

# **Zigi Ben-Haim**

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**Art Gallery of Hamilton**

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## Introduction

The Art Gallery of Hamilton has a strong interest in contemporary art and artists and for several years has organized more exhibitions by living artists than any other gallery in Canada except one. Most of these exhibitions are of the work of Canadian artists, however we feel it is important to bring to Hamilton the work of exciting artists living and working outside of Canada.

Zigi Ben-Haim, a young artist living in New York City, first came to my attention a few years ago. I was impressed with the quality of his work and its underlying integrity. During the intervening years the work has changed in format from a rather controlled, subdued, almost timeless exterior surface to a more alive and organic format with a greater involvement in color and compositional concerns. In addition, Ben-Haim has established a firm footing in a sculptural format which seems to have grown naturally as a transitional entity out of his canvases. These sculptural surfaces of paper, charcoal, wood, and paint exist as separate forms and yet are inseparably linked to his canvases.

The Art Gallery of Hamilton is pleased to present this first major exhibition of Ben-Haim's work in a Canadian art museum and is grateful to him for his generous assistance and cooperation. The gallery is indebted to the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture for the Province of Ontario, National Museums of Canada, and the Regional Municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth.

—Glen E. Cumming  
Director, Art Gallery of Hamilton

## Zigi Ben-Haim: Work in Progress

The term "the floating world" is usually applied to a class of Japanese prints of the 19th century. These prints depict the middle class at leisure, or feature ennobled scenes from nature, such as Mount Fuji. Yet, strangely, "the floating world" naturally suggests itself as the perfect characterization of the gritty work of Zigi Ben-Haim.

The materials Ben-Haim employs—newspaper, wrapping paper, concrete, sticks, branches, rope, wire mesh—might seem too clumsy, too earthbound and artless to float. But the special artfulness of Ben-Haim is the ability to endow this common stuff of our time with buoyancy.

Very few artists seem as secure in the present age as Ben-Haim. Without any technology or hardware, he acknowledges that he stands on the verge of the 21st century. For he simply believes—has taken to heart—as a living, working fact what all of us have witnessed on our television sets or marveled at in the pages of *Life Magazine*: We live on a floating blue ball in a black sea of space. Seen from the vantage of "out there," the issues that divide people vanish. All that matters is the serenity of that suspension in space. Though his art is rough-looking, what Ben-Haim strives for is an end to division.

For the sake of contrast, Ben-Haim measures himself against the Vitruvian man of the Renaissance, who was the measure of all things, the navel of the world. If Renaissance humanists could have seen what we have seen from outer space, their assurance would have crumbled.

My offering of Ben-Haim as an

exemplary man for the Space Age seems belied by his humble materials, as if we're not in the Space Age at all but in some primeval time. But Ben-Haim's art has very little to do with outward show—otherwise he'd use computer chips—but with a certain cast of mind driven to acknowledge a fundamental unity as the character of the planet.



*Sinuous Independent*, 1980, 52" x 12" x 11", Paper, rope & pigments

Zigi Ben-Haim has been around this blue ball in a manner different from most of us riders. He was born in Iraq, an Eastern country, and raised in the melting pot of Israel.

In the United States, he attended art school in rural California before settling in New York City. His Soho loft is not on some fashionable block of boutiques and restaurants, but in a neighborhood that is still home to noisy industry. He savors this; he finds many of his needed materials right outside his door.

We find something like cosmology in Zigi Ben Haim: A clear meditative philosophy generates all of his work. Each piece can be related to the whole body of his ideas, like leaves on a tree. His is an organic philosophy, befitting the prime material out of which his work is constructed.

The stuff that binds together a scattered humanity is paper. Paper, in all of its manifestations, appears wherever human beings do—from lowly toilet paper, as Ben-Haim says, to the parchment on which declarations of war are written. Paper marches parallel to our lives.

Newspaper, in particular, is a store of information. It's how we know about the world ever in flux. Newspaper is a repository of culture, but this aspect is disembodied. The great portent of newspapers has nothing to do with the yellowing pulp-product in

which our feet get tangled when it blows across the sidewalk. Newsprint is wonderfully tenacious and clinging. By its appearance in most of Ben-Haim's work, we are reminded that the world is, as Wordsworth said, always with us, late and soon.

