

Gardiner Museum's From the Melting Pot into the Fire

Posted by **Moshe Mikanovsky**

Toronto is a very international and diverse city. Being an immigrant you actually feel at home because most of the people nowadays living in Toronto are immigrants. We were joking one day at work that there are no Canadians in the house, or Canadian-born... Well, it was almost the truth, since we did have couple of guys that were born in Toronto, but overall, our team consisted of people from all over the world – China, Romania, Turkey, Scotland, Israel, India, Russia, and more!

This weekend I went to a very special art show at [the Gardiner Museum in Toronto](#). The Gardiner is a museum dedicated to the ceramic arts. I must admit that I have been many times across the street at the Royal Ontario Museum, the ROM, but never had the chance to visit the Gardiner. So I was glad to have this opportunity. What was so special about it is that for the first time, the Gardiner has a show of Israeli ceramic artists, the "**From the Melting Pot into the Fire – Contemporary Ceramics in Israel**" show, and coming with the [Israeli Artists Group of Greater Toronto](#), we were honored to have a special tour with artist [Yael Novak](#) of the [Ceramic Artists Association of Israel \(CAAI\)](#), who was instrumental in bringing the show to Toronto.

It is hard to explain in a short article all the beautiful artworks which are part of the show, and one must go and appreciate in person all the skillful and highly artistic works on display. There are some special themes that run through the show, such as identity, individuality and integration, home and community. There are some similarities between the melting pot of the Israeli society, which was built from many different immigration waves from all around the world, to the Canadian human-landscape, forged throughout the years from many different immigrating communities. In both places, the local culture both influences the newcomers, and changes slightly by new traditions brought from far lands. But Israel's complex existence with all its daily difficulties and triumphs is another catalyst in the local artistic creation. And that was something me and my friends had the advantage of understanding some of the cultural background behind the artworks. Here are some examples of the amazing work from the show:

Yael Novak, In Between the Pots

In her work, Yael Novak combines her love for pottery and architecture. She "draws" in the negative space between the pots some of the common Israeli landscape icons – small and large city houses, modern high-rises, Muslim and Arabic dome-covered buildings, minarets, and cypress trees (click on the image to see a better view).



Yael Novak, In Between the Pots, 2006, Slip-cast earthenware, terra sigillata, 30x360x40 cm

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2010

From the melting pot into the fire

I just returned from the media preview for From the Melting Pot into the Fire at the Gardiner Museum and it is -- in a word -- extraordinary.

The exhibition of conceptual work by Israeli ceramic artists that explores the issues of land, identity and home in contemporary Israel. The exhibition does not endorse any single political, social or artistic point of view. Instead, visitors are encouraged to reflect on the work and form their own opinions about the issues it raises. Notably, the labels that accompany each work, usually written by an exhibition curator, were written by the artist and provide an intensely personal response to the complex issues addressed.

The intimate and personal nature of this exhibition provides visitors with an individual rather than a political perspective of the issues that have and continue to shape life in contemporary Israel.

From the Melting Pot into the Fire has its origins in the Fourth Biennale for Israeli Ceramics that was organized by the Ceramic Artists Association of Israel (CAAI) and hosted by the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv in 2007. (The CAAI is a non-governmental, non-profit professional organization that supports ceramic artists in Israel.)

Yael Novak from the Ceramics Artists Association of Israel acted as that group's curatorial liaison to the Gardiner Museum, and was on hand this morning. She recounted beautiful, intimate and sometimes sad stories about the pieces. Here is her piece below.



She has created the Israeli landscape with her pottery, using the negative spaces.

I was also drawn to Avner Singer and Varda Bar Shamai's The Building Blocks of Memory / Monument for the Hebrew Language. There are 30 cubes: 27x27x27 cm each. I wasn't aware that the Hebrew language wasn't a spoken language until relatively recently -- about 200 years.

Posted on Sat, Nov. 27, 2010 10:15 PM

Ceramic works capture many facets of Israeli culture

By ELISABETH KIRSCH

Special to The Star



Yael Novak's earthenware forms reference Middle Eastern water towers and other architectural forms. They are part of an exhibit of contemporary ceramics from Israel at Belger Arts Center.



Is there a recognizable form of Israeli art? Spend time with "From the Melting Pot Into the Fire: Contemporary Ceramics in Israel," and your answer will most likely be yes and no.

No, because even though the modern state of Israel, much like the United States, adopted the concept of the "melting pot," past attempts to erase all cultural vestiges of the Diaspora have largely been abandoned.

Israel has accepted itself as a country of immigrants, and native traditions are deemed an undeniable part of each citizen's personal code. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the arts, and the diversity of this exhibit highlights the multicultural aspects of Israeli culture.

Yes, because those living in Israel share certain commonalities — a specific desert landscape; the juxtaposition of centuries-old sites next to new ones made by a sophisticated, high-tech society; and the tenuousness of life lived in a war zone. One or more of these issues abide, for the most part subtly, in the work of more than 30 artists assembled for this exhibit.

"From the Melting Pot Into the Fire" is an international traveling show organized by the Ceramic Artists Association of Israel in conjunction with the Mint Museum of Craft + Design in Charlotte, N.C.

The show's first North American venue was the Gardiner Museum in Toronto. When Evelyn Craft, director of the Belger Arts Center, discovered there was a time lag until the exhibit moved to the Mint Museum, she arranged for it to travel to Kansas City. The installation at the Belger is of museum quality, involving everything from platforms to video to light installations. The space has never looked better.

In a recent talk at the Belger, Yael Novak, an artist in the show and main coordinator of the exhibit, pointed out that "99 percent of the artists in 'From the Melting Pot' are female. The work here contradicts the typical image of Israel, which is that of the macho Israeli soldier. That image is valid. But women are not afraid to show the fragile nature of our existence. And there is nothing like the inherent fragility of ceramics to underscore the precariousness of life itself."

