

Shamai Gibsh

Drawing in Clay/Painting with Earth

Article by Shira Silverston





Facing page: **Stelae (Detail)**. 2011. Stoneware, terra sigillata, handbuilt, saggar fired. 200 x 250 cm. Photo by Ron Arda.

Left: **George**. 2009. Stoneware, terra sigillata, handbuilt, saggar fired. 40 x 60 cm. Photo by Yaron Porat-Gibsh.

Above: **Night Scene**. 2014. Stoneware, terra sigillata, wheel thrown, wood reduction smoke fired. 30 cm/d. Photo by the artist.

Below: **Burning Stones**. 2013. Stoneware, terra sigillata, copper, wheel thrown, handbuilt, saggar fired. 19–25 cm/ea. Photo by Leonid Padrul © Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv.

I ENTERED SHAMAI GIBSH'S STUDIO ON A CLEAR, SUNNY winter morning. From the corner of Jaffa Street, I could already see the warm lustre of the ceramic pieces beckoning. Gibsh was busy putting new pieces into the kiln and, as usual, he seemed to be in perpetual motion. The most recent works filling the studio seemed to be moving along with him. In recent years, he has focused on working with terra sigillata. This technique was employed by the ancient Greeks in their monumental artistic pottery. A thin layer of clay is applied, to seal and give the surface a sheen. His works range from functional pieces to sculptures, and what they all share is the rich and colourful palette of the terra sigillata, which he makes from a variety of clays mined locally and in various places in the world.

We sit at a small table in a corner of the studio, which is located in the coastal city of Jaffa-Tel Aviv and try to hold a conversation, but we are interrupted by questions from the constant flow of curious passersby. In recent years, the neighbourhood has become quite trendy following the opening of cafes and boutiques. "I miss the old neighborhood, the way it used to be when I opened the studio. It was 'dirtier', more authentic, and it smelled of the sea," Gibsh tells me.

Gibsh began working in ceramics after studying engineering and business administration and living in the US for many years. Following a visit to the ceramics studio at Harvard University, he fell in love

with ceramics and began taking lessons. A few years later he quit his job, returned to Israel and opened his studio in Jaffa. In the works he created then he dealt mainly with local landscapes. He made tiles with drawings of Jaffa using terra sigillata mixed with stains. Constantly recurring in those landscape pieces are the arches, steeples and minarets of Jaffa which are similar to those in many other cities in Israel that incorporate the three religions – Judaism, Islam and Christianity. As an artist creating in Jaffa who is influenced by its landscapes and cultural background, Gibsh works to capture and preserve the unique fragrance and essence of the city in his works, which depict this old city from a historical, social and cultural perspective. He says that, after years of living outside of Israel, he suddenly saw Jaffa's vaults and arches, so strikingly rounded compared to the wonderfully soaring phallic minarets, as a metaphor for the Middle East. With time, those forms evolved from two-dimensional tile work into three-dimensional sculptures.

The reality of everyday life, as well as national conflicts and disasters, cause socio-cultural elements to 'seep' into artistic works, influencing both the collective and personal discourse. Gibsh, like most Israelis, served in the army for several years, an experience that influenced him greatly and is manifested in the work he has done these last few years. In 1973, he was an enlisted soldier who fought in the Yom Kippur War as a tank commander, and he lost many of his friends who were killed in battle. "I





Top left: **Zoom#1**. 2015. Stoneware, terra sigillata, handbuilt, wood reduction smoke fired. 35 cm. Photo by the artist.

Top right: **Him**. 2015. Stoneware, terra sigillata, handbuilt, wood reduction smoke fired. 45 cm. Photo by the artist.

Below: **Doors Under Blue Sky**. 2009. Stoneware, terra sigillata, copper, handbuilt, saggar fired. 130 x 35 cm. Photo by Yaron Porat-Gibsh.

Facing page, left: **Sealed Earth & Smoke**. 2015. Stoneware, terra sigillata, handbuilt, wood reduction smoke fired. 125 x 75 cm. Photo by the artist.



was just a young man of 19 when I found myself in battle," Gibsh says, "and that was a harsh experience that haunted me for years. It was only two or three years ago that I finally managed to exorcise it, wrench it out of myself and into the clay I work with." In 2013, he created a series of pieces called *Burnt Stones*, dedicated to his fellow soldiers. The work was exhibited at the *Seventh Biennale for Israeli Ceramics* in the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv, which later kept them as part of the museum's permanent exhibit. The series consists of several lens-like objects and halved spheres with a terra sigillata slip and saggar firings using organic materials. The lens-like form is reminiscent of the armour of past warriors – round, complete, precise and protective. The halved spheres suggest the shape of a helmet, also a defensive artefact. The roundness and symmetry that project security, however, are at odds with the surface, which is alive with unsettling shades of fire. Signs of the organic materials burnt onto the objects, similar to burn scars on the skin, create a disturbing, bewildering sense of injury and pain.

