

An Interview by Bruce Glaser, Director, Gallery of Israeli Art
 BRUCE GLASER: How long have you been in the United States and why did you come?
 KOSSO ELOUL: I have been here a little over a year. I came for the International Sculpture Symposium in Long Beach, California and have stayed on as artist in residence at the college. The terms of the symposium were very simple. They invited sculptors from all over the world, providing transportation, expenses, and necessities, as well as tools, materials, and technological know-how. For instance, I had the help of space engineers at North American Aviation in order to go through with my project, and I couldn't have done it without them. California is a place with quite sophisticated industries, so the sculptors had quite a time experimenting with things under their direction. Industry donated the materials and facilities. They were really marvelous.
 G: That's a situation quite different from what in fact exists in Israel, where the technology is not nearly as advanced as in the U.S. What is your feeling about the artistic milieu in Israel itself, in contrast to the U.S.?
 K: I think it entirely depends on the individual. If you are completely content with a chisel and a hammer and a stone, then Israel is a marvelous place. If you need modern technology for what you are after and it's not available—and for me there are no romantics about the process—then you are going to be dissatisfied. If I could get the idea across by snapping my fingers, I would. I have a lot of friends who are always talking excitedly about the craft side of sculpture. It strikes me as too slow and too much like a medieval situation. In Israel, where every scrap of steel is imported, the use of modern technology is a problem. Partly because of this, many Israeli artists are doing a lot of traveling. As in most small countries, Israeli art is influenced by the big centers. Paris used to be the main influence but now it's New York.
 G: What about your own experience in Israel? I notice from your biography that you were involved with the New Horizons group, and that you were one of the founding members. What were some of the goals of that group?
 K: The New Horizons was formed right after the War of Independence. During the war, you have to remember, Israel was cut off completely, and was also in physical danger, and there was little time for concern about art. But right after the war, it became obvious that a lot of artists were hard at work in their own ateliers. When the extent of this became known, the excitement in Israel at that time, about the newness of it all, was very sharp. There were about 20 of us who got together and decided to make a show. It started with a show, not a group. And then we exhibited, for about 11 exhibits, on and off in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa.
 G: Did the group have any ideology behind it?
 K: There was no defined ideology nor a constitution or an aggressive situation. But there were certain qualities, certain common attitudes about our work. In the first exhibit we had a mixture of styles, but as we went along, our direction became clearer—people left, people joined, and it became more homogeneous and exerted more influence on young artists.
 The discussion within the group was mostly about abstract versus figurative art. At that time, there was a big battle about one against the other, as if one takes away from the other. In the development of the group, those in favor of abstraction came to dominate. Zaritsky had been doing abstract work for years, so it was nothing new to the artists. But going to the public with such work, and coming out with a catalogue, was something else. There were discussions at the museum and everywhere else. There was a lot of criticism about the work, and half of it was unfavorable. The public had not been exposed to this kind of thing before, but now it was moving the country. All this began in 1948. The last exhibition at the Ein Harod Museum was a show that could have been in Europe. It could have been anywhere in the world. It was cohesive and it was clean. And the reason we put it up in the Ein Harod Museum was because of the building and the lighting and the space.
 Now we had everything there.
 G: There was an analogous situation in the U.S. at the same time. After World War II, some American artists, namely the Abstract Expressionists, were coming into their own, but their initial reception was not very cordial either. It took a number of years, way into the late 50's, before they were finally accepted. But in view of what you have said, it is interesting that it's so often made out that vanguard Israeli art is merely an imitation of phenomena in Paris and lately in New York. It seems to me that it is more interesting and reasonable to consider this thing that happened in Israel in 1948 as something spontaneous and organically necessary rather than something just influenced by an art center such as Paris and New York.
 K: Well, it was spontaneous, definitely. And it was an absolutely local Israeli situation, although we

