

Zigi Ben-Haim

I N D U S T R I A L B A R O Q U E

Stefan Stux Gallery

AN INTERVIEW WITH ZIGI BEN-HAIM

BETH E. WILSON

Beth E. Wilson: How did you come to address the series of major global issues presented in the work now at Stux Gallery?

Zigi Ben-Haim: I decided to do these works relating to the environment, to global warming, to habitat loss, and so on, as an outgrowth of work that I was commissioned to do for NASA. The subject of that commission was a tribute to the Columbia space shuttle. Working on the commission, I really got into what the Earth is all about, what the sky is about, the concept of going from one place to another, leaving your traces and taking something with you, which has been the subject of my work for a long time. Somewhere it turned into looking at two different cultures, the one we live in here, and the other existing up there. When you put them together, we learn more about what's here, we learn more about the environment, and I got really involved with the subject. This show actually is driven from the ideas that were developed in the making of that project.

While traveling from one place to another, you have to adapt to the new culture in order to survive. I think of that as a metaphor for all kinds of things that you put together. I combine the urban environment and the world of nature and this way, I can create another kind of form that makes sense to me.

BW: This combination of nature and culture is a familiar one in your work, no?

ZBH: Here again there are several key images that I've been using for some time—the brick, the ant, the leaf, which have always represented these ideas, it's just that here the meanings are made deeper as they're worked into the other images. Every time I use them they further develop my own vocabulary.

The basic idea is that the leaf represents what is given to us by nature, we have no control over it. It's a universal image, because leaves exist everywhere, they come and go with the seasons, or as the wind blows. They all seem the same, until you pick one up and see it more clearly—what kind of plant it's from, how it got here—just like people. The brick is the basic symbol of man-made objects, of creativity. Since ancient times people have built with bricks, it's something we created. In order to survive in the world, we have to combine these two [nature and culture].

The ant represents the disproportion that exists in our lives as in nature. Have you ever seen some of those ants that carry the leaf bits that are 20 times larger than the

ant? It's how the small things can create big changes—this disproportion is crucial for our survival.

BW: How did you come up with the idea of the Industrial Baroque to describe this work?

ZBH: A friend commented on this reference to the Baroque when he visited my studio. The Baroque was such a rich period, in the Arts, in music, in painting—it was all so colorful, full of details, so much information—the opposite of minimal. That's the baroque element. I'm obviously not of that period, but the metaphor of it appealed to me. I'm working with industrial material, but in something that seems like a baroque mode to me. It doesn't make any sense in the context of the real baroque, but it makes sense in my world.

BW: Your work always seems to multiply the meanings of things—of words, of images, what-have-you. In TraVolution, you're addressing issues related to evolution. What kind(s) of evolution do you mean here?

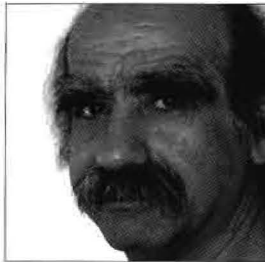
ZBH: You can look at 'evolution' in different ways. There's the obvious meaning, the Darwin stuff, but we also have our own evolution, how our thoughts change or broaden, and the environment itself is changing, moving on. I wanted to talk about the evolution of culture itself, using recognizable icons from ancient cultures [like Stonehenge and Easter Island] because all our culture is based on them, even without our knowing it. There's humor in the piece too, thinking about those places where they have a problem with the theory of evolution because of the Bible, or the evolution of question marks, and all that stuff. In addition, there is the element where [early humans] go from crawling to walking, but I made it in reverse, because we're going backwards, too. And that image is made up of little pixels that are really contemporary symbols today.

BW: Much of your work seems predicated on bridging gaps between seemingly opposite ideas or tendencies, especially the play between representation and abstraction. How did you develop this strategy?

ZBH: When I started this kind of work, it was more abstract, but after 9/11 something interesting happened. Before that, the world was kind of unclear with the Cold War. We didn't know what was happening, would they press the button or not, we were taught to hide under a table from the atom bomb, which is ridiculous—the whole world didn't know what was going on. 9/11 brought us to reality, everything became real. A world of images is everywhere, so somehow I felt that the work had to have a

more substantial relationship to reality. This big change in our lives, before and after, left a meaningful trace that penetrated into my work.

