

Zigi Ben-Haim

Painting and Sculpture

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Introduction

I once remarked, "My interest lies in an engagement with art that transforms from avant-garde to art history, as I watch it happen." The work of making culture is an endless, incessant process. While this is an enterprise that occurs at many different levels, of course, it is the work of art that can bring together, select, and focus on the telling threads of our communal experience.

The art of Zigi Ben-Haim engages classic aesthetic concerns about material, texture, and gesture. Yet, it transcends these abstract qualities, speaking to the unique contemporary condition that we all share. Invested throughout his modular paintings are images that are at once deeply personal yet are infused with social significance. Private concerns, thoughts, and fragments of his experience are caught in the flux of language and images from popular culture. In the process they build a fantastic calendar, a progressive – and at times ecstatic – encapsulation of life in New York, a vivid document of our times made especially poignant since the events of 9/11.

After recently adding "Happy Birthday" (2001) to The Guggenheims' permanent collection, Lisa Dennison, Deputy Director and Chief curator stated; *"The Guggenheim first acquired Zigi Ben-Haim's work in the 70's, a beautiful work on paper, whose spare elegance was in keeping with the minimalist aesthetic of the museum. In the past few years the artist has developed an extraordinary new body of work, which echoes the multifaceted language of art today, but yet remains unique to his own vision. Seriality is infused with a sense of the handmade in Zigi Ben-Haim's new work. The grid is a unifying system, a backdrop, through which he explores numerous aesthetic possibilities: text fragments, photo transfers, abstract forms and recognizable imagery, some found some invented"*.

In constructing some of his sculptures, Ben-Haim often mentions a particular recurring image, recalling how certain species of ants carry leaves detached whole (or sometimes carved into large, abstract forms) back to their nest. The leaf dwarfs the insect bearing it, an incongruous image whose wonder is compounded by its repetition through the long line of ants following a common path. Elements of this imagery find their way in and out of his paintings and sculpture. I think of this as a description of the process, the path, that we all share as we move our "leaves" through our daily lives. The end product of all this individual activity is culture, the modern world in which we live – a world that Zigi Ben-Haim returns to us with its hidden poetry revealed. Watching Zigi at work, I feel once again like a privileged witness to the process of history taking shape.

Stefan Stux, Gallery Director

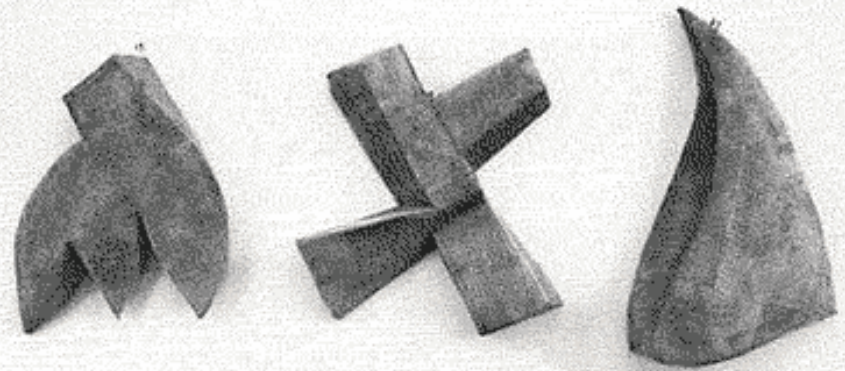
The Leaf, The Oval, The Brick, The Ant

Zigi Ben-Haim's panoramic, protean mind restlessly discharges ideas in a mental process that seems to electrify both his hair and his astonishingly luxuriant eyebrows. As he talks, he spins a web of correspondences, at times surprising even himself as he discovers something new in the work under discussion. His is an iconography in progress, an expansive visual lexicon of found and invented images he constantly adds to, fine-tunes and recycles. His studio at the moment is full of large, shiny, light-weight aluminum panels hung with neat rows of notebook-sized plaques; also of aluminum, each plaque swings loosely from two hooks.

Occasionally, the grid schema is interrupted by the addition of larger plaques into the composition. The panels are formatted as polyptychs and hung on the wall although a few are intended to lean against it such as the prodigious "Happy Birthday" (2001), recently acquired by the Guggenheim Museum. They might be great, pre-LED message boards, Ben-Haim's version of a Wailing Wall, coded exhortations to the planet dispensed as flash cards, most displaying a discrete image in shades of blacks, greys and whites glossed by an occasional cool green or blue.