were not trying to represent the country. We were just trying to be ourselves, and the choice of the group was just what was the freshest in the art there at that time, a time when Israel was suffering from sentimentality. There is a great love for the country, which every Israeli seems to have in his blood. In art, this results in landscapes, a lot of landscapes of the worst order. I have been a judge and on the jury of the General Artists' Association yearly exhibitions where you always run into the problem of that sort of material.
 G: Would you say then that the better artist in Israel has a less sentimental orientation in his work?
 K: I think that the better artists in Israel are human beings, alive in the 20th century, concerned with everything that goes on in the world. They're just as international in their sense of human life as anyone else, anywhere in the world. And they do not feel the need to exploit the clichés about their country.
 G: But, on the other hand, there have been many discussions about the idea of an Israeli art, a national style, eventually evolving in Israel, perhaps even showing Jewish characteristics, although some people feel the characteristics would more logically be Oriental. I don't want to get into a discussion of whether there is such a thing as Jewish art, or what possibilities there are for development in either of these directions, but I was rather impressed with an article that Hilton Kramer wrote in Commentary in February 1965 about Israeli Art, after he had seen the Art Israel Exhibit. He had, of course, visited Israel before that. He felt that in many instances, the problem with Israeli artists was not so much sentiment, as he restricted his discussion to the avant-garde artists, but of too much concern with stylization.
 K: Correct.
 G: He felt that the future of Israeli art lay in some kind of social and aesthetic synthesis. And this idea was supported by conversations he had with people like Danziger and Streichman. He, and they, felt that the art should be related to the landscape, although, obviously, not in the sentimental way you noted before. In fact, several artists have referred to the possibilities of the Negev. I think you yourself have made some mention of that in the past.
 K: The Negev is extremely exciting. That's why an early sculpture symposium in '62 was held there. For me, it's a basic environment, just land and sky and man. And in that emptiness, you don't need to make any adjustment to anything—buildings, trees or whatever. You're just very much alone, and the work stands alone. A stark situation forces you to elementary things. But I found in the California desert exactly the same environment, the same landscape. In fact, when I passed by Red Rock Canyon on Route 14, I stopped because it's exactly like King Solomon's mines in Timna (in the Negev). If you had a photograph of one and showed it as the other, nobody would doubt you.
 G: Do you think that if somebody worked in the Negev and was affected by that desert, one could not say that his work was specifically Israeli?
 K: I would say that first of all it would be his work. If he's a sensitive artist or a sensitive sculptor, he will be taken and affected by the surroundings, but he will neither dwarf the landscape nor be dwarfed by it. It will be an exchange between the two of them. If he were to work there, or if he were to do a sculpture in the middle of New York, with its architectural settings, he would find each situation compatible with his concepts, and he'd deal with each seriously. He would reach a complete rapport. He wouldn't be lost in it.
 G: But on the other hand, one can say that an artist who works in New York and who is affected by New York and that environment is reflecting a little bit of America. And although an artist who works in a desert in America is also getting an aspect of this country, his experience is not as distinctive as that of an artist working in the desert in Israel, who is more likely to be in touch with the forces that are shaping the country, that is the so-called pioneer spirit. And Israelis have talked about the challenge in man's confrontation with the desert. Isn't that more Israeli in a way?
 K: All right, so here you have man's confrontation with electronics and with outer space. When I take a subject of that nature like the one I call "Breakthrough," it can be seen as a statement about man in either of these environments. It is partly about the effort an individual makes to break through all the barriers and all the layers around him in order to reach his own core. It's just as much a breakthrough to make the desert fertile, as it is to reach for the moon. Suppose two generations from now or one generation from now the whole desert is just a big garden. I still believe that in Israel you would have the spirit of pioneering, this nervous fermentation which just doesn't let you rest because you want to improve on the things that are there already. Fight now much of our country is desert. But in ten years Israel has already changed to such an extent that you cannot talk about the same country. Even in five years there have been tremendous changes. So there comes a point at which I become rather suspicious of looking for specifically Israeli art. I would much rather see human beings living on this globe with an



