

# Culture for the People: This Israeli Venue Proves Art Doesn't Have to Be Pretentious

An art venue in The Ramat Eliyahu Art Workshop one of the most interesting exhibitions currently showing in Israel – and displays it with humor and a dedicated curatorial effort.

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From a video

by Dan Michael Rosenberg.

Enter this art workshop in Rishon Letzion and you might think you've stepped into a community center. It totally lacks the typical white, cube-like gallery gravitas – but it houses one of the most interesting exhibitions currently showing in Israel. The curator, Orit Hasson Walder, has brought together four Israeli artists and come up with a light, unpretentious display of sculptures and video works that has nothing of self-importance about it.

A video installation by Ori Levin in the building's street-front window greets the visitor. Levin's work starts off with a touching "atmospheric" photograph of a small flowerpot containing a cactus against the backdrop of a whitewashed wall, a representation of the quintessential image of Israeliness, by now worn thin from overuse. An invisible hand throws a tennis ball at the lyrical cactus, threatening to knock it over. The hand turns out to belong to the artist, bored in a waiting room, perhaps at the Interior Ministry or some other state establishment. She's playing with the ball. Her mother picks it up. One of them – it's not clear who – throws it again, this time hitting the flowerpot and knocking the cactus onto its side. Earth spills out.

Next to the brief video we see the "original," a real flowerpot containing a cactus, with a photograph of a cactus that has been assembled from a few different plants via

Photoshop. Taken together, this sculptural-photographic compilation plays as a parody of the art of Gideon Gechtman (1942-2008), the formulaic juxtaposing of an object and its representation, repetitiveness in different semantic registers and mother-daughter symbiosis in the form of a plant. Levin's tactics void every gesture of power. There's no reason to look for an allegory; we are left with a joke that fell flat, with the myth of the sabra (fallen victim), as an effect of pointless nonsense.

Levin's installation is part of a project of "window art," in which works of art will be displayed as a regular feature in the gallery's window. Like Levin, Dan Michael Rosenberg casts his parents in a highly comic video work. The simple storyline gradually assumes a Chaplinesque quality through a series of "Home Alone"-style events. The film begins at the end. Rosenberg is singing "The blue is beautiful in the sky" – from "I'm Still a Child," which won first prize in the Children's Song Festival of 1980 – on his parents' grave. From there we go back in time: he's standing in the middle of the living room singing them the same song. They tell him to stop and flee to the kitchen. He follows hard on their heels with guitar and amplifier, chasing them through every room in the house. They slam doors and shutter windows; he positions himself opposite the balcony on a crane and rappels down to them, while the song continues to play.

He's an obsessive nag, harassing his parents, who refuse to acknowledge his talent. He hovers over them on a wind glider as they jog in a field, taking his revenge for the song's pesky question, "Well, child, what do you want to do when you grow up?", killing them softly.

Shay Id Alony's contribution is a white sculptural installation in the form of a silent procession of totem-like figures made from found items – junk, remnants of furniture, construction materials – which together constitute a kind of elegant zombie band. The work is influenced by comics and film animation; the figures evoke a sports team. One of them, with a skeletal face and a towel on its head, might be a soccer player or possibly a pharaoh, another has a towel draped around its neck, a third has a soccer-ball belly. Rods of various kinds become scepters. The figures are posed in a defensive posture, as though inviting others to a game, or like objects that demarcate a sports field for spectators. The tenor of the installation brings to mind aliens, too.

***Detail from Shay Id Alony's sculptural installation of totem-like figures. Photo by Avi Kakon***

One source of inspiration for the work, the curator notes, is the sequence of buildings constructed as a kind of "blocking barrier" between the city's refurbished western neighborhoods and its Ramat Eliyahu section, where the gallery is located and which is home to immigrants from Ethiopia.

Also occupying this space is a sculptural installation, "Vision of the Wet Bones," by Gil Yefman. Continuing a project he presented in Japan, "Vision" was created in cooperation with local school pupils as part of an environmental education program. The students collected plastic bags, from which the sculptures were made. Bones, genitals, breasts, eyes and other organs were knitted and then hung, large and round. Decorative plants have been placed within them, so that the objects are also flowerpots

on demand, a process the artist calls “transforming poison into medicine” via a technique of “turning their swords into thread and their spears into knitting needles.” The recycled plastic bags, morphed into flower-pot sculptures, recalls simultaneously an apocalyptic vision in the spirit of the prophet Ezekiel and resourceful domestic aesthetics achieved by recycling and decoration in the spirit of macramé.

## **Resolving tensions**

In addition, Hasson Walder has found a smart, elegant solution for one of the inherent tensions of peripheral municipal galleries. On the one hand, there is a desire to professionalize them, remove them from the straitjacket of irrelevant provincialism and annex them to the art world. That requires a serious curator; committed artists ready to take part, although they know the leading figures of the art world will probably not see the exhibitions; and a budget for creating place-specific projects, not just recycling what the artists have already shown in prestigious art spaces in the center of the country.

At the same time, there is persistent pressure from local artists to exhibit their amateur works, be it in plaster or Fimo. Their needs, too, need to be met in the form of visibility, space and an occasional warm response.

Hasson Walder has created a large exhibition showcase, which she calls “The Gallery of All Things.” Inspired by The Museum of Everything in London, the Renaissance period Cabinets of Wonder and outsider art, it is devoted to “works and objects found outside the field of art.” At present, it contains a collection of miniature shoes, sculptures made of palm fronds and the estate of a physician, Dr. Herman Reich, who used his spare time in the clinic to create bizarre works out of Plasticine.

The exhibition is well suited to those who can do without the array of tactical accessories by which art is elevated and exalted, such as vacuum-like spaces with luxurious décor, a silent office at the side where sales are made and a feeling of separation from life. None of the above exists in the Sadna Le’omanut (literally, art workshop). It’s located in a lobby with a street window, its accessories are mostly school-like in spirit and design, its ways are simple. It’s the perfect backdrop for this affable art, which brims with the joy of creation and is not full of itself. Exuding an atmosphere of home economics and handicrafts, the exhibition proves that “for the whole family” need not be an embarrassing disaster. Beyond this, the curator has devised an exhibition possessing a distinctly comic thrust, with a strong element of art jokes or jokes about art.

Indeed, in the spirit of the periphery that every novice activist or retired chief censor swears by, Hasson Walder has created an exhibition that honors the concept of “community art.” Without disparaging, condescending to or lowering expectations in regard to the “community” at which the exhibition is aimed, and also without prostituting the artists or art itself.

*Municipal Gallery, 5 Shaul Hamelech Street, Ramat Eliyahu neighborhood, Rishon Letzion; Mon. - Wed., 9 A.M.- 2 P.M., Thurs., 5 P.M. - 7 P.M.; until the end of October.*