

Between Heaven and Earth

On Ilan Averbuch's Works

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"What you moor to the earth connects to the sky" ¹

Constantin Brancusi, 1918

The power of Ilan Averbuch's sculptures stems, to a large degree, from their unconventional physical dimensions. Like Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1937), which rises towards the sky, Averbuch's sculptures invite the viewer to gaze upwards. Although the essence of these sculptures is related to the earth and to earthiness, they also embody a thrust towards the heights of the sublime. The simultaneously earthy and sublime quality of these works is underscored by their material makeup: Averbuch uses stones, wooden beams, and different types of metal associated with the earth, as well as water and transparent glass that allude to the sky.

Averbuch's sculptural language is centered upon this combination of different materials (some of which are recycled), which endows his work with its distinct qualities. The relations forged within these sculptures are unexpected and at times deceptive, leading the viewer to wonder which of the materials is supporting the bulk of the sculpture's mass. This is especially evident in the stone, wood and glass sculptures, which occupy a central place in this exhibition. The contrast between the massive, opaque stone and heavy beams, and the fragile, transparent sheets of glass provides these works with unexpected transparency and an ethereal quality. The recurrent use of certain materials (such as pavement stones and wooden railroad ties), meanwhile, charges the works with a sense of depth and continuity, so that they appear as reincarnations of previously existing things.

Averbuch's works resemble architectural structures that bring together both old and new materials. As Carter Ratcliff remarks in the catalogue for Averbuch's 1997 exhibition at the Open Museum in Tefen, " In part, his sculptures owe their monumental aura to their materials – stone, copper, lead, heavy wooden beams. In great part, this aura is created by his themes – civilization and its history, its interactions with nature. Yet the deepest power of Averbuch's art, its truly convincing monumentality, is the product of qualities that we ordinarily consider anti-monumental."²

As Gideon Ofrat further notes, " Theatricality is the basic language in Averbuch's work: ritual, scenery, heroism, sacrifice, conflicts (ranging from the combination of materials – wood, iron, stone – to the internalized themes of catastrophe, conflagration, destruction). And theatricality is nothing if not the ephemeral, the provisional, the temporary... alternately, the heavy, charged materials, reality stripped of the merest trace of "as if." With the help of these, Averbuch has come to construct temples and other monumental structures that ultimately dangle unsupported in midair or join together as fragmentary relics. And time, the time of death, reigns, and it has the last word..³

The Local and the Universal

Averbuch is a citizen of the world, and his monumental sculptures have been displayed in numerous exhibitions and public sites worldwide. At the same time, his connection to his native country, Israel, is indisputable. His work is based on local elements that have come to accompany him on his journeys, appearing in his works as recurrent motifs. One of these motifs is the image of the Seven Species, the biblical fruits and grains that represent the land of Israel: dates, pomegranates, figs, olives, grapes, barley and wheat. In some instances one of these fruits or grains appears as a central compositional element, while in other instances several of them appear one alongside another.

Over time, Averbuch's Jewish-Israeli sources of inspiration have been supplemented by universal elements such as domes,

crowns, aqueducts, ladders, and images of animals. As Averbuch notes, "I work a lot on the space, in the physical and the spiritual sense and, of course, also in the personal sense, between the cultures. The memories I plant in my work are memories from here together with the process they have undergone there."⁴

Notwithstanding the importance of local elements in his oeuvre, Averbuch's oeuvre is part of a wide-ranging international tradition of public sculpture, whose resonances are embedded in his works. The Greek artist Janies Kounellis, who lives and works in Italy, writes that "The possibility of making things that are truer and more real depends on the relationship to the tradition. The truth lies in the relationship – perhaps simple, elementary – with tradition. [...] tradition is very broad in aspect, it is not localizable. A localized tradition becomes politically instrumental."⁵ Indeed, Averbuch's sculptures contain a human truth that transcends the local to become universal.

Averbuch's works are on display in public spaces throughout the world, and reveal his connection to the society in which he creates. Art exhibited in the public sphere is inherently different than that displayed in self-enclosed spaces such as galleries or museums. Works in the public sphere are seen by viewers who are not necessarily art connoisseurs; they penetrate into the personal sphere of individual experience, and reach out to the viewer rather than waiting for the viewer to come to them. Averbuch's choices reveal great sensitivity in adapting each work to a given public site, and create an intimate dialogue between his monumental sculptures and their viewers: "All my works are a dialogue between the intimate and the monumental. They are monumental, but with a question mark."⁶

Environmental Sculptures in Place of Monuments

In contrast to its international history, the local history of art in the public sphere is extremely short. Avraham Melnikov's *Roaring Lion* (1934) in Tel Hai was the first public sculpture created for the Israeli public sphere. This memorial sculpture, which rises above

the common grave of the eight fighters who died in the heroic battle to defend Tel Hai, was inspired by Mesopotamian art. At the time of its creation, *Roaring Lion* provoked a significant amount of criticism. Nevertheless, it heralded the beginning of an era marked by the proliferation of sculptural monuments throughout Israel – most notably realist artworks designed to commemorate the country's fallen soldiers.