ON TECHNIQUE & MATERIAL (R)

international mentality. In fact, that's how I got this symposium going in Israel. I told them that Israel is one place that cannot afford to be provincial. The provinces cannot afford to be provincial. We had to do something international. That's the only way we could go. Ben Gurion had been saying the same thing for years, and fighting for it—with a scientific institute, with scientific research, and with everything of the sort. He said we cannot afford just to relax.
 On the other hand, with my Jewish education, which includes the Talmud, the unknown qualities that may be Israeli art are there in the background anyway. You don't have to worry about it because you're so saturated with it.
 G: You have commented on your work that it reflects the "tenseness, hardness, openness, and directness of our present culture." Are you referring to the technology or to the sociology or the psychology of our age, or what? When you say tenseness and hardness are you referring to the impersonality of our culture? For example, the lack of civilized behavior of one man toward another man?
 K: No. It's a very deep question and I was not concerned with sociological harshness in connection with individuals or groups. I was referring to the hardness of life in our time, which is simply being realistic, trying to see things as they are, and not fooling ourselves.
 G: You are making value judgments about tenseness and hardness and openness.
 K: I see them as fact. I see them as a way to look at life realistically, just like I look at the material of my sculpture for what it can give us, for what it can give me. If I can get what I want out of stone, I take it from stone. If not, then steel or concrete. Then I try to expand their potentialities up to the breaking point. And the same thing with life—what can life take?
 G: Well, it's interesting, you just mentioned that if you can't do it in stone, you'll do it in steel and concrete. What else is behind that change? In your earlier pieces of 4 or 5 years ago, when you worked in stone, the material was often very rough in texture, even though you used the same basic forms you use today, such as the cylinder and triangle. But now your work is so much more "finished". Does this reflect an interest in engineering or structural design as elements that might have been brought into your work?
 K: My progression with materials is actually due to a certain development within me. It was like a peeling off process. When something doesn't give me what I need, I shed it. At one time, I worked a lot in wood. But one day I looked at it and just threw it off and gave all my tools away. My knowledge about wood and stone is enough for a lifelong career, but I can't use it anymore. I took to stone because it was so static, so stable. The wood had a feeling of growth to it. It was warm and inviting, in the sense of being cozy, but I had to give it up when it no longer gave me what I was after. At that time, I could get quite good results in stone, with just a plain chisel and hammer. But it reached a point where somehow it wasn't enough. Perhaps because it was too craft-like. This technique showed that the sculpture was "made". My work now has to look like it happened by itself, and not that it was made by me or by anybody. That's why it's in steel. At one time, stone gave me that same sense of weight, inertia and tremendous solidity. I took forms and imposed a force on them. It was actually both inner forces that were about to break through and outer forces that registered something on it. In that sense, stone registered it beautifully because you don't expect it from stone. There is a compactness about stone. There's a quietness about it and a great natural beauty. We walk on stones. It's a material that we know from childhood. And all of a sudden that hard thing was changed by what I had been doing to it. This illogical situation that I referred to before, is the thing that I wanted. But then I came to a point where the material was not giving it to me any more. I needed more tenseness. So I got the weight and solidity of stone, which I still needed, by using and solidifying of stone, which I still needed, but concrete, since concrete can be only a shell, but look solid to the eye. And it's a beautiful material. But concrete was not enough and so I tried combining it with steel. That gave the intensities that I couldn't get with one alone. Then when I was working with steel, I found that I could achieve still more intensity by introducing color. I do it very sparingly, only at a point where it's a problem of intensification.
 G: By intensity, I take you to mean this feeling of compactness and at the same time a feeling of breaking open.
 K: Yes, I want it to be a "should" sculpture. It should break, but it never will. It should move, but it never will. It's an absurd situation in a way, but it's like a transition, a thing that's never at rest.
 G: You have commented in the past, and more or less just indicated, that you would not use concrete by itself, because you were not satisfied that it had an adequate feeling of weight, so you used steel. I find this interesting in the light of certain tendencies in modern sculpture that repudiate volume, as in