BW: The work also oscillates between painting and sculpture. Why is that such an important element for you?



ZBH: My painting (or my work, it's better to say)—has a strong sculptural quality, that three-dimensionality. In my sculptures some of those shapes are developed completely into three-dimensions, free-standing. None of the work is flat, there's always another dimension in there. I use the mesh because you can see through it, see that there's a gap between the painting and the wall. I emphasize the depth of the shadows behind by painting the back side of the plates with a very shiny, glossy, deep green or blue color. It creates a shadow with an aura around it, as it bounces the light in the gap between the panels and the backing. I chose these colors because green and blue are the colors of the air and the water, the moving elements of nature. My work is also somehow about movement over time. Some people refer to the works as "painterly sculptures" or "sculptural paintings", but they all start from works on paper and I work on them all simultaneously.

BW: The complexity of the multiple images and the range of elements you include in the works threaten to create total chaos, and yet somehow the structural components impose an order on the flow of imagery. What initially looks chaotic, after you spend some time with it, emerges with a sense of order. How do you see this structure of the work functioning in relation to the very large themes that you're addressing here?

ZBH: I think Nietzsche would be happy with that. [laughter] Ultimately it's a reflection of our way of life, our thinking, our way of looking at things.

First of all, when you walk on the streets, you see everything presented to us broken up, with little individual frames of reference. Every situation, every street sign. But altogether, they create a world, the bigger picture. When you look at the whole environment, what's happening, you also find certain openings for this kind of problem, that kind of problem—global warming, the oceans, the animals disappearing—it's almost like walking on the streets and you see all those signs directing you. In order to understand what's going on in that street, you put everything together, and then you see where we are actually living, what we are breathing, who we are, and so on. You break it into smaller problems or smaller pictures out of the big picture, and then you put it back together in a way that you want. You recompose it somehow. So that's why this mixture of chaos and order makes sense to me.

BW: Your sensibility, your feeling for the density of the layers of meaning really shines through all the work.

ZBH: Layers is exactly the right word for it. When I started doing this kind of work in the 70s, it started out being all about layers. I would pile layers of paper, one on top of the other, opening them up using hidden ropes

to reveal the layers underneath. Still now, you can see that sort of process here. There are openings here and there, it's all about revealing the layer behind it or the layer above it, next to it, and so on. If you look at culture, it's built from layers, you peel the layers, the way archeologists excavate it. This kind of work is about peeling through the layers to discover what's in there. Again it's the chaos that we discussed before, but somehow it all makes sense.

That 'somehow' is what's very hard to put your finger on—the poetic dimension of the work.

That's the art. If you can explain everything, something's wrong with it. It has to leave something for your own imagination—I don't even want to explain everything to myself. I need to work up to a certain point, and then let it go. You let the material lead the process and the structure with the basic elements of everything. Then you can do whatever you want with it, in terms of how you want to interpret it, understand it. The foundation is there, you have to have that. From there, it's up to the viewer.

I once visited an old church in Russia, where they put a line of icons up on the wall. There was a whole line of people praying, but each to his own saint. But who's behind the icons? The same guy. Everybody has his own culture, his own family, his own ideas, and so on, but in the bigger picture, they're somehow all connected. It's like that in the work. There are subtle differences, but they're all brought together in that particular piece, and it all makes sense.

Beth E. Wilson is an art historian, critic, and curator, holding degrees from Georgetown University, Hunter College, and CUNY Graduate Center. A member of the International Art Critics Association (AICA), her writing has appeared in publications such as Tema Celeste, Arts Magazine, and Chronogram, and she has published essays in reference works including The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Postmodernism, The Dictionary of Women Artists, and most recently in The Art Seminar: Photography Theory, edited by James Elkins. She teaches courses in modern and contemporary art and photography in the Art History department at SUNY New Paltz, where she has also curated several exhibitions for the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art. She is the lead curator of the 2007 Kingston Sculpture Biennial, opening this July.