The connection to earth, cultural tradition, historical background and existential discourse is given an additional dimension in the installation entitled *Stelae*, which also deals with his family history. Almost all the members of his father's family were murdered

in the Holocaust, and Gibsh grew up in the shadow of that terrible loss. Exhibited in the Aharon Kahana Museum in Ramat Gan, the installation consists of clay tablets that serve as memorial plaques or monuments or milestones sunk in sand. They are covered in a terra sigillata slip and saggar fired, and some of them have iron prints of family photographs and other historical photos. Among them are pictures of the Auschwitz extermination camp, a photo of Gibsh with his tank driver (who was killed in the war) and a contemporary photo of a Palestinian on the separation wall. Collective history has left its mark and together with his personal experience is burnt into clay as a memory in the private cemetery Gibsh has created. The fiery red hues raise questions about eternal struggles and survival, about lives cut short and the effects of the past on the present and the future.

"After two such series, I felt that I had purged myself of the need to get the past and its conflicts out. In the past two years, I have returned to pursuing the local landscapes and, at the same time, from a technical point of view, I went from saggar firing to wood smoking and found myself drawn in to the world of the effects of natural terra sigillata," he tells me.

Gibsh is an 'earth collector'. He mines clay wherever he is, whether in Israel or on his trips throughout the world, he purifies and refines it into tiny particles that will reappear as slips and mementoes of his travels. Today he has a palette of 15 natural terra sigillata 'colours' ranging from white to beige, yellow and various hues of pink and red. He uses that palette to create drawings on the surface of his pieces. The drawings usually combine straight geometric lines and images of local landscapes – both urban and natural – and recently,





include drawings of figures. In a series of works he created last year, which will be exhibited at the *Eighth Biennale for Israeli Ceramics* mid-year in 2016, he used terra sigillata to draw figures of nude men and women on cylindrical objects. Those figures are in dialogue with the black and red figures drawn in terra sigillata on ancient Greek vases, but they have a contemporary look and adorn hollow, non-functional ceramic objects, unlike the Greek vases, which were meant to have practical uses. That is Gibsh's way of telling a contemporary story through form and ornament, earthly, lonely anonymous figures raising eyes pleading for salvation.

It is interesting to observe the control in Gibsh's geometric forms, which are precise and 'centralised' compared to the partial 'loss of control' on the surfaces themselves, the outer 'shells'. That is due in great part to the choice of firing methods, since it is especially difficult to have control over their results. Gibsh is an expert in primitive firing techniques. He says that it is only with the firings that he finds the loss of control exciting. "Gas pressure, barometric pressure, the duration of the firing – all of these things influence the outcome and you can never precisely repeat the same reduction process. There are always surprises. I still maintain relative control over the process, but I allow myself to let go. That way,



sometimes wonderful things happen and sometimes it causes me terrible heartache. I end up breaking or discarding about 40 percent of the saggar firings results because I am not happy with them," he confesses to me, immediately adding that since he enlarged his palette of terra sigillata colours without adding stains and has begun doing more wood smoking than saggar firing, his control over the outcome is greater.

Gibsh is a collector and researcher of work methods. He is always learning and investigating. His never-ending engagement with the surface of ceramic objects has led him to develop a work process that includes a number of oxidising firings at low temperatures, each one with an additional layer of terra sigillata appropriate to the sintering temperature of the layer and a final reduction firing with pine and beech.

Like past explorers who journeyed around the world, Gibsh is a constant traveller. Every summer he works at the Harvard studio for a few months. During the past two years, he visited Japan, where his work was shown at an exhibition, he gave workshops and participated in symposia in Denmark and Turkey, exhibited in South Korea, where he has been invited to exhibit every year since 2010, and he has upcoming visits to Texas and the Far East to give workshops and to exhibit his work. On his travels, he collects earth, observes, gathers ideas in an ongoing dialogue with people and artists who preserve the legacy of the past. His journeys into personal and national history converge in his meticulous corpus, and his tireless work with surfaces raises questions about the internal and the external, about the material and the spiritual, about documentation and belonging.



Shira Silverston is a ceramics artist and Assistant Editor of the Israeli ceramics art magazine 1280C. She is in charge of conferences and special programs at Beit Benyamini – Contemporary Ceramics Center, as well as a member of the Center's Board.

