



## **From the Melting Pot into the Fire: Contemporary Ceramics in Israel**

**Yael Novak**

The vibrancy of contemporary Israeli ceramic art is evident in this latest show to arrive at the Whatcom Museum, Bellingham, WA. The variety of innovative work from both studio ceramics and industrial design ceramics demonstrates the strength and diversity of artistic expression in Israel in this field.

“ From the Melting Pot into the Fire, Contemporary Ceramics in Israel” is a selection of contemporary Israeli studio ceramics on view concurrently with the NCECA 2012 conference. The exhibition includes a broad range of works by Israeli artists, of different backgrounds, who address the controversial issues of land and identity from diverse perspectives. It provides new insights into contemporary life and art in Israel, unrepresented by the daily dose of news from the Middle East.

In this exhibition the 38 artists aim, through their work, to address personal and communal concerns focusing on the daily reality of cultural and territorial conflicts combined with stressful political and economic conditions. In this way, they reveal how complicated and often intensely personal the issues of identity, land and home are in contemporary Israel. Most of the artwork on display- distinctive, profound and often humorous, stimulating and thought provoking – demonstrate the diversity that can be achieved through expression with clay.

Many of the pieces on display offer a unique perspective on matters that shape both individual and collective identity. Any such identity is a reaction and reflection on the history, geography, political climate and cultural heritage of its country of origin. In an attempt to find uniformity in diversity; immigrant societies have opted to adopt the "melting pot" concept where diverse ethnic migrations merge to forge a unified cultural landscape in some cases and a colorful mosaic in others. In Israel's historical quest for a unified national identity the "melting pot" concept was a necessary measure in the young state's founding years. It has since been abandoned in favor of cultural pluralism. A discussion of the reasons for this exceeds the context of this presentation and it will be left to comprehensive sociological, ethnographic and political research into the rapidly changing global cultural map. Israeli society has undergone and is still undergoing significant changes. It is gradually moving from an identity based on nationalistic values of heroism, struggle, survival and Jewish continuity, to a society re-

examining its identity and its quest for wellbeing and prosperity. Israelis have become significant players on issues of global concern. With international involvement in the worlds of arts, science and technology, Israel has become cosmopolitan, sophisticated and accessible.

Geographically and culturally the country is a historical crossroads where east meets west, where ancient sites are juxtaposed with new ones built by a sophisticated high-tech society, where western modes of expression meet traditional Middle Eastern ethnicity and aesthetics. One cannot but be impressed by Israel's unique colorful cultural mosaic. This multicultural aspect of Israeli society is evident in the diversity of approaches and themes explored in this exhibition.

Martha Rieger's 'My Melting Pot' provides an intensely personal response to the complex issues addressed. In a series of three smoke fired bottles, the artist explicitly illustrates her own melting pot experience as an immigrant and the product of two faiths. Leah Sheves in 'Essence of an Ornament' contextualizes this concept through a series of objects inspired by both western and eastern aesthetics. Austere Bauhaus architecture, oriental ornamental designs and the Middle Eastern 'mashrabya' architectural element are integrated into the forms, creating a new visual vocabulary. Mashrabya is a traditional Middle Eastern architectural feature used to create privacy and climate control. With time and cross cultural influences, it was adopted and integrated into Jewish life as an essential religious and architectural feature in synagogue design – 'the mehizha' – a partition allowing women to see but not to be seen. Michal Alon's 'Screen' echoes the mashrabya concept. Inspired by local landscapes and hues the clay discs form a space divider, 'an ethereal barrier allowing the flow of air, light and energy'. 'Urban Tiles' critically comments on the consequences of unplanned urban growth. Photographs of typical drab and unattractive residential buildings are rendered beautiful through computer manipulation. The images are printed onto tiles to form a decorative kaleidoscope of patterns echoing traditional Iznik tiles used extensively in Middle Eastern architecture - an implicit connection to our locality. Efrat Eyal's 'Model Home' hangs vertically to form a repetitive geometric decorative pattern which bears a resemblance to oriental carpets. A closer look reveals a series of several small molds of building types which together form a miniature housing project. The artist comments with a critical eye on the fine line we walk between individuality and conformity.

A sense of place strongly emanates from Yael Novak's 'In Between the Pots'. Moving back and forth from the visual and the tactile to the imaginative and illusionary, the negative spaces between a series of repetitive stark earthenware vessels create a familiar landscape. Pottery and architecture are placed side by side, the boundaries of the one discipline form the outline of the other. The essence of cultural diversity and complexity is captured in the outlined icons of local identity: the kibbutz water tower next to the mosque's minaret or the indigenous Cyprus tree; domed Arabic houses adjacent to a post modern urban skyline. Coexistence - a reality or an illusion?

Ruth Schreiber's 'Two Swings' speaks of frustration, dream and disillusionment. Two inaccessible and fragile stoneware swings suspended unevenly by thick chains hang in front of Fragonard's painting of a

lady on a swing. Freedom of movement is juxtaposed with the incapacitated and inaccessible - a painful observation and a strong statement on the reality of life in the region.