In addition to its up-to-the-minute currency, however, paper possesses an ancient, noble quality. The Ra boat, Ben-Haim is quick to point out, was a paper boat, and its voyage marks that floating shift from one place to another, from the East to the West, that is the overriding content of Ben-Haim's work. The pieces that are many manifestations of the sails of oriental boats are the paradigm for this unhindered feeling. Paper carries culture, and barriers can't be erected to prevent it.

Paper is the component of the work that is evanescent and transitory; it is the carrier of the spirit. Zigi Ben-Haim's art doesn't happen until the spirit comes hard up against representatives of materiality, the products of culture, such as architecture and technology. As embodied in the concrete anchors of the sails, materiality pins down and localizes the spirit. A block of color in a new painting has the same effect. It imbues the spirituality of a work with a particular character and personality.

The dichotomy of matter and spirit is matched or paralleled

with another one: the given nature versus the second nature. Given nature is that which has always been our heritage: the sky, the sea, the particulars of a rural landscape. Second nature is what we've made of the first: the urban environment with its myriad of paper products that have lost all vestiges of their origin in wild nature, for instance. Ben-Haim is quick to emphasize that he is not a worshipper of nature. He is no ecologist interested in reverting back to a pure state, just as he doesn't see anything in the current worshipful attitude toward handmade paper with its primitive overtones.

Rather he sees the given nature as a spiritual lens through which we can evaluate our honest and current position in the world. The second nature is a feeling, omnipresent but ungraspable. There are no hard lines in nature, Ben-Haim reminds us by way of analogy. There is no such thing as the horizon line, but by positing one between sky and sea, we know where we are.

A bit of criticism should be interjected here. Whatever form lines, whatever categories we have divined in the art world, Ben-Haim works between them, operating on feelings and intuition, rather than by searching for the boundaries of a style, rather than by attaching a name to it. James Joyce said that "to name is to numb." Ben-Haim is on the

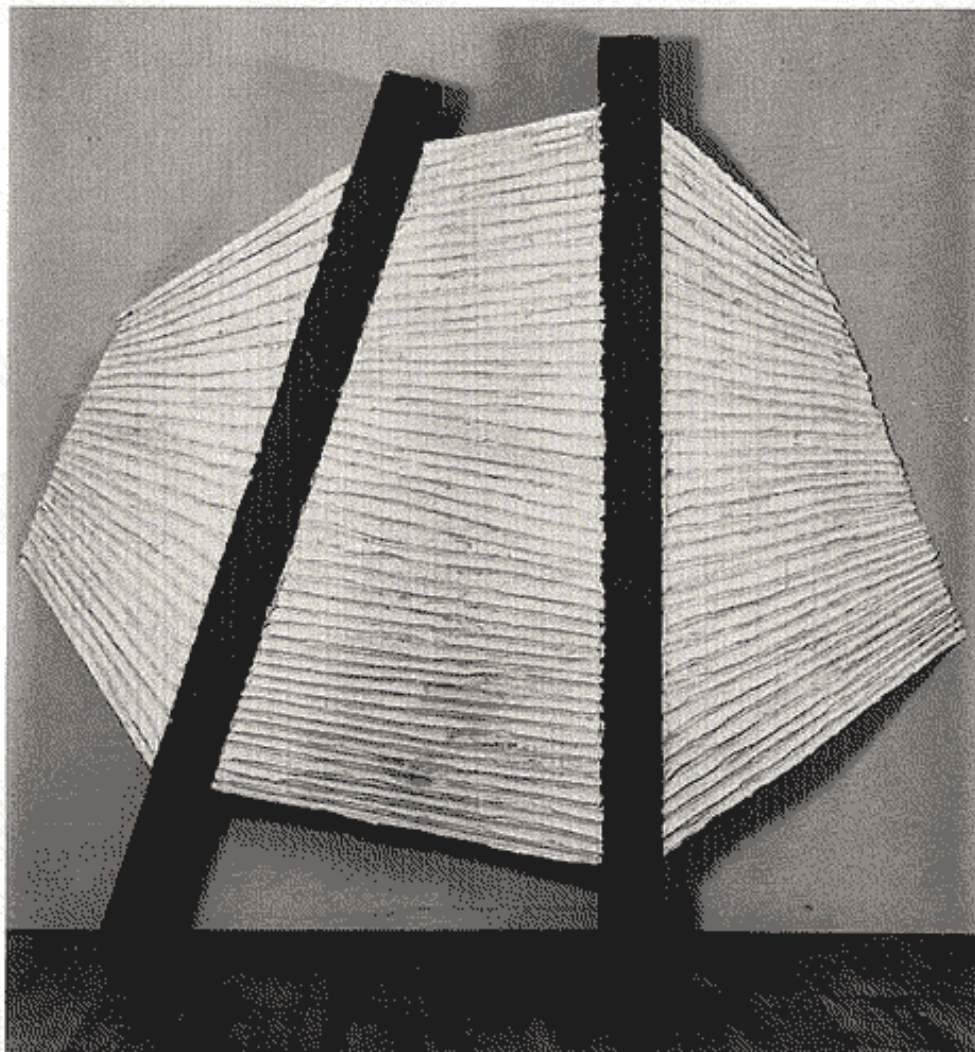
lookout for cycles, for the dynamic movement in art. He is especially interested in how the response to feelings or the senses that formed the basis of American painting—from abstract expressionism through lyrical abstraction and field painting—