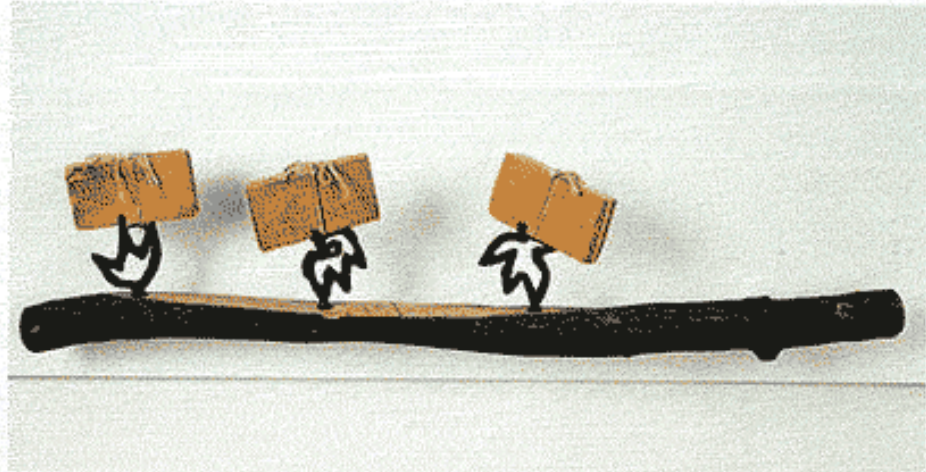
Canvas shapes that look like girders or wire mesh insertions are composed out of a number of individual plaques in works such as "Time Shell" (2001) and "Caught in Time" (2003). Ben-Haim's hybridized formats are exuberant amalgams of architecture, sculpture, painting, drawing, prints, photographs and collage.

Zigi also has several free-standing sculptures in this exhibition which include "To Reach a Brick" (1998), "Sometime, Somewhere" (1999), "Simple Faith" (1998), made of soft-looking wire mesh and "Living Process" (2003), a tree-like armature hung with more burnished silvery plaques embellished with leaves.



Wire Talk 1992
D-159A
20"x16"x5" 20"x20"x5" 25"x15"x5"
Wire mesh

While begun in 2000, this series was inspired in part by the shattering events of September 11, 2001 and the downtown reconstruction project. The recent works function as a kind of cultural survival kit provisioned with everything he can think of—and Zigi can think of a lot—including photographic images of the Statue of Liberty and that of Wall Street's George Washington, the World Trade Center towers, storefronts, grills, signage, hydrants, banners, cryptic computer language and an abundant array of abstract forms, juxtaposing the high and the low. Every shape, every figure is accompanied by a story and signifies a number of things to Ben-Haim. They are the artist's journal, his theory of everything, his wide-ranging personal and cultural history in scavenged, heraldic terms, idiosyncratically, exquisitely orchestrated with seriousness and humour. Look for four of his favorite motifs—the leaf, the oval, the brick and the ant—which he depicts singly or in combination; they appear frequently, the cornerstones of his visual vocabulary.



High Gear 1997
D-178A
12"x50"x10"
Branch, bronze, brick, rope

Ben-Haim's leaf has three lobes and looks like a hand, at times, or possibly a stylized body. It represents nature, recurrence, growth, fecundity. The oval conveys a similar meaning. It's an end, a seed pod that splits open and is destroyed yet it is also a vessel to be replenished, symbolizing the beginning of another cycle and the sweetness of continuity. The brick is a basic unit of construction and has been since before the pyramids; it represents culture. The ant is the artisan, the builder of civilizations, the striving, indefatigable, undaunted worker. It is adaptable, a survivor that

can carry loads many times its own size. Ben-Haim believes in disproportion. Power, he says, does not depend upon size and abilities are often untapped and unrecognized until called upon, a stance visualized in his whimsical image of an ant carrying a leaf or a leaf carrying a brick.

Ben-Haim's recent works are densely interconnected tableaux, dizzy with narrative and symbolic implications that testify to the complexity and combustibility of his imagination. They are the traces of all that he has been, seen and done, witnesses to the richness and diversity of his heritage. For the sake of his art, Zigi takes everything on, everything in, crosses disciplines, tells a thousand and one tales, experiments, refuses limits. He is a little like the indomitable ant he admires able to find his materials everywhere, building determinedly, courageously paving the way. With a zest that is almost alarming in its matter-of-factness and originality, Ben-Haim transforms what others have overlooked into something rich and disproportionately wondrous.

—Lilly Wei, Art Critic and Independent Curator