

Zalmona 2013

# A Century of Israeli Art

Yigal Zalmona



Lund Humphries in association with  
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

26.2013-10-02

extracting yourself from all your context-juggling. Ullman turns the substance of earth into spirit, a masterful negotiation between an identity that is bound to place and a more expansive Jewish identity which links him to the universalist heritage of thinkers like Moses Mendelssohn, Martin Buber, and Gershom Scholem.

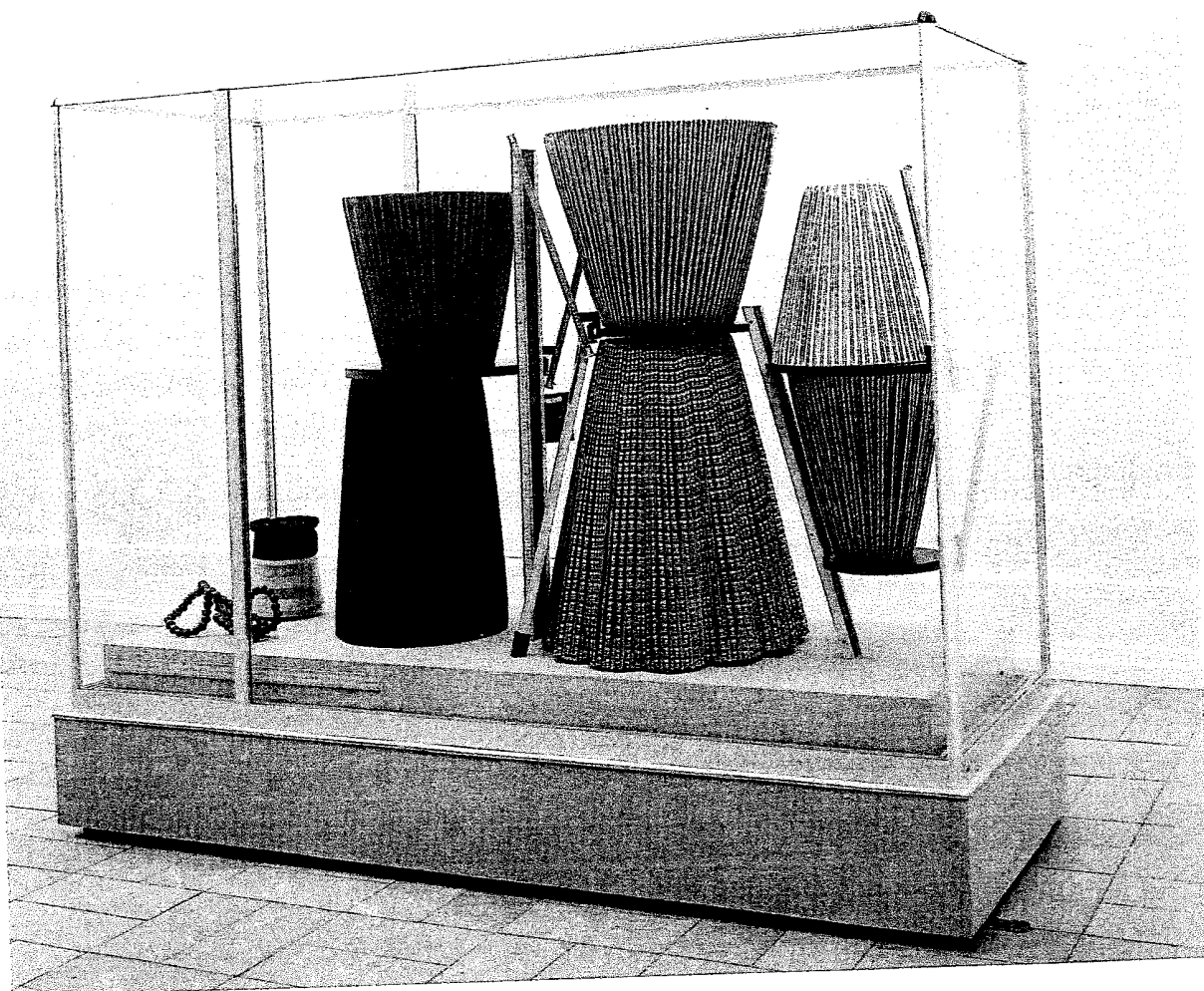
Zvi Goldstein's conceptual work began in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when he lived in Milan, home to a very lively modernist scene and to several leading exponents of Conceptual art. At the end of the seventies, he started to seek a new post-Conceptual definition of the art object's status. He created works that he did not call either sculptures or assemblages of readymades; rather, they were visual metaphors that, joined to theoretical texts, served as a basis for discussion. Once explicit and declarative, over the years these works became more sophisticated and enigmatic.