soon gave way to the rigors of art dominated by a mental aspect, minimalism and conceptual art. Ben-Haim has been impressed by a synthesis: The disciplines imposed by minimalism and conceptualism have become tools for channeling the recently excluded

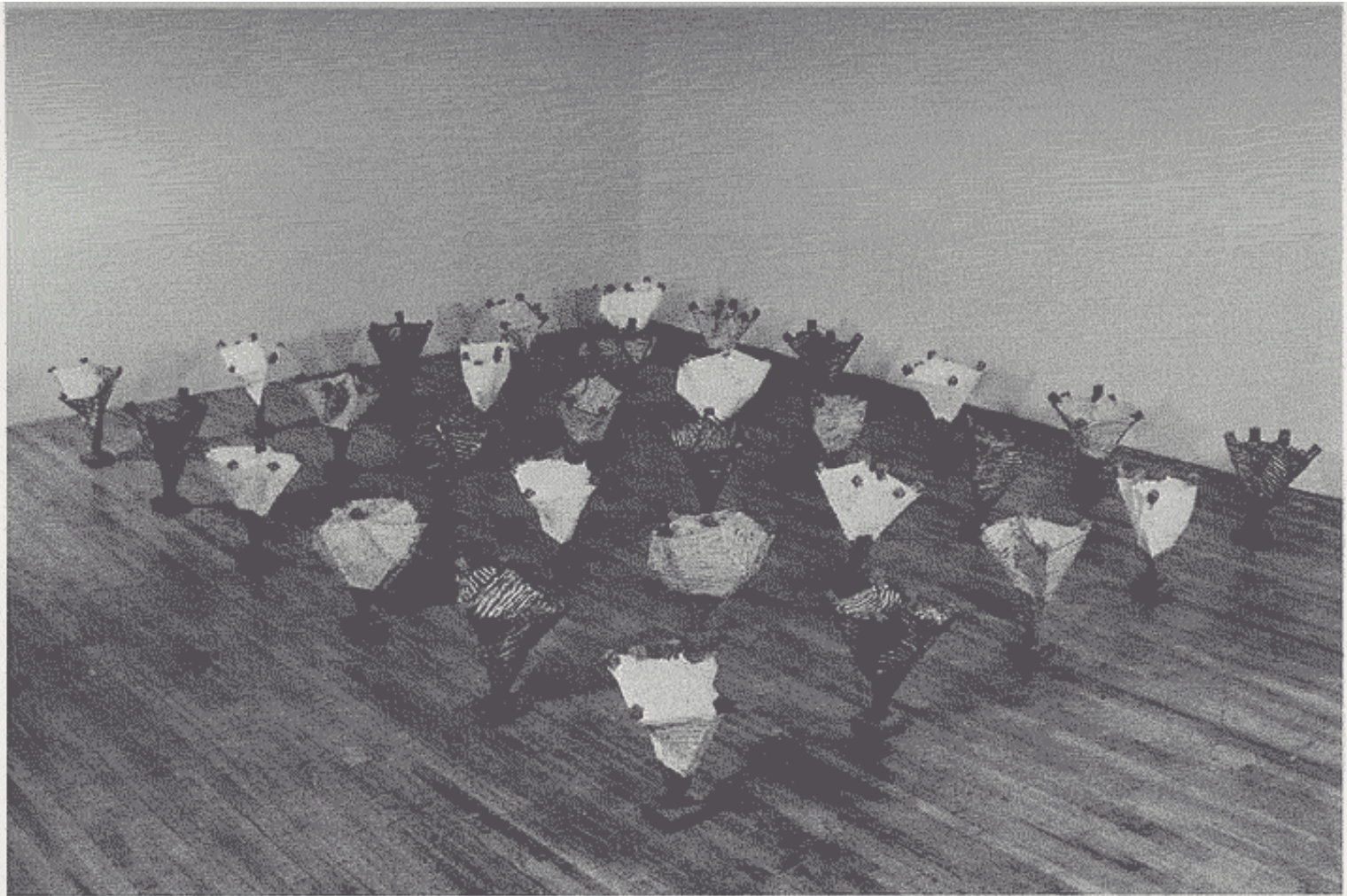
sensory and feeling aspects of art. Hence, he sees American art in a strong position now, being able to acknowledge both the brain and the emotions.

