

Avner Levinson in Conversation with Ofer Lellouche

What was the trigger that made you pick up art?

When I was 13, my father passed away. As part of the attempt to cope with the loss, my mother suggested that I join a sculpting class. I worked with a group of adults in a live model class. I knew nothing about artists and about art history, but I loved working with the material, and I built a small studio in the basement of our house. I would spend the hours after school in the studio making mostly expressive heads of imaginary people. The combination of the little familiarity I had with art and my young age created something very primal and direct. I guess it suited my situation very well. What interested me was the possibility of expressing human emotion. It was not a specific emotion. Looking back, I think that the power I found in sculpture was the ability to convey a deep human experience that I couldn't put into words.

How do you start a sculpture, what is your starting point? What is the inspiration? How much do you dialogue with other artists while working?

I am very connected to the history of art on an everyday level. When sketching or making small sculptures, studies of sorts, I regularly work from observation. But when I work in the studio on new large-scale sculptures, my starting point is not a particular thought or an image or a model. I also do not have another artist's painting or sculpture in mind. I start from an experience of emotion, from a movement that interests me. Sometimes it is something as simple as how a head sits on the neck, other times it is an abstract idea.

Can you talk a little about your work process?

When I start a sculpture, I work very fast. Within two hours, there's already a sculpture, even two-meter high sculptures. But in the next stage, the initial idea I had in mind begins to blur and fade away, and I work with what emerges in front of me in the material. This process usually takes several months. It is a process of constantly changing all the parts of the sculpture. I work on each part separately, but every individual part affects other parts, and also requires them to change. I am constantly trying to maintain tension and create tension between the detail and the whole and between the front and back, while also trying to close the sculpture so that from every angle it looks good but also surprising and different. It is almost a dance of sorts around the sculpture.

Can you give an example of this dance?

I'll give you an example from a sculpture I have been working on in the past few months. In the first stage of work, the sculpture was created as a standing figure. But since I did not find the figure interesting enough, I started shifting the material and drastically changing its shape and structure, until the upright movement became an arc, and the sculpture became completely abstract - from a narrow two and a half meter high sculpture it transformed into a much wider one and a half meter sculpture. There was something interesting about it, ambiguous, and I decided I won't work on it for the time being. For a few weeks I only looked at it. It seemed good and right from most angles, but from a certain perspective it did not work. I felt that the sculpture standing in front of me had no meaning. The shape and form of the sculpture were satisfying, but I did not feel that I was able to connect with it emotionally. I felt it was too generic. When I work, it

is important for me to reach a physical place with a sculpture, but it is just as important for me to reach an emotional place with it. You could say that if a sculpture is not at this specific place, I do not find enough meaning in it and it does not interest me. It is not something I think about or put into words; it is more of an intuitive feeling, and that is probably why while working on a sculpture, something that I do not always completely understand and can explain happens. It just feels right. And when a sculpture gets there, exactly that point, I stop.

Back to that sculpture - I decided to continue working on it and open it once again in completely new directions. At the end of the process, the sculpture turned into a head sculpture. I certainly think that it is possible that in a few years' time I will go back to the abstract shape that interested me at some stage in the process, and start a different, new sculpture from the same place. In this case it did not sit right.

In the head sculptures, I noticed that you emphasize the nose, the mouth, the eyes... but also work abstractly, so that the different organs are not anatomical. I presume this is related to the tension that you mentioned that you are trying to maintain and create in the sculpture. I'd like to try and understand more about the type of relationship you are looking for between figurative and abstract and between the front and the back of the sculpture.

When I am working on the motif of a human figure, whether it is a full figure or a head, I feel as though I am moving between two poles: an image that is closer to reality, and on the other hand, an abstract image. Like I mentioned, the tension between the poles is what interests me. I want to create an expression. And expression is not necessarily something universal like sadness, anger, and so on, but rather something more subtle and precise, personal even - like layers of feelings, sensations, and life experiences. In sculpture, I explore questions through a plastic sculptural language. My goal is to create a sensory experience of depth and space with abstract means. For instance, for me, a nose, other than being a nose, also allows me to create large expanses in relation to the depth

of the eye.

