

## Resonant Reflections: The Art of Ilan Averbuch

by Rachel Rosenfield Lafo

Imagine stone leaves floating amid vertical planes of glass, a glass balloon constrained in its wooden frame, unable to rise, or a pair of wings weighted down by heavy stones. These are just a few of the antithetical images that form the essence of Ilan Averbuch's evocative and metaphoric sculptures. Firmly rooted in their connections to history, myth, literature, and art, they are made from the timeless and durable materials of stone, wood, copper, lead, iron, and steel. His sculptures bear the marks of time, not only because he uses recycled materials like railroad ties, paving stones, and curbstones that bring their own history to the work, but also because of their resemblance to ancient artifacts and architectural structures that might have been unearthed in an archaeological excavation, perhaps even serving a function at one time. Yet while they echo with the resonance of times past, they also speak to the present and future, as repositories of individual and collective memories that have bearing on our contemporary lives.

Born in Israel in 1953, Averbuch's artistic output is inextricably linked to the history, culture, geography, and politics of his native land, influenced by his travel experiences in South America and India, his education in London and New York, his years living in the United States, and his absorption of many literary and artistic inspirations. From a young age he drew meticulous pictures of stone walls, indelibly imprinted by a country "...layered with historic remains" where he "...adopted the methodology of using fragments, lost narratives, and poetic interpretations to drive" his "aesthetics."<sup>1</sup> Among the recurring themes in his work are civilization and its history, growth, transformation, and the inevitable passage of time, dreams and memory, the relationship between text and image, and the conflict between our aspirations and our limitations.

Averbuch's methodology adheres to the theory of the unity of opposites, first proposed by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, in which everything has a co-existent and dependent opposite with which it forms balance and unity. The dialectic of the unity of opposites has been a lynchpin in philosophical thought since ancient times, informing many traditions including Marxism, alchemy, and the Chinese philosophy of yin and yang. Averbuch's physically imposing sculptures with their large scale and powerful material presence have the appearance of permanence and stability, yet—like the tilted frame in *Self-Portrait*, the grounded balloon in *In The End of Utopia*, or the crown and dome that have fallen on their sides in *The Little Prince* and *Berlin Dome*—are constructed to suggest the opposite. Physical weight is often counterbalanced by the illusion of buoyancy in those sculptures that seemingly defy gravity by featuring heavy, archaic stones held up, improbably, by vertical elements of wood or glass. This semblance of precariousness is particularly evident in the public art installation *Terra Incognita* (1995), where large blocks of stone form two huge cubes that balance between three clusters of vertical wooden poles, leaving a gateway through which people can pass. Walking or standing under these massive stone cubes is most certainly unnerving.

Over his more than thirty year career Averbuch has developed a personal vocabulary of recurring symbolic forms drawn from his life experiences and the cultural influences that have shaped him. These include both the natural - leaves, vines, petals, fruit, vegetables, grain, trees, water (both literally and figuratively), animals, figurative elements and references to the human body; and the manmade - rings, bells, funnels, books, weapons, wheels, boats, gates, towers, ladders, stairways and other architectural forms. While the meanings of Averbuch's sculptures are nuanced and open to interpretation, his visual language is always recognizable. If you come upon an Averbuch sculpture you will know that it is his.

This exhibition at the Open Museum in Tefen Industrial Park focuses on six sculptures that integrate glass with stone, steel, lead, and wood. Averbuch first introduced glass to his work in 1996, drawn to the material because of its association with the gridded glass structures of modernity, specifically the glass curtain walls of modern skyscrapers that offer protection while letting light in. He was also intrigued by the "psychology of our relationship to glass," our fear of shattering it. Usually thought of as a fragile and breakable material, glass can actually—against all conventional logic—be quite strong. As Averbuch explains, "For a sculptor who loves the language of material interaction, the properties of surface and colors in materials, glass is one of the most natural ones. The fear that goes with it is just an added bonus. It is the *to be or not to be* of materials and one that has hardly any oxidation. In other words it does not rot or disintegrate."<sup>ii</sup>

The artist's use of glass, then, was in part an attempt to challenge the viewer's perception about the properties of materials and create ambiguity about which element in his sculpture was supporting the other. For example, in *Time Will Tell* (1996), one of the first sculptures to feature glass, Averbuch suspended a stone branch of leaves more than two feet off the ground in between vertical panes or walls of glass, so that the glass appears to bear the full weight of the stone. When the sculpture is exhibited outside, a channel cut into the stone collects water, recalling the water troughs built by Bedouin nomads to collect rain in the desert. Both water and the vine, a frequent motif in Averbuch's work and a symbol of Israel in the Old Testament, are critically important life-giving sources. The sculpture also alludes to the artist's daughter Maya, whose name, which means "water" in Aramaic, appears in the title of *Drawing for Time Will Tell (maya)*, made at the same time as the sculpture. The artist metaphorically links the water in the channel as "it fills up with the rain and dehydrates by the sun, in an endless cycle," with the passage of time and life cycle in his daughter's life.

Although Averbuch's large, beautifully rendered drawings are not included in this exhibition they are pivotal to his working process. Created before, during, and after the sculptures that are associated with them, the drawings combine sketches of the sculptures with the artist's handwritten introspective notes and musings. As he explains, "I start with a raw sketch, a notebook sketch, a passing thought. The drawing is more like a diary of the making of a sculpture. It is the digestion of the form, the making it on paper, sometimes the writing about it or reference to what it

is about, like "Maya" in *Time Will Tell*. Because it is like an unorganized diary, it almost always starts before the sculpture and is on my wall as I am working on the sculpture, and ends some time after I finish the sculpture."

