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Dr Michael Levin

***“The City as a Museum - Modern Art in
Jerusalem and Tel Aviv”***

11:00 hrs, Wednesday 17th September

Michael Levin

The City as a Museum - Modern Art in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv

The new works of art erected in Jerusalem in recent years inject a modern note into the city which is in itself a mosaic of many cultures and traditions on many different stratas.

The absence of any prior tradition integrating art and construction allowed a considerable degree of freedom in erecting works of art.

Many of the sculptures commissioned in the last two decades reflect their link with the environment. Were we to transplant these works to another site, we would be injuring the work and surrounding alike. The manner in which these sculptures blend into their surrounding is due to the fact that most of them (like the works by Gross, Calder, de Saint Phalle, Karavan, Kadishman, Shemi, Orion, Ullman and Turell) had been made to order with the particular site in view.

The legitimation for integrating contemporary art in Tel Aviv, a modern city founded in 1909, had already been assured by the quality of the Jerusalem program, so that it was unnecessary in the initial phase to commission renowned international sculptors in order to justify the importance of the enterprise in the eyes of the local public. Tel Aviv of the 1930s was the first city in the world to be constructed almost entirely in the International Style. Most of the public art was commissioned in the last decade. It was installed in the long boulevards, near offices and residential buildings and close to the Mediterranean seashore.

Jerusalem is characterized by spiritual, religious and political tensions. Tel Aviv is characterized by continuous social, economical, and cultural dynamism which generated the slogan of Tel Aviv as "... a city without a stop".

- Views of Jerusalem

- Max Bill, Four Squares bisected into identical halves (Public art outside the Old City)

- Jewish and Moslem's rejection of figurative art

- Michelangelo David (1501 - 1504) Florence. Copy was offered as a gift for the 3000 years anniversary.

Piazza della Signoria, near the Palazzo Vecchio (Similar to the Italian Hospital in Jerusalem)

-David in the Academia. A bronze copy in Piazzalle Michelangelo

- David in Hakone open air Museum, Japan.

David by Verrocchio (copy) in David's Tower (the Citadel, now The David's Tower Museum, Jerusalem).

Orthodox Jews and Moslems prefer modern abstract art to figurative.

Jean Arp: "On the Threshold of Jerusalem", 1961 - 72.

In the late 1950's Arp created a series of sculptures in which the word

threshold appears in each title. Their shapes are a continuation of the assemblage and the

collages reliefs which preceded them in his work. These sculptures are flat and resemble reliefs whose hard background was taken from them and replaced by scenic space, As such they became the threshold to the scenery (in this particular case, the park and the Old City.) This sculpture is an enlarged version of the Three Graces created by Arp in 1961 on a smaller scale. The three Graces appears in art as early as the classical period. One recognizes the three shapes composing the piece as the shadows of 3 women. (For example Robert Delaunay, La Ville de Paris)

The name "On the threshold of Jerusalem" was given to the sculpture after the artist's death in order to avoid any association with figurative art which could cause difficulties to religious Jews and Moslems.

Examples of abstract art commissioned to overcome reservations toward figurative art:

- Ezra Orion, "Ma'alot", Stairway to the Stars, 1979 - 80

-Alexander Calder, Homage to Jerusalem, Stabile, 1977

This sculpture, Calder's last work, has an open and light side and a sealed heavy side. On the light side we find high arches which also appear in other stables. The significance of the arches changes with their location. On Mount Herzl they become windows and gates through which the panorama is taken in (Ein karem & the edge of the Jerusalem Forest), their shape appearing to be an echo to the mountains. The heavy side reminds one of the tail of animal.

Helen Escobedo, The great Cone 1986.

-Michael Gross (unique combination of abstract sculpture with expressive emotional aspect), "Prayer to the Mountain Ridge" 1974, Simon Bolivar Garden.
The leaning arch on the threshold of the abyss is seen on the background of the blue sky as a white line which leads the observer's gaze from the nearby environment toward the panorama spread below (... " I understand, said the donour, this is the horse, but where is Simon Bolivar?.....")

-Michael Gross, "Tremor", 1983.

The minimalist sculpture is seen among the trees and against the background of Jerusalem. The components of the sculpture are two segments from circle of different diameters and located in different planes are connected and form an obtuse angle between them.

-Isamu Noguchi's Billy Rose Sculpture Garden, 1965,

part of the Israel Museum. The garden is called officially "art garden" and not "sculpture garden", in order not to upset orthodox jews, although it exhibits also figurative art such as sculptures by Rodin, Bourdelle, Archipenko, Lipchitz, Nadelman etc...

-Popular ornaments on lintels in the Old City Moslem Quarter:

One of the five major commands of Islam is the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. It is the duty of every faithful Moslem to make the pilgrimage at least once in his lifetime. Upon fulfilling this behest, he is granted the title of Hadj. Shortly before his return, members of his household start decorating the house. The most popular motifs are plants and structures that have religious significance: The Black Stone of Mecca and the Golden Dome of Jerusalem.

