

Spotlight

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Sunday Star-Ledger

Art park blooms in spring

BY DAN BISCHOFF
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

This time of year is usually when the Grounds for Sculpture, the privately-financed art park near Trenton devoted to a hodgepodge of contemporary sculpture, opens a major spring show. This year, however, the Grounds is holding over its immensely popular installation by Seattle glassblower Dale Chihuly through July 6.

That deeply luxurious show, which spreads both inside and outside the glass walls of the Museum building, looked fantastic against the drabness of winter, and now it competes with the sudden blooming of the gardens at the Grounds. But even forests of wisteria do not dim Chihuly. Spring only wishes she came arrayed in colors like the glass artist's, and this one show that is certainly worth a second visit in good weather.

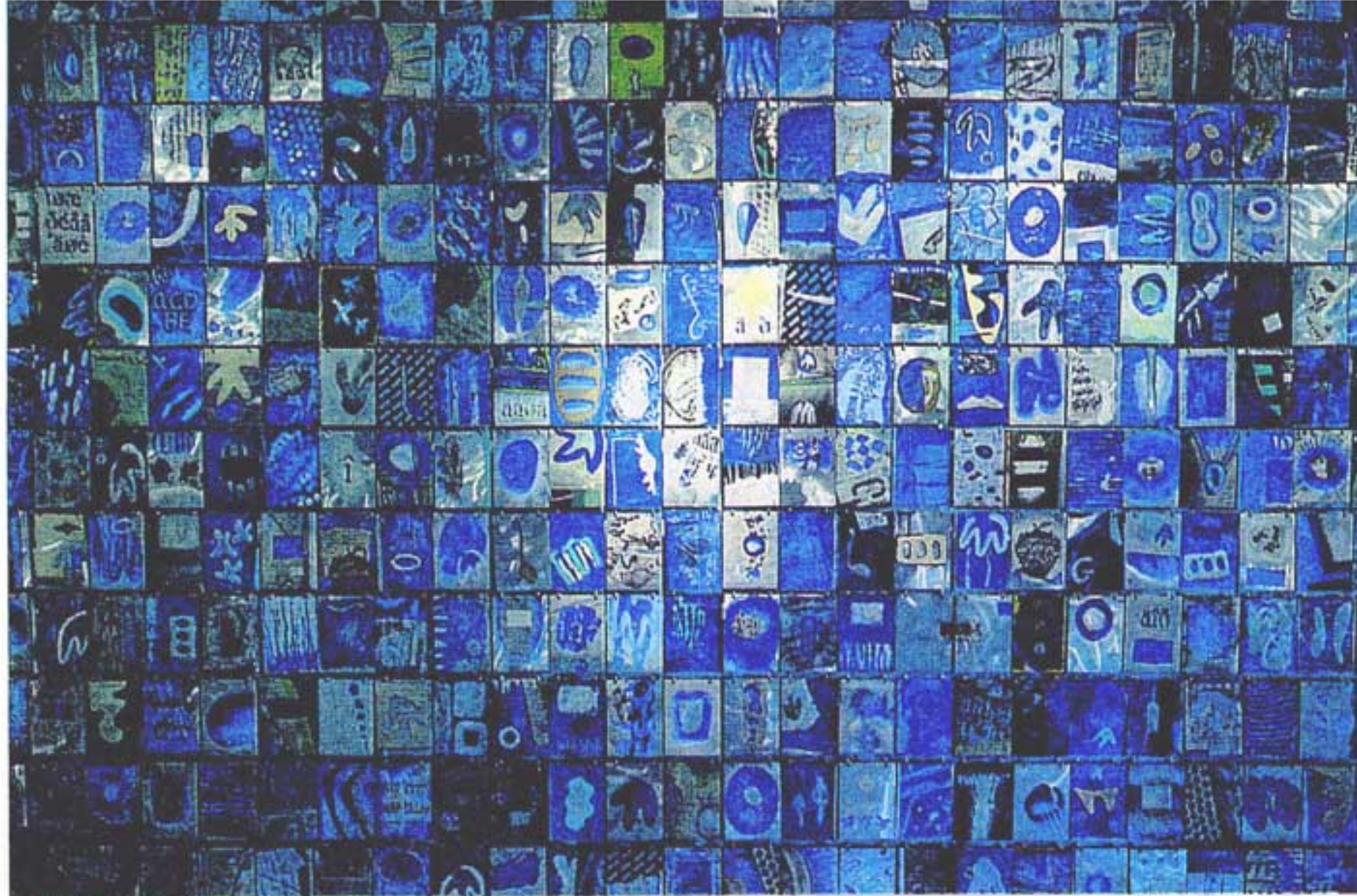
building on the former state fairgrounds is opening smaller shows by two very different artists: Israeli-American sculptor Zigi Ben-Haim, and Nantucket painter and sculptor Ilya Kagan. Ben-Haim is a high Modernist and Kagan a neo-Impressionist. In that very general sense, they are alike — both devoted to art movements that are fading into the past.