Concomitant with that embracing dynamism is his intense wish to enliven dead material. As the opposite of what he does, Ben-Haim cites heroic, monumental sculpture. The vital war hero is caught in a dramatic pose, but he is frozen there, deadened. Zigi Ben-Haim's sculpture looks almost alive and anthropomorphic. He sees no mystery to its alert, human quality. If your work is engendered by a real, animating philosophy, the fruits of that philosophy can't help but seem endowed with organic life, even though they may be but paper pulp, wire, rope, and concrete.

Above all, Ben-Haim's work works because he sees all sides, the ramifications and dimensionality of an issue. Though the concrete is opposed to and clashes with his sails, it doesn't contradict or defeat them. The two forces, material and spirit, enliven each other. Ben-Haim sees himself in the gap between all these contradictions, matter and spirit, existence and perception, given nature and second nature, the bucolic and rough-and-tumble landscapes. Hence the vital, quickened look of his art. There is no time to refine the work in these elusive, but insistent gaps. Therefore his work keeps



Ancient Sall, 1980, 90" x 90" x 7", Paper, concrete & gauze



Urban Forest, 1980, 130" x 145" x 17", Paper, pigments & concrete

growing and changing.

After the Picasso Retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, one of the most frequently cited opinions of "the Master" was that the artist should be like a child, that is, he should lose his inhibitions. Many artists in New York followed this dictum to the letter,