Ilan Averbuch notes that, ironically, his first environmental sculpture, which was created in 1983, was designed to be exhibited in Tel Hai. During the 1980s, environmental sculpture began to be perceived in Israel as a distinct genre that may exist independently of the local culture of commemoration. Averbuch's works for the public sphere, which build upon this distinction, make no allusions to historical events – focusing instead on universal themes which are, at the same time, highly personal. *Harp, Sea, and the Quiet Wind* (1989), the first work he created in Israel, exemplifies Averbuch's highly personal approach to sculpture in the public sphere. This sculpture, which is situated in the vicinity of the seashore in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, frames a view of the sea when seen from its one side and a view of the city from its other side, while enabling viewers to feel the wind blowing through it. Significantly, it assimilates into the existing environment rather than intruding into it – a strategy characteristic of Averbuch's overall approach to public sculpture.

Another work that underscores this approach is *Divided World* (2000), which is on display in Lavon, in the Lower Galilee. This sculpture looks out towards Beit Hakerem Valley, "framing" one of the most beautiful vistas in Israel. The two steel arches at the center of this work do not meet, and are supported on either side by a massive stone structure. A set of steps leads to the top of each stone structure, so that the stunning landscape may also be observed from up high. When the sculpture is viewed from a distance of several dozen kilometers, the arches appear to merge into the outline of the mountain range. As Averbuch explains, "I wanted a space that is a fragment of an unknown space, but also a complete space by itself, and the result was two staircases rising

about six meters up. The two series of steps do not converge and are not entirely parallel – thus creating an interior space that visitors can wander across and climb up into."⁷

Averbuch's work *Doubts* (1995), which is on display in EuroPark Yakum, is a monumental olive branch resting horizontally on its edge. Does this work raise doubts concerning the possibility of representing an olive branch? Or perhaps concerning what we refer to as "the longing for peace," which is symbolically represented by this branch?

Following Averbuch's 1997 exhibition at the Open Museum in Tefen, his sculptures were put on display in the sculpture gardens of the Tefen and Omer Industrial Parks. The sculpture garden at the Open Museum in Tefen contains three of Averbuch's works. The first of these works, *Grapes and Other Promises* (1994), features a cluster of grapes alluding to the story of the spies sent by Joshua to explore the Promised Land (Numbers 13). This work, which over time has become one of the works most identified with the museum's sculpture garden, touches on the theme of unfulfilled biblical promises, while the ironic title chosen by Averbuch raises the question of whether Israel is indeed the Promised Land.

The title of the second work, *Deus Ex Machina* (1996), relates to the world of Classical Greek tragedy. This term, which literally means "god out of a machine," refers to the resolution of a seemingly unsolvable problem in the plot by means of an unexpected intervention. The form of this sculpture is reminiscent of a bisected Greek pediment whose two halves are rotated outwards, while framing forms reminiscent of abstract letters, a sort of meaningless alphabet. *The River* (1996), the third sculpture on display in Tefen, is composed of iron bamboo poles and waterskins cast by Averbuch in India in 1996 (and related to the artist's memories of trips to the Sinai Desert). This is one example of how Averbuch imbues his sculptures with both his own youthful memories and with cultural impressions collected in the course of his travels.

Two additional works by Averbuch are on display in the Open Museum in the Omer Industrial Park. *Berlin Dome* (1994), whose form echoes the golden dome of the newly reconstructed synagogue on Oranienburger Strasse in Berlin, represents a fallen crown. Averbuch spent some time in Berlin before the dome was restored during the 1986 renovation of the synagogue. Today, this golden dome can be seen from numerous points throughout the city. The dome positioned on the ground in Averbuch's sculpture reappears in additional works such as *After the Reign* (1990), *The Fall* (1989), and *The Little Prince* (1995) .

The second sculpture on display in Omer, *Wheat in Berlin* (1987), makes use of a symbol that is at once quintessentially German and Jewish-Israeli, thus forging a connection between Jewish and German culture and creating a positive analogy between them. At the same time, the wheat growing out of the railroad tracks also alludes to bitter memories of the Jews' fate in a German context.