Ben-Haim's show, "Journey with Me," consists of some 14 pieces, really combinations of painting and sculpture, 11 of which were part of a show at Fordham University last year dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the founding of Israel and sponsored in part by the Consulate General of Israel in New York and the U.S. Office of Cultural Affairs. Ben-Haim was born in Baghdad in 1945, emigrated to Israel when he was six, and has split his time between New York City and Israel since 1974. He has won numerous awards and fellowships, and often works with industrial materials and organic forms.

In this show, Ben-Haim favors the color blue and four symbolic shapes: the leaf, which often looks like a hand or a flame, representing nature; the oval, representing life cycles; the brick, which stands for construction and by extension culture itself; and finally the ant,

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This month, the Domestic Arts



PHOTOS BY JULIE PEÑA/THE STAR-LEDGER

Zigi Ben-Haim's paintings, such as "Rhapsody in Blue" consist of alkyd enamel on dozens of aluminum tiles hung on a wire-mesh frame.

GROUNDS

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the tireless worker and builder of civilizations. His leaves and ovals remind us of Matisse, while the flattened forms, and vaguely Surreal combinations of arbitrary geometric shapes, bring Picasso to mind.

The straight sculptures, like "Spike Hole" (1989), "Bubble Rush" (1984), and "Glowing Memory" (1999), are relatively conventional art objects, standing on a base and made, often, from aluminum, wire mesh, and a material stretched or laid over them, like canvas or paper. Ben-Haim's paintings are rather more unusual. Done in alkyd enamels, they are built up from dozens of palm-sized aluminum tiles hung on wire-mesh frames that tilt back, step-like, from the viewer to the wall. The tiles can cover the frame from top to bottom, like they do in "Rhapsody in Blue," (2001), or they can range in unique combinations that expose the frame itself or isolate a series of panels, as in "Mutual Gravity" (2002), Ben-Haim's meditation on 9/11.

The effect is like a mosaic, but also like a notebook's pages arranged in a grid. Each tile is its own painting, or sometimes collage. Ben-Haim likes to glue cardboard packing slips, and solvent-transfer-like photo images, onto his tiles. "Mutual Gravity" includes a distorted news photo of the World Trade Center that makes the towers look like squiggles in the sky.

It's an interesting technique, especially when enough of the framework is visible to confuse you as to whether you're looking at