Michaela Orstav's hand-built, unglazed, collapsed porcelain vessels exemplify this, as do Noa Holzstein's untitled white clay, delicate flower-covered pots and Ziona Benor's simple little porcelain houses, floating in a tank of water.

Some of these artworks were first exhibited at the Fourth Biennale for Israeli Ceramics. Held in 2007 at the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv, it was titled "Territory and Identity — Between Ceramics and Architecture." The carryover accounts in part for the prevalence of architectural themes and motifs in this show.

Dina Shahar's photo-printed, decorative ceramic tiles feature splintered views of typical, drab Israeli residential buildings made fascinating by her manipulations. Anat Bar El's "I've Been Around the Block," composed of ceramic outlines of homes overlaid on a hand-drawn map, literally depicts her daily itinerary in her Jerusalem neighborhood. "Model Home" by Efrat Eyal consists of dozens of small molds of various building types that form a miniature housing project.

Novak's sober yet stunning lineup of abstract earthenware forms reference Middle Eastern water towers, a mosque's minaret, cypress trees and kibbutz housing. Novak's work exemplifies the best in this show: art that exists strongly on its own merits as it also vibrates with conceptual vigor.

This was not so easy to pull off, Novak said.

"One of the issues we have to deal with as Israeli artists is, 'Do we have a debt to society to be thematic?' Each artist must decide this for her or himself.

"We have an active studio tradition in Israel, but there is no continuum from earlier on."

The first ceramics teachers in Israel migrated from Europe. Many of them were members of the Bauhaus who fled from the Nazis in the 1930s, before Israel was even a state. As a result, Novak said, "my forms are inspired by the West while I am in the midst of the Middle East."

In Israel, architecture cannot be separated from questions of boundaries. Anna Kirzner's porcelain briefcase opens to a black-and-white video of her trapped within narrow confines. "Out of a Wall a Stone Will Cry" by Shani Orstav examines multiple slabs representing building stones, with at least one possible nod to Jerusalem's ancient Wailing Wall.

Marcelle Klein and Tami Bar-Lev's "Lie of the Land" combines two organically shaped, all-white vessels mounted at different heights and a video to give the effect of an hourglass. It is a work of quietude and contemplation, meant to create, the artists write, "a changing topography with unclear boundaries."

The impact of war itself is dealt with best by the artists whose work is most poetic.

Dori Zanger Schechtel's "Hand-Warmers," a colorfully painted slab with several dozen rounded shapes representing hand-warmers, reflects a tradition from her native Argentina. The folk-art imagery throughout the piece is charming, but the hand-warmers are eerily like grenades.

The beautifully illuminated porcelain walkway by Rachel Elimelech Urbach in various shades of yellow leads up to a photographic image of Tel Giborim (the Heroes' Knoll monument in Israel). Only with minute observation are the Hebrew words "I did not betray my country" discernable in the pathway, a reference to an actual note found in between the toes of a slain, tortured Israeli prisoner from the 1970s.

The crusty clay pieces stacked high in Mirvat Issa's "Our Daily Bread" indeed resemble loaves of bread. They call to mind the importance of bread in various Jewish rituals, such as Passover. But they are also reminiscent of the stacks of shoes in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Like the most memorable art here, the less didactic the work, the more one's imagination works overtime. "From the Melting Pot Into the Fire" gives the brain and heart a lot to do.

ON DISPLAY

"From the Melting Pot Into the Fire: Contemporary Ceramics in Israel" continues at the Belger Arts Center, 2100 Walnut St., through Jan. 15. Hours are 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, noon- 4 p.m. Saturday and by appointment. For more information, call 816-474-3250 816-474-3250

Posted on Sat, Nov. 27, 2010 10:15 PM

Home Is Where the Art Is

Written by **Christopher Jones**



[The Gardiner Museum](#)'s first major exhibition of 2010 was unveiled to the media this morning in advance of its official launch tomorrow: *From the Melting Pot into the Fire, Contemporary Ceramics in Israel* is a complex show, much more conceptual art than pretty pots and vessels.

Ceramic artist Yael Novak, left, whose installation *Between the Pots* is featured, joined the museum's Chief Curator Charles Mason in leading the tour. "The show is about identity and sense of place in a multicultural, immigrant society," said Novak, whose work takes advantage of the negative space "between the pots" to depict the multifarious building forms prevalent throughout the nation. "You have the iconic architectural shapes of Israel," says the artist, "the influence of the kibbutz but also the domed and minaret shapes of the Arabic villages. The installation combines my two loves, architecture and pottery but I created my landscape out of air; architecture is about volume, my architecture is air, it's an illusion."



More than half of the 37 works on display here (whittled down from 110 originally shown in the 2007 Fourth Biennale for Israeli Ceramics in Tel Aviv) are concerned with homes and houses, like Daphna Leshem's *City-Container*, above.



“There’s a lot about architecture,” acknowledges Novak, “but we did not go into the subtext of this. You have houses on wheels, the floating houses, the houses that are actually cardboard boxes, these are all metaphors for the very fragile nature of our existence in the area.”

Notes Mason: “The title of the exhibition is a comment on the fact that Israel is a cultural melting pot that draws Jews and others from all over the world coming together to form a common identity as modern Israelis.”

Another curious wrinkle is that all but two of the works on display here are by female artists. “Ninety-five per cent of ceramic artists in Israel are women,” states Novak, “and the reason for that is that as the traditional providers of family income men could not spend the time on ceramic art because it’s very difficult to make a living this way. We do have men doing this but it’s mostly women.” Homemakers, you might say.

Photos by Christopher Jones