

CONTEMPORARY ISRAELI ART

Carved in Wood

From her studio in the quiet, seaside town of Herzliya, Orit Hofshi creates art that transports viewers into another world, a world where questions about man's place in the universe confront them.

> by Heidi J. Gleit

There is something familiar about the landscapes and figures in Orit Hofshi's prints and drawings. Elements in them often are based on photographs that Hofshi has taken or clipped from newspapers, but that doesn't explain the sense of déjà vu or the fact that many viewers approach Hofshi to tell her that a friend or relative of theirs appears in her work.

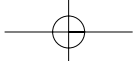
"The figures in my works are life sized and so the viewer can relate to them. As a result, some viewers are [mistakenly] convinced the people in them look familiar," she says. "A capability of mine is to make people look familiar – to create images that people identify with."

Irish art scholar and curator Patrick Murphy suggests the same is true of her landscapes. In an essay in the book accompanying her latest exhibit, "Ephemeral Passage," he writes, "In *Pahoehoe*, 2002, we are presented with an escarpment of rock.... We search for feature, something to redeem the image from the non-descript, the generic... Hofshi's featureless rockscape offers nothing but our own perception of it, eschewing the viewer's search for meaning."

The Personal behind the Universal

Hofshi's works have a universal quality, but they are influenced by her background and that of her family. "I am very influenced by history. I spent years exploring my family's roots. My art doesn't focus on my personal history, but I look at it and try to understand it in a global context," she explains.







“We were in the US for nine years and decided to come back to Israel because we realized our identity is Israeli and wanted to pass it on to our children,” Hofshi says.



Hofshi was born at Kibbutz Matzuva in 1959 to immigrants from Czechoslovakia. “My mother left Europe alone at 15 and built a new world. She met my father on the ship on the way over, though they did not become a couple until later,” Hofshi relates. “They were both in Young Maccabi and went to Kibbutz Deganyah and then established Kibbutz Matzuva, where they lived for 25 years.

“They came right before the gates of Europe were closed. My mother’s parents had certificates that would allow them to settle in the British Mandate of Palestine legally, but they couldn’t get out of Europe. My father’s parents were wealthy Zionists who bought certificates for many Jews, but didn’t manage to make it here themselves.”

Even though her family left Matzuva when she was a child, the other kibbutz members became a surrogate extended family for Hofshi, her parents, her twin brother Rani, and her older sister Nogah. Today her parents live in Haifa and Hofshi lives in Herzliya with her husband Nittai and their three teenage children, Noam, Offer, and Netta. Before settling in Herzliya, she spent many years abroad, studying at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia and the University of Leeds in the UK.

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Two of the rare works that do feature images directly connected to Hofshi’s personal history are *Vis Vitalis* and *Resilience (Holesov, 1944)*. Both works stem from the trip that she and her mother took a few years ago

“Ephemeral Passage,” is on display at the Open Museum in the Tefen Industrial Park until December 20, 2009. For details, call (04) 910-9600. Hofshi’s work also will be on display in the US at Philagrafika 2010 in Philadelphia from January 29-April 11, 2010.



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to her mother’s hometown of Holesov.

“The town remembers its Jewish community and invited me to visit and exhibit my work there,” Hofshi explains. During the surreal visit, they found people there who remembered her mother and her family – *Vis Vitalis* shows her mother walking arm in arm with one of them. However, they did not find her mother’s childhood home, which had been located next to the town’s once-ornate synagogue and destroyed along with it.

“The Nazis destroyed the synagogue twice and after the war the Czechs destroyed the only wall of it that was still standing,” she says. A photograph of that wall that reached her by chance is the central image of *Resilience (Holesov, 1944)*. Hofshi hastens to add that everything surrounding it came from her imagination and the photographs that she takes constantly on her travels around the world.

In addition to her own photographs, Hofshi incorporates images that she clips from newspapers and magazines, generally images related to political events or that depict people shocked or saddened by their surroundings as they try to deal with the world. She follows the news closely, listening to the radio as she works.

“Both of my parents are the only survivor in their family. I think we have a right to live here, but we have to ask hard questions,” she says. “I don’t have a solution for the problems in Israel, but the fact that people become refugees is not something that I can tolerate or understand. It is complicated, but we should not stop trying to deal with it.”