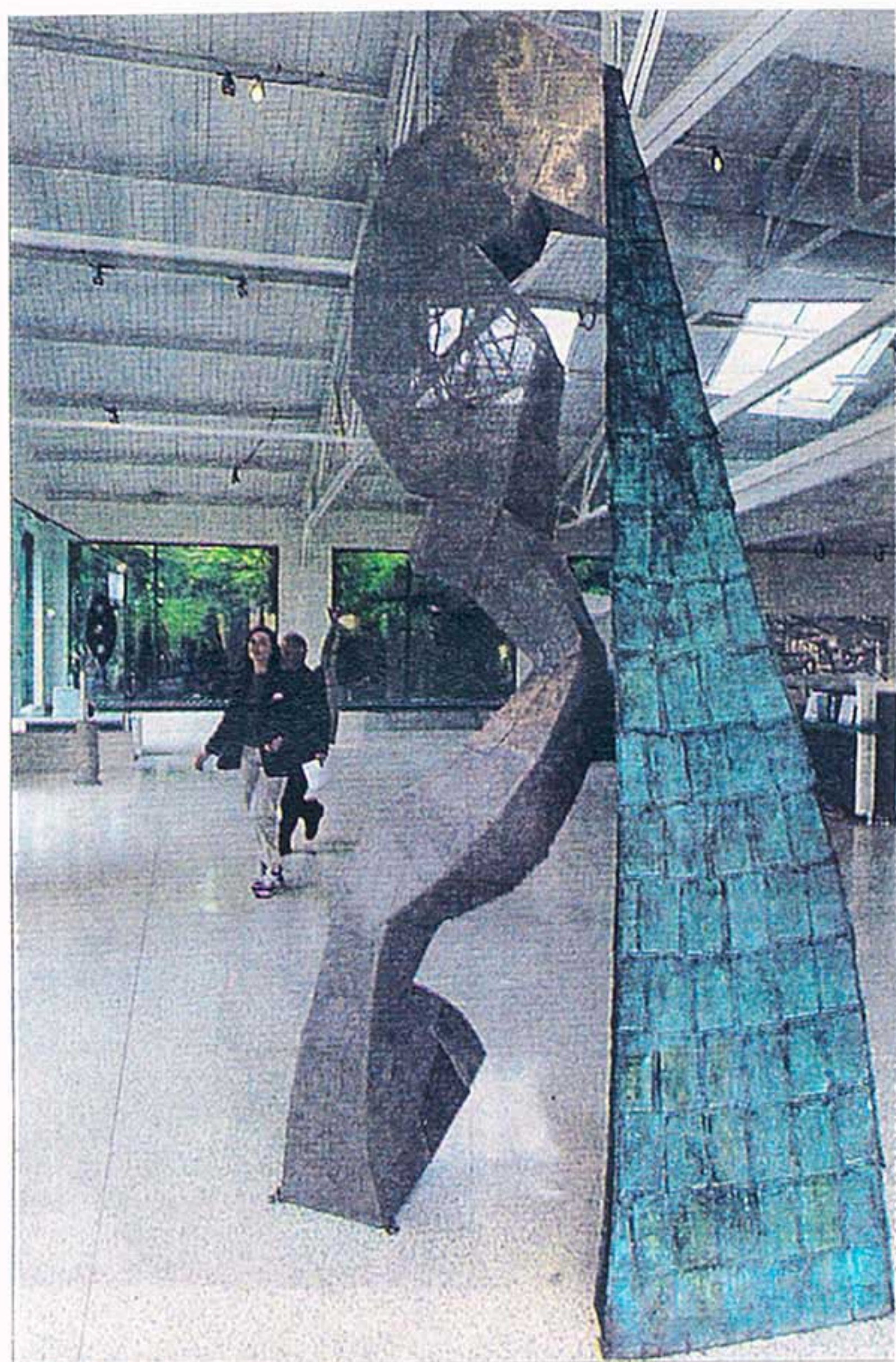
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a painting or a sculpture. Ben-Haim certainly thinks it's a more ambiguous division than you might think. And this style heightens the cool, aesthetically self-absorbed quality of classic Modernism, even as Ben-Haim gets into the Rauschenbergian grit of photo transfers and Mideast-type violence in the New World. The work never really escapes the decorative, no matter what its theme.

The decorative is the starting point for Ilya Kagan, whose Impressionist paintings of wealthy playgrounds — Aspen, the island of St. Barts in the Caribbean, and urban nabes like Fifth Avenue outside the Guggenheim Museum — strive not to capture a fleeting moment in time

and light so much as a color harmony that rhymes with pleasure. Born in 1969, Kagan is the son of furniture designer Vladimir Kagan, and Impressionism is a special interest of the Grounds' patron, Johnson & Johnson heir J. Seward Johnson. The 24 acres of park land behind the two exhibition galleries at the Grounds are spotted with Johnson's polychromed, 3-D versions of Impressionist masterpieces.

In this show, Kagan exhibits 14 terra cotta sculptures that certainly rhyme with Johnson's popular "Impressionist" statues. Several pieces are copies, or anyway directly inspired versions, of the series of arrogant and devious portraits of lawyers done by Honoré Daumier in the 19th century. Kagan also shows sculptural versions of graphic work by the brilliant illustrator Gustav Dore ("Don Quixote") and of drawings by Daumier ("Art Critics").



"The Fall," one of Ben-Haim's more conventional sculptures, consists of steel, wire mesh and copper.