Averbuch's anthropomorphic sculptures, like *Narcissus and the Desire to Fly* (1999), a visual evocation of the Greek myths of Narcissus and Icarus, comment on human folly and the dangers of pride and self-absorption. In this bipartite sculpture Icarus's wings of wood and glass are also Narcissus's ribcage and lungs, with two round stones, "...hanging on both sides of a mirror-like glass, suggesting sexuality and vanity." Here glass is both a transparent "soft skin" and the reflective surface in which Narcissus was mesmerized by his own image. In *In the End of Utopia: (The Big Balloon is Far)*, a work made in the same year, consists of a glass balloon constrained in a skeletal structure of wood ribs. Weighted down by its wooden framework and by stones that form its base on one end, the balloon, a symbol of utopian dreams, cannot fly or reach fulfillment. Writing about these two sculptures the artist has said, "Both works suggest a tool to fly but seem to have a paradox of materials built in which deems to ground them forever...they are built with great care for craftsmanship as if craft will win the task but with a full knowledge and irony that the image combined with this material is an impossible tool—it is only art."

In *Skirts and Pants (after Duchamp)* (2000) Averbuch pays tribute to an iconic work of the early twentieth century, Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. Suspended from a wooden framework like marionettes, the male and female figures are manipulated in the vein of the mechanistic bride and bachelors in Duchamp's *The Large Glass*. Semi-opaque etched glass panels create the physical form of the figures' garments and other symbols referencing sexuality, war, and male-female relationships. There is also an architectural source for Averbuch's gridded glass figures. The artist was inspired by Frank Gehry and Vlado Milunić's deconstructivist "Dancing House" in Prague, nicknamed "Fred and Ginger," which successfully and playfully evokes the famous dance partners in architectural form.

The literary and poetic nature of Averbuch's art merges most explicitly with the sculptural in his architectural installation *The Forest* (1999). Describing his intent for this sculpture, Averbuch writes, "The steel and glass columns represent the language of modernity. The inscriptions on the glass represent the written word. The archetypal "capitals" are monumentalized symbols removed to unreachable heights." Excerpts from four seminal literary works are paired with capitals that are iconic representations of wheat, dates, pomegranates, and grapes, four of the seven fruits and grains described in the Bible as examples of the Holy Land's fertility. Averbuch's pillars of knowledge with their quotations from *Deuteronomy 8:7-15*, *Crime and Punishment*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Little Prince* are like trees that have been grafted with many offshoots from the artist's life.

The mystical symbol of the tree, which occupies a special place in Averbuch's work, pervades the religious, artistic, and literary traditions of many cultures,

representing among other things growth, the cycle of life, and the link between Heaven and Earth. In Jewish tradition the tree of life is a symbol of eternal life as well as of the wisdom of the Torah. The tree serves as an alter ego for Averbuch (Ilan means tree in Hebrew) in the sculpture *Self-Portrait* (2008). Fashioned from overlapping panes of glass that sprout from a steel trunk, the tree shape also resembles a flower, funnel, bell, or horn. The large lead frame that surrounds the sculpture is off-balance, as though it might have dropped from the sky and landed on one corner. The tree too tilts at an angle, so that its glass panels bisect one edge of the frame. For the artist *Self-Portrait* no doubt personifies the certainty that even as one grows and evolves there will always be a struggle to maintain balance in life and art.

No discussion of Ilan Averbuch's sculpture would be complete without addressing the term monumental and its relevance to his artistic output. Certainly many of Averbuch's public art projects are monumental in their grand scale, commanding presence, and implications of timelessness. And some fulfill the definition of monument as a structure commemorating a person or an event, such as the public artwork *Under the Shadow of a Big Tree* (2009), in Taramac, Florida, which memorializes, in a metaphorical way, a fallen police officer. Critics writing about his work have aptly used the term "intimate monuments,"<sup>iii</sup> or suggested that the sculptures are "about the impossibility of the monumental," because they represent "the aftermath of the disillusionment that has followed our utopian pursuits, that has come with the failure of our dreams."<sup>iv</sup> Yet though the motif of the toppled or fallen monument does run throughout Averbuch's work, he also erects towers, wheels, trees and columns that reach to the sky. It is this polarity between the opposing elements of earth and sky, toughness and fragility, stability and imbalance, stasis and dynamism that endows the sculptures with their poignancy and emotional weight. They are both monumental and anti-monumental, obtaining their critical edge from the tension created by opposing characteristics, celebrating our achievements while lamenting our imperfections.

Averbuch's great accomplishment is his ability to combine the technical skills essential for the creation of large-scale sculptures with the vision to free weight-bearing forms from their physical tethers, enabling them to ascend to metaphysical heights.

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<sup>i</sup> Ilan Averbuch, "Public Projects and Works in Public," in *Ilan Averbuch: Public Projects* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2010), p. 84.

<sup>ii</sup> This and all other quotes from the artist, unless otherwise noted, are from e-mails and statements sent to the author from December 2012 – February 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> Carter Ratcliffe, "Ilan Averbuch: The Intimate Monument," in *Ilan Averbuch: Sculpture and Drawing* (Tefen: The Open Museum, 1997), p. 29.

<sup>iv</sup> Mark Daniel Cohen, "The New Paradigm of Public Sculpture," in *Ilan Averbuch: Public Projects* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2010), p. 13

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