Hofshi does this in her work, taking the images out of their original context and putting them in her own context.

Photographs
courtesy of Orit
Hofshi.

Left:

Vis Vitalis, ink drawing, woodcut, and grease pencil on paper, 2007. (Oded Antman)

Previous page:

Discern, transfer drawing and woodcut on paper, 2005. (Avraham Hay)

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From Concept to Art

Hofshi, who teaches drawing, painting, and printmaking, has a background in drawing, which is evident in any media she uses. She mainly works in media related to relief printmaking. In addition to employing the traditional printmaking technique of carving a piece of wood in order to make prints on paper, she also adopted a more unconventional method of using the carved wood as an object, a relief which is a work of art in its own right. She also uses the carved wood to make rubbings, which she often combines with prints, drawings, and transfer drawings on a single page to create a multimedia monotype.

Hofshi’s studio in the Artist’s Residence, Herzliya, is dominated by a worktable that is two meters long and one meter wide – which is the size of the wooden blocks that are the backbone of her work.

“This is the size that people can relate to since it is about the size of a person,” she notes.

Hofshi makes the blocks herself by gluing together 20 cm. wide planks of pinewood.

“I always work with pinewood, not plywood. I like the smell and texture and let it have its say,” she explains.

After examining the wood, she decides whether to use it to make a print or to display it on its own, or to display the ink-coated block after she uses it to make a print.

“I am most conscious of the properties of my materials and their relationship, particularly the inherent texture and patterns of the wood, which combined with the effects of the carving and sculpting tools become an integral part of the woodcut’s message,” Hofshi explains.

She draws on the wood before carving into it. When carving, she doesn’t follow the lines of the drawing exactly – it’s a guide and she sometimes redraws the image as she carves. She carves at different thicknesses and depths, depending on the wood, though this cannot be discerned when she uses the block to create a print.

“The print is different from the block. There are many traces that disappear when it is printed,” Hofshi notes.

When she makes a print, she covers the carved wood with an even layer of ink and tops it with paper. She then presses the paper against the wood with a flat wooden spoon, slowly moving it

in a circular motion and evenly applying pressure to the back of the paper so that it picks up the paint from the areas that have not been carved out.

Hofshi uses relief printmaking, in which the paper absorbs ink from the block’s upper surface, as compared to etching, in which the paper absorbs ink from the carved out areas.

“One of the advantages of this technique is that I do not need a press and all the equipment that is needed for etching, but only need a wooden spoon,” she says, adding that despite the simple equipment, printmaking requires lab conditions.

Another advantage is that she can lift the paper in the midst of the printing process to examine it and add ink to areas that she wants to be darker. Hofshi makes many proofs until she reaches the final work and sometimes even goes back and recarves the wood after making a test print. Once the image on the paper matches the vision in her head, she usually makes four prints and two artist’s proofs.

Hofshi prefers to use Okawara paper from Japan or a handmade Japanese-style paper that she obtains from Izhar Neumann, a Jerusalem native who studied papermaking in Japan and then opened the Tut-Neyar paper mill in Zichron Ya’acov. She usually uses only one color of ink, generally black, because she has found that colors distract from the concept. This choice also is influenced by Israel’s harsh white sunlight.

“The sun in Israel is so strong that it washes out all the color and so painters here don’t make as fine distinctions between shades of colors. Israeli works of art often are light with an elimination of information that reflects the way light in Israel eliminates things from view,” Hofshi says.

Some of her works consist of a single block or print, but many consist of a series of wood blocks, prints, drawings, rubbings, and paintings that come together to form a single tableau so huge that it cannot be assembled in her studio.

“I respect printmaking and so I can go beyond it,” Hofshi says. “For example, a rubbing has the same matrix as a print but is totally different. The matrix is a vocabulary and I can take a word from it and ask questions about the temporariness of man in a political context.” ■

ERETZ Magazine thanks Yael Shavit for her assistance with this article.

Facing page (top):
Datum Collectanea, ink drawing and acrylic on carved pinewood panels, 2005. (Avraham Hay)

Facing page (bottom):
Resilience (Holesov, 1944), spoon-printed woodcut on Okawara paper, 2008. (Avraham Hay)

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