With his Conceptual background, which entailed an iconoclastic approach to existing notions of style and method, Goldstein assumed that art must now move on to a new stage. He took as his starting point the idea that modernity, though imposed by the West around the globe for its own colonial purposes, plays a key role in societies on the periphery of Western culture and economic development. Israel was part of that periphery – “condemned to be modern,” in Goldstein's phrase – and therefore nourished by a scientific, investigative worldview. Goldstein believed that the strong cultural context of the West, with its concentrations of artists in major centers, ramified systems for the exchange of information, solid economy, and compelling intellectual heritage, was fundamentally different from the cultural context of the periphery. A vigorous, sophisticated cultural climate made it possible to approach contemporary art directly, to understand its nuances and allusions. This kind of full interpretative power is lacking in a weak, peripheral cultural context. Hence, according to Goldstein, the need for a separate, parallel interpretative framework for contemporary art in the periphery – and hence the importance of the explanatory texts in his own works.

Western culture, he argued, tended to manipulate the “Third World,” retaining a monopoly over the way in which the latter was described. Peripheral culture therefore found itself dragged into a discourse not of its making and often remained a passive observer for long periods of time. Colluding in this perception, accepting the Orientalist stereotype, the periphery identified itself as inherently “primitive” – unsophisticated, at one with nature, and so on. This argument may be applied to much of Israeli art, past and present, with its romanticization of the idyllic East and its adoption of an ostensibly authentic “low” artistic idiom. Nevertheless, as we saw, the Israeli gaze on the East betrays the effects of a Western visual regime. Goldstein's work subtly encompasses the various aspects of Israeli culture's attitude toward the East, or at least the various latent remnants of Orientalism. Playing with paradox and inversion, he deconstructs the Israeli attitude to the East, depicting it as a Western gaze imprisoned in a peripheral cultural context.

We have also seen that the work of quite a few Israeli artists, including Raffi Lavie, Tamar Getter, and Michal Na'aman, revolves around the discrepancy between “here” and “there” – the different artistic situations prevailing in Israel and in Europe. Goldstein extended this intuitive understanding into a meta-narrative for the relationship between center and periphery, First and Third World, vis-à-vis culture and science. But instead of offering a formal solution, he charted a completely different course. From his position in the “Third World,” he attempted to find an Archimedean point that would enable him to escape his fate as the passive object of the West's gaze.

Goldstein rejects the West's interpretative monopoly, believing that the periphery can and should intervene in Western culture, saying what it thinks of modernity “from here.” The center's tendency to invent the periphery's cultural reality, using its own interpretative models, should be countered by an autochthonous self-image and a local discourse. In the 1980s and 1990s, he created metaphorical constructions that elicit free meditation



*Winding*  
 (1.5m series), 1995  
 Constructed  
 of woven  
 glass, plastic  
 and Ethiopian  
 photographs,  
 1.5m,  
 150cm  
 Tel Aviv, Jerusalem;  
 National  
 Museum of the Arts,  
 Tel Aviv for Israeli  
 Museum, Tel Aviv, Israel

and fantasy around the subject at hand. These artworks were rich, organic, ambiguous, and highly complex, bringing together analytic modes of representing socio-cultural realities and the practical construction of forms and images. One of Goldstein's contributions to the contemporary art discourse lay in this singular blending of theory and fantasy, reason and irrationality, in highly innovative visual forms. It would seem that the supposed primitivism and weakness of his place supplied a way to break new ground, to propose a fresh treatment of image and object. Being isolated, away from the center and in an "inferior" (but interesting) context, enabled him to formulate a convincing artistic alternative.