After the Large Glass

The sculptures featured in the current exhibition are characterized by a combination of massive, opaque materials – wood, stone and lead – with glass and empty spaces. In *Self-Portrait* (2008), Averbuch combines opaque lead with transparent glass and air. This work resembles a fountain with water flowing up from a single source and breaking through the surrounding lead frame. Rather than being positioned parallel to the ground, the bottom part of the frame is rotated slightly so that it appears to be only partially anchored to the ground, creating a sense of instability. Does this transgression of the limits of the frame amount to a portrait of the artist, or do the layered sheets of glass represent the process of artistic creation? As Mark Daniel Cohen notes, "Unlike painting, it [sculpture] extends beyond the protected space within the frame, extends into the world, into our space. And what extends is not just an abstracted organic image, a tree image, but is as much the form of a fountain, a geyser, an upward surging, of energy, of creative imagination, of the thrust and enthusiasm – the elan – of the creator."⁸

The motif of falling, which appears in the works containing upended domes and crowns, recurs in the sculpture *The End of Utopia (The Big Balloon Is Far)* (1999). In this work, it is unclear whether the balloon is about to rise up into the sky or whether it has just collapsed on the ground. This ambiguity stems from the balloon's connection to the slanted base, which contains the potential to rise upwards. The combination of glass, stone and wood endows the sculpture with an ethereal quality, while reinforcing the illusion that this heavy mass is capable of floating into the air.

The Forest (1999) is composed of four units representing sheaths of wheat, grapes, a date tree and a pomegranate – four of the Seven Species mentioned in the Bible. The large sculptural elements representing the fruits and grains rest atop columns composed of recycled wooden rails, which may perhaps allude to the age-old journey of these images through the realm of human consciousness. These wooden "tree trunks" are surrounded by glass columns, which are inscribed with related literary and biblical texts. The massive stone elements atop the columns appear heavier than the supporting glass and wood mass. This impression of a lightweight base supporting a heavy mass is similarly provoked by the sculpture *Time Will Tell* (1996), where vertical glass plates support a series of stone elements resembling the leaves of an olive tree – another recurrent motif in Averbuch's work.

One sculptural work that stands out in the context of Averbuch's oeuvre is *Skirts and Pants (after Duchamp)* (2000), where several human figures are assembled under a pagoda-like structure. The figures appear to be dancing, while the work as a whole is reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–1923), also known as *The Large Glass*. Duchamp's work, which combines different materials on glass panels surrounded by a wood and iron frame, clearly inspired the combination of materials and the movement of the figures in Averbuch's work.

In *Narcissus and the Desire to Fly* (1999), Averbuch combines both different materials and two different Greek myths – those of Narcissus and of Icarus. This sculpture features a pair of wings representing the motif of reflection, with one wing on each side of a circular glass frame. The desire to reach an unattainable goal, which is symbolized by Icarus' aspiration to fly, is combined with the theme of Narcissus' self-love; together, these two combined motifs may be read as self-portrait of the artist.

The current exhibition in the Omer sculpture garden brings together a selection of outdoor sculptures previously displayed in various sites around the world. In addition to showcasing each of these individual sculptures so that viewers may appreciate their unique qualities, this exhibition provides an opportunity to study a large number of Averbuch's sculptures and to observe the dialogue they entertain with one another as they come together to create a unique and intriguing sculptural installation.

¹ Tretie Paleolog, *De vorba cu Brancusi* Sport-Turism, Bucharest, 1976.

² Carter Ratcliff, "Ilan Averbuch: The Intimate Monument," in *Ilan Averbuch, Sculpture and Drawing* (exh. cat.), The Open Museum, Tefen Industrial Park, 1997, p. 29.

³ Gideon Ofrat, "Upon Thy High Places and Times," in *Ilan Averbuch, Sculpture and Drawing* (exh. cat.), The Open Museum, Tefen Industrial Park, 1997, p. 23.

⁴ Annie Goldenberg, "Here and There," *Ilan Averbuch, Sculpture and Drawing* (exh. cat.), The Open Museum, Tefen Industrial Park, 1997, p. 14.

⁵ Jon Wood, David Hulks & Alex Potts (eds.), *Modern Sculpture Reader*, Henry Moore Institute, 2007, p. 447.

⁶ Ilan Averbuch with Mark Daniel Cohen, *Ilan Averbuch Public Projects*, Milano: Charta, 2010, p.10.

⁷ Ilan Averbuch, "Divided World," excerpt from an informational page distributed by the Open Museum, Tefen, 2000.

⁸ *Ilan Averbuch Public Projects*, p.11.