interpretation.

Of course, Ben-Haim has kinships in the art-making world, too: with Elizabeth Murray and Frank Stella, who share his dissatisfaction with the conventions separating painting from sculpture, rectilinear from organic. With Bill Jensen, in whose thickly scumbled paintings, like Ben-Haim's nearly colorless in their depth, a vegetable form may similarly emerge, or simply a molecular urge toward life. In Ben-Haim's freestanding sculpture, there can be seen a nod to Tony Cragg's deliberate confusion of industrial and physiological equipment. Finally but not least, there is a link with Jean Dubuffet, whose devoted courtship of unreason, realized most fully — and paradoxically — in his embrace of cross-hatched geometry, finds a spritual succession in Ben-Haim's work. Having long submitted to the exacting discipline of resisting one impulse with another, Ben-Haim has earned the grace of intuition.



Rolling Leaf,
1994/Bronze
14 x 12 x 6"

*Collection of Aya
Azrielant*

Nancy Princenthal

Art critic & writer