

Tel Aviv

Israel's second largest city is known as 'the bubble' for its air of detachment from political turmoil, its hedonism, cosmopolitanism and vibrant art scene

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When I recently visited Tel Aviv, everything seemed normal: surfers were catching waves, the cafés on Rothschild Boulevard were teeming, and droves of people turned up to hear artist Michal Heiman discuss her work at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art (part of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art). Considering, though, that my trip coincided with the withdrawal of the Israel Defense Force (IDF) from its invasion of Gaza, and was in the period leading up to the election that brought Benjamin 'Bibi' Netanyahu, leader of the conservative Likud party, back to power, to an outsider, this atmosphere of business-as-usual might have seemed odd. To Tel Avivis, though, such pragmatism is the only way to cope with the demands of living with such emotional, cultural and geopolitical intensity – of living, in other words, in a state of war.

Following the success of Eytan Fox's film about the fictional exploits of a group of hip 20-somethings in Tel Aviv, *The Bubble* (2006), the city's detachment – often manifested in hedonism or *carpe diem* levity – is now well-known. Yet it's an attitude that can be traced back to its emergence from an uncanny (un)coupling. The city was founded in 1909 under the British Mandate for Palestine on plots of land distributed by lottery to 60 Jewish families on the outskirts of the ancient port city of Jaffa. Following this 'Seashell Lottery', as it is commonly known, the look of modern Tel Aviv was shaped by the Eclectic Style (an architectural mixture of Levantine, Central European and Oriental influences) until the city adopted a master plan designed by the Scottish

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botanist, biologist and urban planner, Sir Patrick Geddes, which was based on Ebenezer Howard's Garden City concept and implemented in 1925. The words Tel Aviv, which literally translate as the 'Hill of Spring', are a loose Hebrew translation of the title of Theodor Herzl's seminal book *Altneuland* (Old New Land, 1902), which describes a vision of a modern, pluralistic, social-democratic Jewish state.

With Adolf Hitler's assumption of power in 1933, this slightly scruffy Mediterranean outpost became an architectural laboratory for German-Jewish refugees who, influenced by Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, transformed it into a thoroughly modern metropolis. This triumphant modernist narrative reached its climax in 2003, when UNESCO declared the city a World Heritage Site based on the extraordinary density of International Style buildings. Trying to understand the contemporary implications of this history in his book *White City, Black City* (2005), Sharon Rotbard, Senior Lecturer at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, convincingly argued that Tel Aviv was never the virginal bride (the 'white city') of Zionist myth but materially and ideologically conceived by its association with, and eventual erasure of, the largely Arab Jaffa (the 'black city'), a process of self assertion and denial (some would say repression or occupation) that still animates its 'bubble' mentality.

For an art historian, it's hard to overlook the more than 4,000 modernist buildings that adapted the style, techniques and ethos of the Bauhaus to local conditions. If this intellectual and cultural connection with Europe remains a vital lifeline, the year-round lure of the Mediterranean Sea, ubiquitous water shortage, hourly news reports on Galei Tzahal (the IDF's radio network), and noticeable presence of rifle-toting young soldiers, are constant reminders of Tel Aviv's location within the Middle East. Although I was not raised in Tel Aviv and left Israel at the age of seven for what would become a typical tale of Diasporic peregrinations, I speak Hebrew fluently and visit Tel Aviv regularly; as a result my encounter with the city and its artistic production is mediated through the benefits and disadvantages of weaving between my status as both an insider and outsider. Summer or winter, Tel Aviv feels like an improbable oasis of carefully managed and extremely fragile normalcy; so distinct from Jerusalem with its manic political angst and messianic overtones. I love Tel Aviv for the warm sociability of its cosy art scene, laid-back café culture, Levantine-inflected haute-cuisine, no-frills hummus, schnitzel and falafel joints, corner juice kiosks, bike-friendly dimensions and overwhelmingly secular way of life.

However, despite its defence mechanisms, the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict undoubtedly seeps into Tel Aviv's bounty, and shapes its tightly knit community of artists, many of whom were born to immigrant parents, or second- and third-generation Israelis. With very few foreign artists in residence and virtually no Arab-Israeli or Palestinian artists represented by commercial galleries or shown in museums (which can also be accounted for by the fact that many Arab-Israeli and Palestinian artists refuse to exhibit in art spaces affiliated with the Israeli State), debates relating to aesthetic issues sometimes seem to ricochet around the equivalent of a closed-circuit echo chamber.