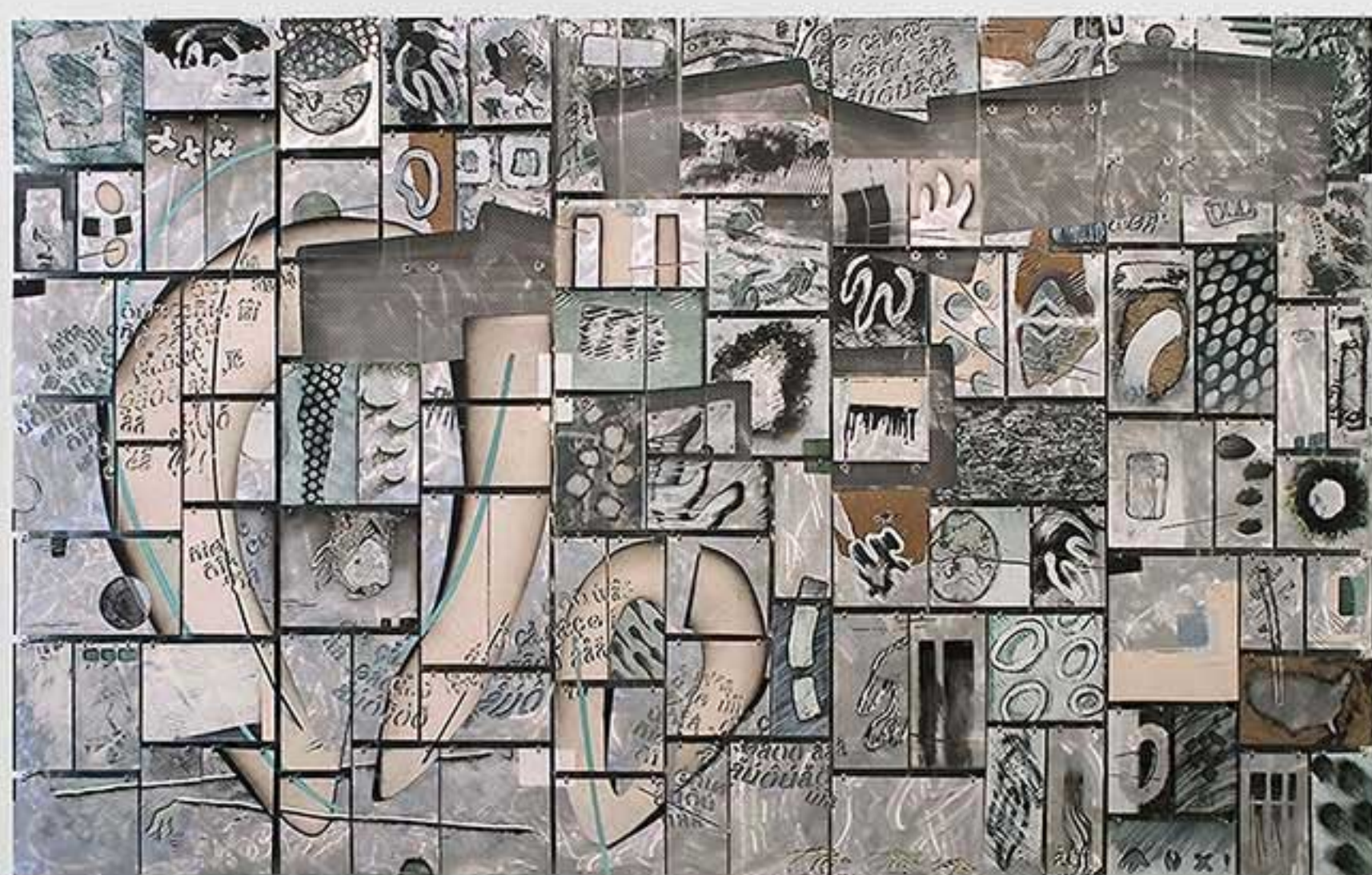
ART

"Zigi Ben-Haim, Journey with Me" and "Illya Kagan, Sculpture and Painting"

Where: Grounds for Sculpture, 18 Fairgrounds Road, Hamilton

When: Through Sept. 10. 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays

How much: Tuesdays-Thursdays, adults \$5, students and seniors \$4, children under 12 \$1; Fridays-Saturdays, adults \$8, students and seniors \$7, children under 12 \$4; Sundays, \$12. Call (609) 586-0616 or go to www.groundsforsculpture.org



"Mutual Gravity" is Ben-Haim's meditation on the 9/11 terrorist attacks.