Goldstein's polished, intricate, philosophically sophisticated works communicate his mission to make art of this kind in the periphery, thereby flouting expectations that the disenfranchised East should produce handicrafts and colorful fabric, exporting folklore, exotica, and fantasy to the West. He was the first – and for many years, the only – artist to explicitly adopt a peripheral strategy of this kind. The world he constructs for himself compensates, in a sense, for the world he lost as an immigrant banished from Paradise (Europe). The Romanian-born son of Holocaust survivors, he has felt foreign in all of his surroundings. His art is that of the émigré severed from his cultural memory, endeavoring to build himself a new home out of the ruins.

Hence his need to establish a world of his own creation, independent and secure – and also his ambition to goad the First World in an act simultaneously motivated by affirmation and repudiation, love and hate.

*Wedding*, 1995 (p. 386), offers an example of the self-sufficient edifice of meaning Goldstein constructs. Artifacts redolent of “exoticism” are assembled in a showcase: patterned Damascene textiles folded around forms that recall narrow-waisted women (the East being feminine according to Western conceptions); an Ethiopian monk’s cowl; photographs of *sharwal* trousers and head coverings worn by Middle Eastern men. Interspersed among these objects are rulers representing the Western scientific attempt to measure and analyze reality and, in this case, that which is foreign or unfamiliar. The showcase reminds us that museum displays were considered the appropriate forum for the living material culture of non-Western peoples, perpetuating colonial attitudes. Goldstein’s juxtaposition of East and West is not a cynical parody or a romantic collage of modernity and tradition (sometimes found in Israeli culture); it is a theoretical act, deliberate and sober, analogous to the building of a distinct universe, in which stereotypical materials from the periphery are combined with a conspicuously modern structure.

In other works Goldstein related to natural phenomena – climate, vegetation – in the same East-West context. Recently, with the trend toward globalization and the failure of the world’s meta-narratives, he has turned to a more personal form of expression. Overwhelmed by practical considerations such as the large number of pieces filling his studio – “haunted by objects” – he decided at the beginning of the millennium to halt his sculptural work. His 2004 book *On Paper* includes accounts of the many trips he had made to experience distant cultures and enrich his visual vocabulary. In 2010, *Room 205*, an “amalgamation” of prose and poetry, served as the basis for an exhibition at the Israel Museum, in which these texts were positioned alongside a complex installation of more than three hundred museum objects, high and low,

Eastern and Western, that seemed to encapsulate many of this artist’s thoughts about culture.

- 1 *A Turning Point: 12 Israeli Artists, 1981*; cur. Sara Breitberg-Semel (exh. cat., The Tel Aviv Museum, 1981).
- 2 *Here and Now: Israeli Art*, cur. Yigal Zalmona, Meira Perry-Lehmann, Nissan N. Perez (exh. cat., The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1982).
- 3 See *Check-Post: Art in Israel in the 1980s*, ed. Ilana Tenenbaum (exh. cat., Haifa Museum of Art, 2008). Fourth in the Sixty Years of Art in Israel series.
- 4 *Itzhak Danziger: Makom*, ed. Mordechai Omer (Tel Aviv, 1982).
- 5 See *Larry Abramson*, cur. Yigal Zalmona (exh. cat., The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1989); *Larry Abramson: Paintings 1975–2010*, cur. Ellen Ginton (exh. cat., Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2010).
- 6 See *Dganit Berest: Loch Ness Investigations*, cur. Yigal Zalmona (exh. cat., The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1989).
- 7 *Yair Garbuz Presents a Jew a Frenchman and an Arab: New Works*, cur. Sara Breitberg-Semel (exh. cat., The Tel Aviv Museum, 1986), trans. Susann Codish, n.p.
- 8 *Yair Garbuz: Selected Works 1957–2006*, ed. Ruthi Ofek and Amon Yariv (exh. cat., Gordon Gallery, Tel Aviv; The Open Museums, Tefen and Omer Industrial Parks, 2006), trans. Einat Adi, p. 311.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- 10 See *Perspective: New Aesthetic Concepts in Art of the Eighties in Israel*, cur. Dalia Manor (exh. cat., Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1991).
- 11 *Antipathos: Black Humor, Irony and Cynicism in Contemporary Israeli Art*, cur. Tami Katz-Freiman (exh. cat., The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1993).
- 12 Yigal Zalmona, *Sands of Time: The Work of Micha Ullman* (exh. cat., The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2011; Hebrew).