As for the relation between the parts of the sculpture - I do not see any difference between working on the back and on the front of the sculpture. Throughout the history of sculpture, we see that different artists and cultures addressed the angles of the sculpture in different ways: at times they only treated the front, other times, like in a cube, all four sides. I think about sculpture more like a spiral that is in constant circular movement: front to back, bottom up, and other way round. For me, a good sculpture is a sculpture that the viewer wants to walk around, and finds it interesting enough look at for a long time, like the feeling you have while looking at a landscape - the possibility to look and move in countless directions and ways. I have such an infinite and inexhaustible experience, for instance, in front of a good Cézanne. While working on a sculpture, often it happens that a certain angle of the sculpture looks good but from a different angle, even slightly to the side, the sculpture does not work, so it has to be reopened, changed and shifted, until it reaches a place where it works from every angle and can be closed.

Your use of clay is very unique. Do you work with other materials as well?

I usually pick one thing, and go deep with it. The same goes for the clay. I have worked with it from a very young age, and it is really a part of me.

Clay is a receptive material. It does not restrict me, and allows me to do any move I want. I can subtract or add, and mainly move large chunks quickly. I keep it very wet, and use it as a painter would use paint and brush. I work with my hands, with direct contact between the body and the material, and with large strokes that create movement and flow. It is spontaneous, intuitive, and fast, and gives life to the sculpture.

With clay, you can achieve a sculpture and a large mass very quickly, but I try not to reach the full volume too fast. In the work process, I am constantly in motion, moving around the sculpture, and taking into account many different perspectives, and a significant

part of my work is removal and subtraction and not necessarily construction. Clay is very suitable, even necessary, for work of this kind. It allows me to subtract, to cut out large chunks quickly, and by removing the material, surprising and unexpected things emerge, allowing me to address what's there and what isn't, and the negative shapes formed around the positive shapes in the material itself.

You are describing mostly the process of working with a mass, in large scale sculptures, although earlier you also mentioned small sculptures. Can you talk a little more about the differences in the work process?

I work on sculptures of varying sizes - from miniatures, through small sculptures, to those large sculptures that can reach two and a half meters. Obviously, the scale of the sculpture affects how I work, but the size of the sculpture also affects the viewing experience.

In large sculptures, which are life size or larger than an object in reality, the work is very physical, and the entire body is involved in the construction. In these sizes, the lumps of material create a terrain, and the material itself gains power. The sculpture has a mass that is equal to my own mass and sometimes exceeds it, making it an entity of sorts, which is present in space in front of me. With a large sculpture, I can work with my entire hand, press it against the material; in small sculptures, the hand is too large in comparison, and its touch can destroy an entire area. In a small sculpture, the pieces can be easily changed. It can be disassembled and recreated with just a few touches. While the large sculpture is an entity that is present in the space, the small sculptures convey a different experience in their dimensions. When the image is small, the perspective creates a parallel universe for it.

In sculpture, there is often a sense of mass and alertness. Your sculptures hold a sense of painting, textures, movement, and flow.

My sculptural perception is greatly influenced by painting and drawing, I am not a sculptor of construction and material in the usual sense. People

who sculpt usually ascribe great significance to the material. For them, the material is a key element that dictates the work process and sometimes also the outcome. The material is even perceived as something noble. I always felt the material was secondary. To me, it serves what I want to create, and I must not let it take over. Over the years I have tried working with many materials: stone, metal, papier-mâché, and others. Eventually I returned to clay. I feel I am a clay sculptor. Many times, sculptures I was working on collapsed, broke, or changed a lot, which was always okay, an integral part of the work, because the main thing about my work is the process, which is very open and very dynamic.

Your work is not in the mainstream art world. How does a young artist decide to choose such a path? Did you have doubts? Have you considered trying a different, more central direction in the contemporary art world?

I did not have doubts at any point, but the fact is that I never really decided either. Intuitively, at every junction along the way, I returned to the same kind of sculpture that I make. I have never focused too much on whether my works are relevant or popular. The sculptural practice, touching the material as you sculpt the human body, the relation between abstract and figurative - these are the questions that have always fascinated me, and they give me the sense of relevant and vital work.

I think that without thinking, at a very young age, I realized that it was a way of life that suited me, and that I could live by. My familiarity with the art world - art history and contemporary art - started only at age 23 in New York, where I studied and lived for a decade. I saw a lot of contemporary art, but at no point did I feel it was something that could interest me as an artist, nor did I ever feel the need to be a part of what everyone was doing. I am interested in an everyday process in the studio, in front of the sculpture, surrounded by works that I created in previous years, in understanding where I was yesterday, and in which direction I can continue today. For me, being outside the mainstream is also a strength.