

israel museum, jerusalem ▪ zigi ben-haim, 1984



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zigi ben-haim's work derives its meaning from the encounter between contradictory worlds. this is not realized as a traumatic confrontation, but as the adoption of one world by the other. a new reality, floating between extremes and having its own identity, is forged. one of the fundamental contradictions informing ben-haim's work is that between nature and culture, or at least between our understanding of these concepts. the artist usually describes it as the opposition between a given and a second (adopted) nature. it is the juxtaposition between the chaotic and arbitrary, and the calculated, geometric, artificial and controlled. his "urban forest," for example, embodies this dichotomy in its very name.

the variety of materials comprising ben-haim's sculptures and reliefs are drawn from both worlds. concrete, iron grids, newspapers, wrapping paper — urban refuse — mingle with branches and twigs, the waste of nature.¹ the final product, the object experienced by the viewer, is an artistic solution to the tension created by this polarization. one set of symbols and metaphors is brought into a different context and the two interact. the self-made "second" nature invades the "given" nature and becomes assimilated in it. this convergence creates, as already noted, a new presence. works such as "dark snow," a newspaper mixture inserted with tree branches, project "a different landscape." natural-like and having a biological-like texture, they are reminiscent of reality but do not imitate it.

the materials at ben-haim's disposal also serve as cultural metaphors. one recurring feature in all of his works is the newspaper which is glimpsed peeping out from the "flesh" of his sculptures. the artist regards the written word as a fixed

cultural element which accompanies and documents each historical period. another frequently used material is the brown wrapping paper. though its colour is that of earth (nature), it represents contemporary urban culture. thus becoming a double metaphor, a concept containing its own contradiction.

ben-haim's "creature" sculptures are another example of a kind of "floating essence." lacking a recognizable identity, they are hybrids of man, animal, object and sign. they appear to be torn out of an equivalent reality, wrenched from a series of "activities," somehow breathing — though probably not the air we breathe.

the art critic michael brenson described ben-haim's "groovy grove," an outdoor sculptural group composed of five concrete, metal and newspaper creatures, in the following way: "they seem to be sniffing the ground, dragging their tails, lifting weights or balancing on their heads. There is no stranger or friendlier troupe anywhere. the sculpture gives the whole area around it the feel of a carnival."² these are not coherent, perfectly fashioned monuments fixed forever

1 ben haim's early works from the mid-'seventies were made of layers of paper glued on strings. when, at the end of the process, the artist pulled out the strings, openings resembling furrows in a ploughed field were created along the string beds. already in those works the lines of tearing comprised the controlled geometric aspect which stood in contrast to the amorphous, "natural" texture of the surface.
2 michael brenson, "sculpture of summer is in full bloom," *new york times*, 8 july 1983.

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on solid pedestals.³ says ben-haim: "...when creating a sculpture, objects possessing their own vitality and spirit are important to me. in other words, objects that break through their connotation, continue existing, and this is how i want them to be: in a process of continual evolution, so they will always project an energy of life and will not remain as a sort of finalizing moment, eternalizing the past."⁴ the creatures' scale is human, and, despite their undefined existence, they represent a wealth of human, or at least animal, emotions: pride, pathos, violence, submission, pitifulness. in contrast to their unfinished state, they possess a dynamic living presence which allows for a certain measure of identification on the part of the viewer ("as soon as the creaturely aspect is recognized in the sculptures of ben-haim, the works have a human warmth that draws us in" writes michael brenson⁵). and yet, they are not a definite representational icon.

the attempt to convey the spirit of things rather than an accurate depiction of them is typical of ben-haim's approach. he draws on reality but the abstraction coefficient in his works is high. his principle of abstraction is rooted in his philosophic background just as the feel for the earth, the attitude to nature, the predilection for certain colours and materials are part of his visual storehouse. the concept of roots in general is central to the artist's thought and works: "our roots will always be with us wherever we go. roots are our given nature which we bring to bear on whatever reality we choose to live. they are not wedged or planted in one place, rather they float in suspension. they are always with us..." thus, ben-haim's sculptures, though planted (rooted) in the ground with their three legs, also seem to float. the encounter of contradictory essences in his work is the confrontation of roots with the new reality, an echo of

his own history — born in iraq, growing up in israel, living and working in new york (to the paper sails he created in the 'seventies and which represented the concept of travel and wandering, he added concrete "masts" which for him represented urban mythology).

the so-called post-modernist trend which has overtaken the plastic arts in the past decades is characterized, among other things, by its affinity to local or nationalistic values. thus, for example, contemporary german art falls back on german mythology and specifically german issues. ben-haim's work, and its concern with the unique roots of the cultural group to which he belongs, is not unrelated to this approach. but whereas international art achieves this expression through a return to the figurative, ben-haim's abstract mode imbues his work with a measure of distinctiveness.

western culture is often defined through concepts drawing on technology and capitalistic values such as "rationalism," "planning" and "control." through such a perspective, to the nature-culture polarity we may add the east-west opposition in its stereotype formulation. this contradiction is also the concern of zigi ben-haim.⁶ his works move in a world of wandering symbols, a blur of ambiguous identities, a world floating among dichotomies, among tactics of adaptation to different realities and strategies of creating a new living tissue. it is a struggle for a possibility of forging an identity out of contradiction.

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3 already in his early works ben-haim regarded the work process as of the utmost importance and prevented the sculpture from becoming a coherent finalized product. thus by pulling out the strings which were fixed between the layers of paper, he created spaces which exposed the work process.

4 *tel hai '83, contemporary art meeting, catalogue, 1983.*

5 michael brenson, "animals creep back into today's art," *new york times*, 24 june 1984.

6 his "sails" series began with a curiosity about ancient ships which transported culture between east and west.