Barriers and boundaries delineate, outline and mark a space in time and place, not only in the physical sense but also in our collective conscience and memory. 'Not Now' by artist Simone Solomon and 'Free Space' a poignant work by Anya Kirzner are both personal and poetic reflections on the concept of boundaries, physical and imaginary. They call for the need to break away from confinement within self inflicted borders, frames and conventions. Collective memories carve a space in time and place dedicated to remembrance. Monuments and memorials have become an undeniable part of our collective identity. First and foremost, collective identity is forged by a common language. 'The Building Blocks of Memory / Monument for the Hebrew Language' celebrates the revival of the Hebrew language in a series of totemic columns bearing ancient and modern representations of Hebrew letters, liturgical motifs and images of significant historical personalities. 'Tel Giborim' – Heroes' Knoll is where private and collective memories meet and 'Har Hamenuhot' provides an image of the Jerusalem cemetery where stone, marble and concrete create an eternal connection between man and place.

Mirvat Issa eloquently expresses the idea of memory in 'Our Daily Bread' 'Bread as a memory, place Brown bread, white bread Dry bread, fragile bread Thrilling bread, inedible bread Thin bread, tired bread Inviting bread, demanding bread' The piled high, thin, dry, pita bread reduced to mere crusts call to mind human skulls alluding to Holocaust images. This controversial statement by the artist comments on the trials and tribulations that have faced the Palestinian nation.

Both pita bread and the prickly pear cactus have iconic symbolism and meaning for several cultures in the Middle East as an integral part of their identities. Native-born Israelis liken themselves to the fruit of the prickly pear – sabra in colloquial Hebrew - tough and thorny on the outside, but promising a juicy sweetness within. With implicit humor, the sabra is tinned for posterity in 'Sabras in a Tin Can'

Bread and water are life sustaining necessities for survival. Ronit Zor's 'Moat' (15) explores the theme in a series of stoneware objects filled with water and shaped like ancient aqueducts. Providing both water and means of defense they are a constant reminder of our fragile existence in the region.

Impermanence resonates strongly from the changing topography over time in 'Lie of the Land' a collaborative effort between ceramics and video art. The concept of time is introduced in the form of an hourglass – the transitory element embedded in a rapidly changing landscape created by the flowing sand.

Fragility, impermanence and insecurity are subtle subtexts identifiable in several of the pieces. Uncovering the many layers of meaning is a fascinating experience for both viewer and artist. The majority of the works in this exhibition were created by female artists who are not afraid to either talk or deal with issues of vulnerability.

This approach is enlightening, refreshing and educational. It illustrates a different and less well known view of Israelis, breaking away, as it does, from the stereotypical military macho image portrayed so frequently in the media.

With the tension between fragility and durability, ceramics provide a good metaphor, resonating at a metaphysical level with the uncertainty in the everyday life of Israelis. The innate fragility of ceramics highlights the precariousness of life itself - a concept at the core of several of the pieces. Pots morph into cascades of fragile swirling blossoms images of collapsing vessels in 'Forms', cardboard houses in 'Urban Cubism', houses on wheels and floating houses in 'Return to Sender'. They all relate subtly to one's endless quest for a secure sense of place in an uncertain world. In 'Locked Up' by Ruth Barkai ceramic objects in the shape of locks, question the sense of security within the protective space of our home as does Ethel Pisareff's 'protected space'.

Dori Zanger's 'Hand-Warmers' and Orit Bar Dov's 'Tribal Fire' reflect upon the traditional tribal fire as the center of social life within the community. The sense of belonging to a group sharing the same values, traditions and norms often serves as a comfort blanket.

The individual home, the neighborhood and community all play an important role in providing a sense of security and protection. Anat Barel develops an intimate relationship with her Jerusalem based neighborhood. 'I've been around the Block' records her daily walks in familiar surroundings drawing attention to significant architectural landmarks.

'Memories of the past, events of the present and hopes for the future' create man's cultural imprint on the landscape. Recorded by history, investigated by archeology and built in a variety of architectural styles and traditions, it is a source of information and inspiration for many of the artists. 'The Road is Open' refers visually to the past whilst looking at the present. In 'Six Oy' shards of industrially produced pots make up the contents of an imaginary future archaeological site. Charts of an archaeological excavation inspire and inform a series of smoke fired tiles. In 'Out of a Wall a Stone Will Cry' significant milestones in local architecture poetically inform a series of wall tiles.

Other works directly refer to architecture. 'Structures' renders an urban environment with seven geometric block forms. 'City Container' captures a reflection and an outline of an urban skyline while 'On a Journey Towards Remembrance' the spectator is cajoled into mysterious, narrow and twisted alleys to join the artist on a mysterious inner journey of discovery.

The absence of century old ceramic practice which has always traditionally been in the hands of Palestinian village potters has sent Israeli ceramic art on a journey of self-discovery. Discovering its own voice - that of diversity and strength - derived from a multitude of local and international influences and trends, Israeli ceramic artists have the freedom to explore experiment and make choices of ideas, materials, techniques, working methods and content.

The exhibition illustrates this diversity of approaches - ranging from the purely decorative to the sculptural, expressive and conceptual. While some of the work is intended as social and political commentary, the majority of the pieces are inspired by formal, symbolic and conceptual concerns and a desire to explore the full material potential of ceramic art. The intimate and personal nature of the show provides visitors with an individual perspective of the issues that have and will continue to shape life in contemporary Israel.