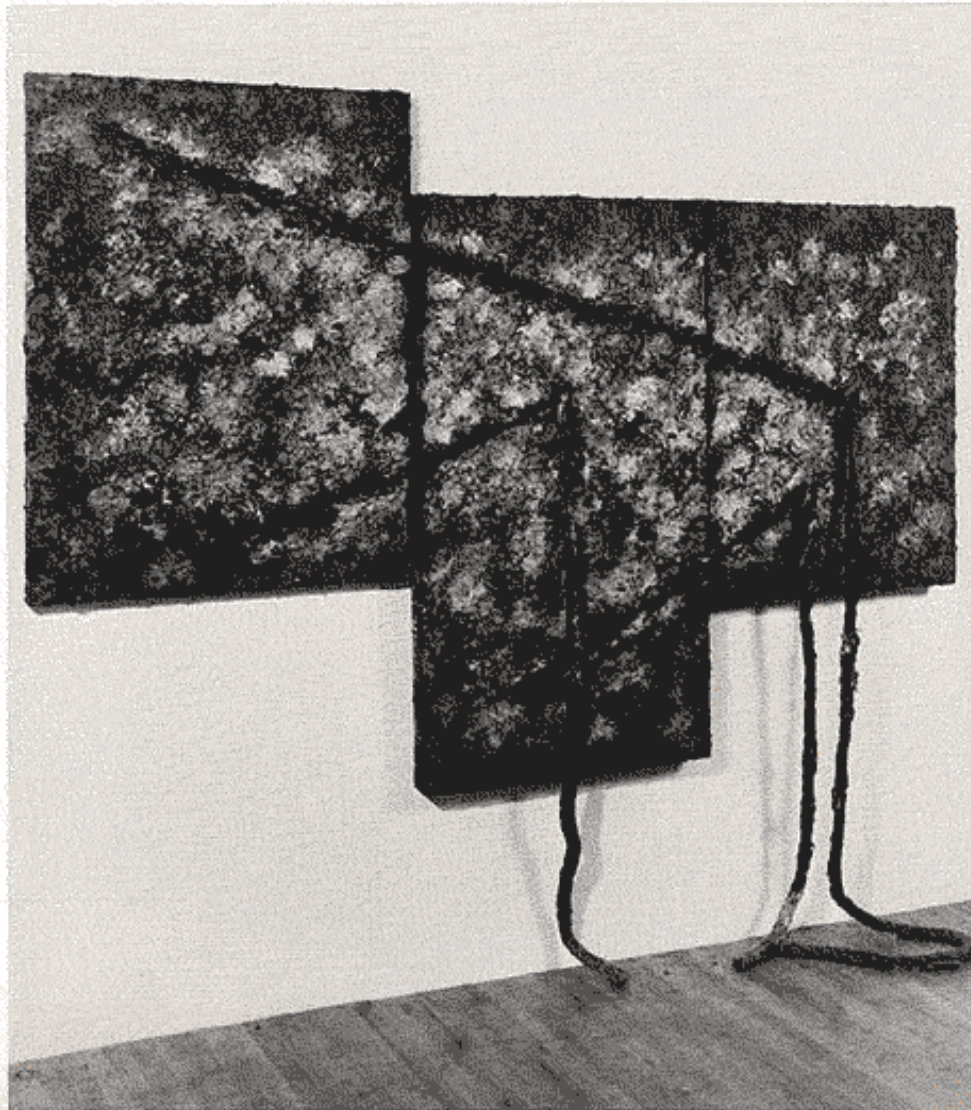
and what ensued was a slew of superficially expressionistic and pseudo-naive art. Ben-Haim has also followed the spirit of the injunction, but with him it isn't a case of being childish. Rather it is child-like, clear-eyed and without blinders.

It takes a pure vision to declare

for crumpling newspaper and braiding rope instead of programming a computer. It takes a child's lack of bias to see the connections between the products of nature and the products of culture, rather than to come down dogmatically on one side or the other.

Only by remaining pure can spirit come out of matter. The indwelling of one in the other is in the grain of American art. The best has always been spiritual. Romantic painters in the 19th

century saw transcendence in the landscape. The descendent of the Hudson River School was the meditative side of abstract expressionism, chiefly represented by Newman and Rothko. Current-



West Way, 1981, 65" x 95" x 5". Paper, pigments & rope

ly, Brice Marden is applying the ancient principles of alchemy in his search for an arrangement of colors that will yield his "gold"—spiritual purification. Soren Kierkegaard wrote that "purity of heart is to will one thing." The abstractionist Sean Scully has been painting only stripes on canvas for ten years, but their persistent repetition has yielded in his work a palpably spiritual feeling.

Ben-Haim's philosophy contains only one idea, and that ennobles it rather than limits it, in the sense that God is *only One*. Theologians talk about the One and the many, with the manifold world of created things tending back toward, showing their origin in, the One. Ben-Haim's painting and sculpture are easily traceable to their source in the unity of material and spirit. His humility and the clarity of his vision facilitate this.

A Zen saying advises that when a teacher points to the moon, don't look at his finger but at the moon. Most people want to stare at the finger, and the artist gladly embellishes it. Zigi Ben-Haim's art is invaluable because we can look through it to the moon. As he recounts in *When I Heard the Learned Astronomer*, Walt Whitman got bored by the facts and figures and went outside to just look at the stars. Zigi Ben-Haim, too, with this fresh vision, lets us go out for air.

—William Zimmer