-Tel Aviv, modern city founded in 1909. In the 1930's was the largest concentration in the world, at an early date, of International Style Architecture.

-Arieh Elhanany, "Hebrew Worker", 1934, the first public art in Tel Aviv, was designed in Constructivist style which was appropriate for the socialist climate of the period.

-Dani Karavan, "White Square", 1976-1988 is a site specific environmental sculpture overlooking Tel Aviv and the sea. As the title "White Square" suggests, it was conceived as an homage to the white city.

-Drora Domini, "Aviv", 1984, (Two concrete coffee cups and an arch with hollow letters "Aviv" = Spring "created" by the coffee steam.

Public opinion was manifested very quickly... the sculpture was wrapped with garbage plastic bags.

-Michael Ullman, "Foundation", 1989. (9.3m length concrete) outline of a typical apartment in Tel Aviv. Ullman provided history for a city without archaeology. (Rafi Lavi, the artist and the art critic of the local newspaper "Hai'r" claimed that he could not review it since he did not find it.) In each room there is a chair in a different position. The buried chairs in Tel Aviv from '89 suggest Ulrich Ruckriem ground relief on both sides of the main approach to the Schloss in this year (1997) Sculpture Exhibition in Münster.

-Micha Ullman, "Library", Bebelplatz Berlin, inaugurated 20/3/95), located at the spot of the burned books during the Nazi regime. (1st prize in competition). Like "Foundation" in Tel Aviv it is an underground sculpture, Under the glass one can see empty shelves without books.

-Rachel Whiteread, Untitled, (books) installation, balcony second floor of atrium of Westfälischen Landesmuseum, Münster 1997.

-Books are relatively recent to Whiteread's reportory of domestic objects and came about through her work two years ago on the proposal (which may not be realized - although she won the 1st prize) for the Holocaust Memorial in Vienna (1995). Her basic unit is concrete cast of a shelf of books of the same size, but each differing slightly in character. In Münster it is not books themselves that have been cast but the void that exists between a wall of shelf-back

and a row of closed books - the often dusty even secret space, glimpsed only when removing a book.

-Micha Ullman, "Sea Level", 1992 (2.7m), Alenbi street. Negative of chairs.

-Micha Ullman, "Gate", 1995 (10.5m) concrete, terracota tiles, iron grate ,
Tel Aviv Performing Art Center (Ya'acov Rechter architect).

Sky can be seen through the negative of a chair at the upper part of the "obelisc". Below the iron grate, a concrete chair covered by terracota can be seen.

-Motti Mizrachi, "Column, Screw and Ducks", 1989 (4.5m painted steel, bronze, stainless steel) was designed with no specific site in mind. The artist only condition for choosing the location was that no street sign will be closer than 10m to the sculpture. No such site exists in the city. Even when installed in Massaric Sq, the no entry sign appeared soon.

-Gabi Klasmer, "Mandatory Sculpture no.1", Ben Gurion blvd, 1991, was installed on 14th of January - a day before the Gulf War. Designed in reference to street furniture, the rust suggest the early days of Tel Aviv under British Mandate rule, the light instead of being transparent is an iron cone but since it was installed a day before the war, people believed that it was a device against the missiles.

-Gideon Gechtman, "Vase", 1992 (3.5m fiberglass),
Iben Gvirol street, Tel Aviv) is not an innocent vase but supposed to be an urne with artist's own ash.

-Arthur Rubinstein Observation point and tomb in the Jerusalem forest designed by Israel Hadani. Rubinstein was cremated (against jewish tradition and religious rules) his "piano"'s music is the landscape of the Jerusalem forest.

-Zadok Ben David, "Beyond the Limits", 1985, (5m, metal stainless steel, g.r.c., paint) was originally called "Why is the Monkey Upsidedown?". The title was changed when the artist discovered the black rope marking the city limits for orthodox jews observing Shabath - a law which dose not permit people to walk outside the city limits, marked by the rope, on Saturday. The sculpture is installed near the sea shore, just beyond the city limit.

-Ilan Averbuch, "Harp, Sea and the Soft Wind", 1989 (5.00 m, wood, aluminium, stone)
When seen from the sea shore the sculpture is installed between a 1915 Mosque and the tallest sky scraper in Tel Aviv the Shalom Tower, (between East and West).

-Charles Simmonds miniature brick instalation, 1981, in a poor neighborhood of Jerusaelm, in addition to the work installed simultaneously at the Israel Museum, served as a field

anthropological laboratory. Passers-by talked with the artist about the quality of life in the quarter, the meaning of living there in comparison to more modern housing in new neighborhoods of the city.

-Motti Mizrahi, "Peace Rider" installed on top of a bank after an exhibition at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion. The artist hoped to install such sculptures cast in bronze in many sites all over the country in order to express people aspirations for peace.

-Allan Kaprow's "Ice wall", 1980, an ephemeral installation in front of the Western Wall of the Old City, better known as a continuation of the Wailing Wall. Kaprow built an ice wall from ice blocks which melted as a metaphor for the destruction of barriers between arabs and jews and between the three monotheistic religions of Jerusalem.