

Zigi Ben-Haim

"Journey With Me"

Sculpture 1984-1997

FORDHAM

University

ROBERT MOSES SCULPTURE GARDEN AT LINCOLN CENTER CAMPUS, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10093

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It may well be that Zigi Ben-Haim comes as close as one can to exploring the edge between the cool punch of minimalist form and the warm accessibility of humanized metaphor. Clear, direct, and boldly assertive contours underscore the minimalist thrust. Underscoring the human aspect are the rounded, organic, quasi-biomorphic qualities that frequently occur, often producing seemingly pliable boundaries and often projecting the vitality of pulsating masses.

Ben-Haim's own interest in creating parallels for life's interactive forces are central to the humanistic associations. In "Marching Ants", for example, three leaf-contoured units carry overpowering, brick-like weights as they parade across an undulating though mechanistic passage. Other pieces, especially the recent aluminum sculptures "Walking Tall" and "Out of the Window", will actually suggest the physical characteristics of a person to many viewers. Ben-Haim likes to work with broad generalizations and ambiguities, and is pleased when interpretations are generated by the observer.

The leaf takes on a number of symbolic roles in Ben-Haim's work, although a viewer always remains aware of how he is pushing its visual possibilities as a sculptural form capable of yielding curves, bends, points, and angularity. A key emphasis is on the metaphorical and allegorical implications of a leaf's life-cycle. Universality makes this an appropriate emblem, but the choice seems particularly inspired because the leaf is largely free from both self-consciousness and solemnity. It can, nevertheless, hold references to the past, present and future.

Introducing a familiar element like the leaf also allows the instinctive reading of weight to be a subjective factor. The irony of Ben-Haim's steel leaves is well suited to late 20th century art. A green glaze addition in some examples gives the leaf a glass-like appearance, thus further complicating psychological responses.

But basically it is understood that the lightness of leaves allows them to drift and travel. They will make a mark on one surface, then another. In this sense, their symbolism in the Ben-Haim work can be considered as part ghost-image, part shadow, and part remembrance.

Ben-Haim sees parallels to the migration of people and to his own experience as a person who has left one locale for another.

"Journey With Me", his exhibition title, reflects this serious probing of sign-like equivalents for the migration theme.

A single red leaf rests alone on the extended horizontal arm of "O.K. Tail". Suspended eight feet above the ground, the shape seems to signify survival. Scale is important to the impact. Here, and in other greatly enlarged leaf forms, there is

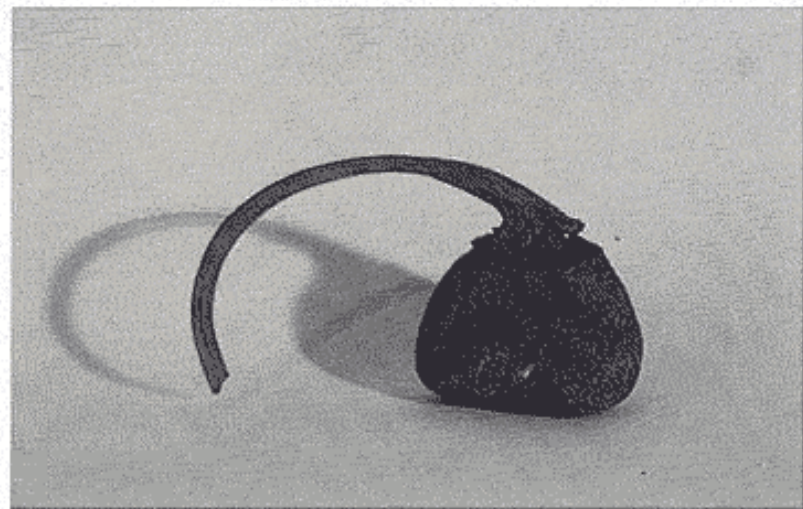
a sense that the image has the ability to shift between the authoritative and the whimsical. Occasionally the motif appears to metamorphize into a hand, opening the way for a variety of other interpretations.

Many years ago, Ben-Haim found inspiration in the chance discovery of a slender, curving branch growing from a stone. This principal of anachronistic adaptation for survival has informed everything in the current major two-decade survey. It is the clue to those many pairings of disparate elements that make each piece vibrate sensually and it is the clue to the way he consistently seeks to develop an animating force.

Other pieces build tension through a variety of inventive ideas. Some contrast indoor and outdoor tonalities or the conventional properties of softness and toughness. The show's largest sculpture, the dual unit "The Fall", is perhaps the most dramatic example with its fragrant reversals of materials. It is the steel that cascades irregularly, providing unpredictable edges, while the green section (a handsome oxidized copper) delivers a strict, industrial-age energy. In "Marching Ants", nature references combined with a rusty pipe suggest the adaptation that occurs within the urban environment. "Air Pressure", with its undulating, gracefully twisting movement, defies the connotations of its sturdy metal material.

Energizing many pieces, too, is an intentional blending of calculated motifs with those that seem to be swifter, free-hand notations. Gestural markings on vibrantly glazed aluminum frequently alter surfaces, for example, and introduce a painterly quality that challenges the stability of the metal.

There is a visual power, too, in the transience produced by variable surfaces and by mesh materials. The mesh might expose images devised by the artist or it might bring in chance sightings. Such activity, especially in an outdoor, urban plaza setting, introduces a wonderful sense of unpredictable movement, which here is peppered by the plaza's own constantly



Found in Arizona, 1975

changing trees, clouds, sky, and light. Everything calls attention to the motion implied by the sculpture's twisting, vibrant shapes and their sense of organic growth. Certain works actually seem to be gesturing towards neighboring buildings.

Perhaps surprisingly for an artist whose primary reputation is based on sculpture, Ben-Haim frequently finds an edge, and sharpens many of his ideas, by going back and forth to different media and experimenting with the expressive possibilities of various materials. Some of his wall pieces have a specific dimensionality, while others produce combinations of real and illusionary depth. Such interactions suggest creative possibilities and become a way to discover the perceptual challenges that make art so stimulating.

*Phyllis Braff
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