

Worldviews in Stillness and Motion

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Iron Works Command Attention, and Video Art Crosses Borders

Israeli artist Orna Ben-Ami's one-room exhibition at Hillyer Art Space appears so eager to walk us back in time that the pull is irresistible, and we go. Her iron sculptures rely so heavily on the past that you'd guess they were made in 1920. Or 1970. But nowhere near 2007.

Her sculptural renditions of the stuff of everyday life — a metal-frame twin bed, a park bench with a shrouded figure lying on top, a baby's cradle — evoke Robert Gober's neurotic objects from the 1990s. Her materials — all her forms are made from matte-finish iron — conjure Richard Serra's forbidding works in lead and steel from the 1970s and 1980s. And her exhibition's tenor, its atmosphere of the uncanny and squelched hopes, harks back to surrealism as practiced by Magritte and Dali.

Such abundant connections aren't entirely a bad thing. When we look at these pieces we know what we're seeing. Collectively, the 14 works hanging on walls or free-standing in the exhibition room allude to the domestic treacheries of childhood. An apron hung on one wall has a window of prison bars cut out at the midriff. A child's cradle has bars on its sides — and over its top. A belt draped across a chair appears to wait patiently for the backside of an errant child.

Ben-Ami finishes every sculpture to a uniform, and uniformly dour, dark brown. It's the color of concentration camps or prisons — those of our nightmares, too. These are domestic objects



gone bad. They cue the anxiety of childhood and nightmarish domestic dramas by way of Freud and the Brothers Grimm. All appear at a remove from contemporary society. The cradle isn't one you'd find in a contemporary nursery. The apron seems dated, too. One detects a whiff of nostalgia for the anxieties of the past, as if they might prove preferable to present-day worries.

Ben-Ami's remarkable facility with her material compels us to keep looking. She works and welds heavy metal into nearly delicate forms. The leather belt in one work looks supple, the stretched canvas of

another piece appears legitimately pliable. You have to look very closely — almost touch these pieces with your eyes — to remind yourself they're not really made from leather or tarp.

Such an exceptional capacity to transform metal into something else proves an apt visual metaphor for Ben-Ami's project. In the artist's hands, iron shifts shape as easily as our hopes and dreams. Just as we use fantasy to escape the less tolerable clutches of reality, so Ben-Ami imbues her material with the power of transmutation.

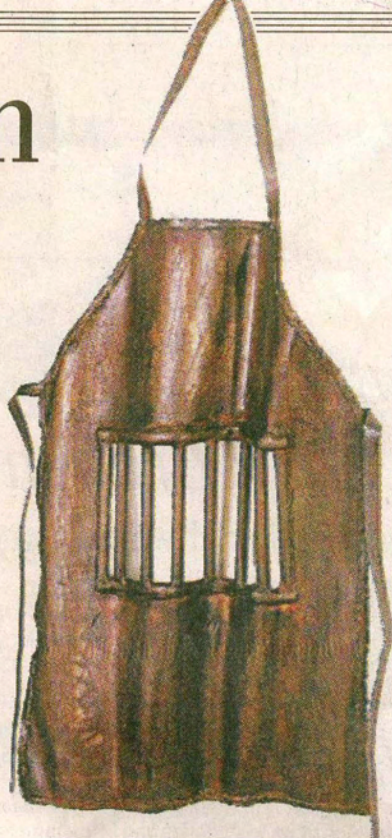
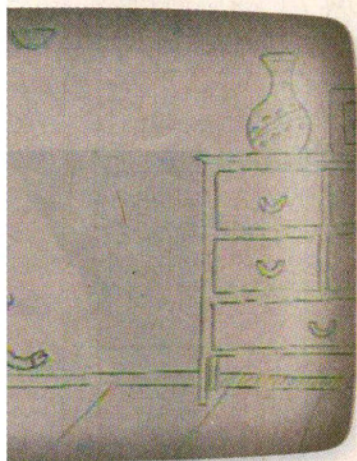
Ben-Ami's close relationship to



Orna Ben-Ami's iron sculptures at Hillyer Art Space include a bed and, top, an apron with prison bars cut out in the middle. Next to the apron are images from Claudio Roberto Lima Guimaraes's "The Three Little Pigs," a standout in the Third Inter-American Biennial of Video Art at IDB Cultural Center.

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Crosses Borders



VIDEO STILLS: IDB; APRON: INTERNATIONAL ARTS AND ARTISTS

surrealism isn't uncommon. Several current exhibitions link contemporary sculpture with the ghosts of surrealism and dadaism past — see the Hirshhorn's "The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas" and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's "Magritte and Contemporary Art" for evidence that early-20th-century innovation birthed many of the forms produced in the last four decades.

Indeed, Ben-Ami proves this rule almost to a fault. The artist's emphasis on the penitentiary aspects of childhood verges on the heavy-handed; the massing of 14 decidedly heavy works into a single room feels like a lot of dark import for a small space. At moments, Ben-Ami looks backward so intently that she must be straining her neck. Still, the objects she creates hold a power that's impossible to deny.

Video Art Biennial

Nineteen videos won honors at the IDB Cultural Center's Third Inter-American Biennial of Video Art. The winners were selected by jurors Irma Arestizabal, curator of the Venice Biennale's Latin American Pavilion, and Jose Roca, chief of traveling exhibitions for the Central Bank of Colombia's cultural center, and are on view in a continuous loop in the IDB Cultural Center's main gallery.

Many of these works grapple with political and social issues particular to countries and regions. To foreign eyes, the least successful works come off as either educational or opaque. There's a lot to be said for work this highly localized, but the problem such projects confront is a diverse audience with gaps in their

knowledge. A number of the videos in this biennial broach concerns that don't translate. (Unfortunately, second-prize winner Benjamin Lopez Alcantara's intriguing mini-documentary about the legacy of 19th-century Cuban independence leader José Martí literally didn't get translated. Only Spanish speakers will understand it.)

Those works that speak more broadly do so by tapping childhood myth or the conceits of landscape painting. The exhibition's star is Claudio Roberto Lima Guimaraes's "The Three Little Pigs," a four-minute trip through the children's story, brought to life as an animated, high-energy tale of drug lords (those are the pigs) and cops (big bad wolves) in the urban ghettos and armored compounds of Brazil.

First-prize winner Zeinab Rebeca Bulhossen Hernandez presents two short works, one called "The Avila," which comments on the mushrooming shantytowns in a national park outside Caracas, riffing on postcard views of a pastoral landscape. Her other piece is a miserably jittery, nearly unwatchable reel, not quite five minutes long, meant to mimic the frustration of a traffic jam. It does.

Links: Iron Works by Orna Ben-Ami, at Hillyer Art Space, 9 Hillyer Ct. NW, Tuesday-Friday 10 a.m.-5 p.m., 202-338-0680, to Jan. 25. www.artsandartists.org.

III Inter-American Biennial of Video Art, at the Inter-American Development Bank Cultural Center, 1300 New York Ave. NW, Monday-Friday 11 a.m.-6 p.m., 202-623-3774, to Jan. 19. www.iadb.org/cultural.