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Zigi Ben-Haim

Grounds for Sculpture

Veteran New York-based artist Zigi Ben-Haim recently scattered 13 sculptures and four paintings throughout the mixed-use, indoor-as-outdoor ground floor of Grounds for Sculpture's Domestic Arts Building. (The exhibition space is shared with the information desk,

gift shop, and café and merges with the outdoor reflecting pools, trees, trailing vines, and sculptures from the collection by means of floor-to-ceiling glass windows.) There's a lot going on here, but Ben-Haim's buoyant, triumphant work looks right at home, in a democratic, encompassing, art-into-life way via the Russian Constructivists and public art theatricality. In this mini-retrospective, which he aptly titled "Journey with Me," Ben-Haim presented the evolution of his art over the past two decades.

The Baghdad-born, Israeli-reared artist came to the U.S. in 1970 and to New York in 1975. He has the curiosity and avidity of the traveler, and, as the product of several cultures, a natural empathy for balancing acts of all kinds. Using industrial materials—stainless steel mesh, aluminum panels, copper tubing, and concrete—to create skins over volumes anchored by concrete bases and cantilevered extensions, Ben-Haim constructs a kind of botanic architecture, weighting nature with the artificial. The earliest piece in the show, *Bubble Rush* (1984), is a humorous, humanoid cone-form set *en point* and scaled with artificial blue-green steel mesh plates. A three-dimensional version of Ben-Haim's recurrent leaf image, which he uses to represent nature, it resembles a standing figure (or hand) about to walk away. It wears a stiff, outstretched chain of mesh smoke ring shapes slipped over its apex, floating at a right angle to the main axis, all in precarious but precise balance. *The Fall* (1989), rising almost 11 feet, is the tallest work in the show, another organically inclined, steel mesh cone buttressed by a gridded mesh support, another balancing act. *Level With Me, Sr.* (1997) is a visual pun, made from



an actual level supported at one end by Ben-Haim's anthropomorphic leaf and holding up a book (or brick, the artist's symbol for culture and another standby in his visual lexicon).

The second category of work consists of juxtaposed cut-outs of shaped aluminum, the surfaces burnished and scored, some sections electrified by dazzling oil or acrylic urethane colors. Again, the forms suggest exotic flora, tautly, deftly, intriguingly balanced, like meticulously composed ikebana. *Red Brick Road* (1998), for instance, is a perforated black oval, the interior edge of the holes painted a shining green set against a leaf shape embedded in a concrete cylinder. It is counterbalanced by a long thin aluminum rod with a glowing copper brick at one end: nature versus nurture, nature revised.

The third category includes painting and wall reliefs—the most recent projects, all from 2001–03—although *Rhapsody in Blue* (2001), a multiple panel work, rests directly on the floor like a wall itself, affixed with swinging, index-card-sized aluminum plaques arranged in grid formation, sus-

ended on a hook, and brushed with several shades of blue. They function as an ongoing diary of the artist's thoughts in images; indeed, each plaque might represent a page of a journal, ripped out and tacked up. Filled with collaged newspaper items, sketches by cartoonists and caricaturists like Al Hirschfeld, photographs, painted abstract gestures and geometric figures, text and technological symbols, these compositions also include the same characteristic motifs of leaf, brick, pod (representing birth, life), and ant (artisan, artist) that are seen in the sculptures. They each have their own polemic, their own energetic, playful harangues, full of information and complex, idiosyncratic connections and interconnections. Ultimately, Ben-Haim's bracing "Journey with Me" turned out to be a trip more than a journey.

—Lilly Wei

Above: Zigi Ben-Haim, *Bubble Rush*, 1989. Copper, aluminum mesh, steel, and concrete, 70 x 70 x 20 in. **Right:** Stephan Balkenhol, *Man on Stilts I and II*, 2003. Painted wawa-wood, two parts, 180 x 40 x 40 cm. each.