Cubism and Constructivism. The artists of these movements opened the forms and used a more spatial effect. Volumes were created from air by using planes or lines. You seem to be moving away from this as you keep to the traditional use of solid material to create volume and yet you are using the materials of modern technology. How do you feel about that?
 K: Well, I wasn't thinking about what's modern and what's not. I can't open my forms, I need weight. The body must be defined precisely and compactly and only then can I get those forces that I mentioned before. The subject of my work is force and action. If I made those open sculptures, I could not construct. I could not build.
 G: Nevertheless, your use of abstract geometric forms clearly relates back to Cubism. Do you view Cubism in this sense as a style that still has great potentialities for you?
 K: No, because it implies a composition situation. And anything that is a composition situation, that is when you have a lot of elements and you build them into cohesion, is out of my sphere.
 G: Some of the younger American painters have talked about making non-relational paintings and of their repudiation of balancing forms on canvas. Is this similar to what you are referring to?
 K: Right, I don't like the cuteness of it. That is the outer result of what I call composition. The process of trying to arrange a lot of elements into cohesive order is not a part of my work at all. More than the Cubists, my work is like Braque's and his egg. This is my problem. Yet, even his egg is not enough for me. He's too classic, so quiet and self-contained. There is no nervousness about his work. For example, the cylinder for me contains the potential of mobility, which is tremendous. It can move left, right, back and forth, anyway, including up and down. I mean that by standing there, it can move in any direction. I find that when the form is split, it may look like an inner force caused the split, or another time it may look as if a tornado went through it, an outer force.
 This business of mobility is by implication. I'm interested in action, in dynamics. The sculpture gives you the feeling that it should go one way and then it goes the opposite way. If you think it should open up, it should close up. It should then move on you. It's also this potential of danger in the sculpture that I'm after. It looks as if it ought to crack up on you. In fact, I have a great time when a collector or somebody has to deal with the packing and crating of these things. He'll ask me if it's going to break. That's good because it's on the tension point.
 G: How do you go about arriving at the forms for your pieces?
 K: I can tell you what I do and maybe that will characterize the process. I love monkeying with little shapes. I do that for instance in clay. I like to make it hard, to the point where you can slide it with a knife. I play around with the shapes. I'll have a few of them, and then one shape looks right, and I'll pull it out of the bunch and put all the others away. Then I might see that it's not enough, so I'll do a second one and a third and fourth, and then the second and fourth might have something in common. Eventually I'll end up with a dozen little forms on the table, and I'll let them dry. Some day later, when I just feel like it, I'll come over and look at them and either make a new one, or pick one of them. Then I'd want it permanent and so I fire it. Only then it's so small. It's about 2 or 3 inches and it's only mud. It's worthless, it's no material, nothing and I've no respect for it. I've no involvement with it. It's like doodling on a paper. But then when I decide what I'm going to make, that's when I look at it and say, "Well, I must have been thinking of this thing for steel". Then I keep looking at it and I'll say, "Well, this should be 3 feet", or "That might be 10 feet", or "This shouldn't be too large, it should be about a foot". And then I think about making the real thing, and take cardboard and build it. I want to see it finished in terms of size, if the cardboard disturbs me as material, I'll spray it over. This gives me the sense of volume and weight. I might play with the cardboard a bit, but when it's okay, and only then, I'll go to the factory and see that it's done in stainless. So, actually the first impulse is clay. Now I'm using styrofoam, because I can get those edges with a knife cut, or with a rasp. It's a matter of minutes. Although when you work you don't feel time, you don't know, it might take an hour. But anyway, while you're with it, it's there. When it first happens, it happens directly, but the second time, I really come to it from the outside. And then I look at the results. Let's say that the cardboard make sense and I'll throw them away. When I come to the factory, it should have already been done. It's just a matter of executing it. So there's no composition. There is absolute planning, control and decisiveness at every step and every point.

ISRAELI HISTORY

CONCEPT

MARK PROGRESS (R)