In contrast to the focus on Israel as a geopolitical hot spot, there's a lingering sense that too few international collectors, museum directors, curators or critics visit Tel Aviv on a regular basis. Because of this, talented local artists who are not willing to move to another country for the sake of their careers – for example, Eli Petel, Miri Segal, Talia Keinan, Uri Nir and Manal Mahamid – have missed out on the kind of exposure experienced by internationally established Israeli artists based in the USA or Europe, such as Yehudit Sasportas, Ori Gersht, Yael Bartana, Keren Cyttter, Guy Ben-Ner, Omer Fast, Ohad Meromi, Tamy Ben-Tor, Ofri Cnaani and Mika Rottenberg.

Apart from the logistical difficulties that emigration presents to the close-knit dynamic of the typical Israeli family, many artists choose to stay in Tel Aviv because of the favourable working conditions. Until a few years ago, when the surge in French Aliyah (Jewish immigration to Israel) sent prices soaring, real estate was relatively inexpensive and large studio spaces were widely available, especially in the industrial areas of south Tel Aviv (home to the famous hole-in-the-wall eatery, Falafel Gina). Some of the most adventurous exhibition programming in the city happens slightly off the beaten track. There's Raw Art and Alfred in the trendy, dilapidated, Florentine neighbourhood – once home to a community of Greek and Turkish Jews who established the spice-splendid Levinski market, now populated by students and foreign workers, – while Dollinger Art Project, dedicated to emerging artists, has dropped anchor in the area around the notoriously drug-riddled Old Central Bus Station, home to mostly Filipino and African labourers. Unlike other art hubs, Tel Aviv's blue-chip galleries – including Dvir Gallery, Givon Gallery, Chelouche Gallery, Rosenfeld Gallery and Sommer Contemporary Art are sprinkled throughout the city. In the centre of town, the Heder Gallery is a collaborative venture between an art gallery and an architectural and interior design firm that presents an inventive cross-disciplinary program, while just

around the corner from the bustling Carmel market, the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA) showcases time-based work by contemporary Israeli and international artists.

Recently, efforts have been made to shift Tel Aviv's marginal status with the inauguration of an internationally curated biennial (ART TLV), which was launched in September last year and which is timed to coincide with the Athens and Istanbul Biennials. Other positive developments include the increasingly influential ARTIS, an independent non-profit initiative based in New York and Tel Aviv that supports contemporary Israeli art, and the appointment of the spirited artist and curator Doron Rabina as Director of the Art School at the Beit Berl Academic College (aka the Midrasha), located about 30 minutes northeast of the city. This concerted campaign to infuse Tel Aviv with new energy (and to showcase what locals have always known) is indeed welcome: the only worry is that it will be derailed, as previous efforts have been, by what citizens of 'the bubble' euphemistically call 'the situation'.

Eyal Danon and Galit Eilat

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Tel Aviv is a city that makes its inhabitants believe they are disconnected from the State of Israel. A visitor to the country's second-largest city and main financial centre during the recent Israeli attack on Gaza would have been amazed by the city's air of detachment from the rest of the country.

Bubbles are, of course, very attractive, and Tel Aviv is a liberal city filled with clubs, gay bars and good restaurants stocked with great produce from sunny farms. If you want to mix a great culinary experience with a cultural one and mingle with the local art crowd, for example, you can't beat Joz & Loz, a small, cosy restaurant in Yehuda Halevy Street, where writers, filmmakers, curators and artists like to meet. Joz & Loz is Arabic for 'walnuts and almonds', and is also an expression used to describe close friends.

But what can the art scene offer the city during times of

political confusion, when only 60 kilometres away war crimes are allegedly taking place? Does art ever burst the bubble? As Nili Goren, the curator of '2009: Tel Aviv Time', a show recently held at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art during the city's 100th birthday celebrations, which included more than 200 mainly photographic and video works from the last decade by 44 international and Israeli artists, noted: 'The encounter with the city is at times depicted as an intimate experience, even as a setting for introspection and seclusion, at others [...] as an arena in which to study human phenomena and the social structures represented in the city.' However, any attempt to provide a new perspective on life in Tel Aviv, in such a context and in the current climate, was doomed to failure. Tel Aviv Museum of Art, which is state funded, celebrates the accepted national narratives and creates a programme that is deliberately disconnected from life outside the bubble. In fact, this was the second time within the space of a year that an exhibition had been held in the museum celebrating a national event. 'The 1970s in Israeli Art: My Own Body' was one of the many shows organized in 2008 to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the State of Israel.

The museum is currently hosting another exhibition celebrating the city: 'Sounds and Visions: Artists' Films and Videos from Europe – The Last Decade' is a European tribute to the Tel Aviv-Yafo Centennial. The exhibition features a selection of contemporary video works by artists from 20 member countries of the European Union. Significant support was provided by the Delegation of the European Commission to the State of Israel. Although the show opened in February, the Israeli attack on Gaza did not affect the EU's decision to celebrate the city: none of the artists included were from Tel Aviv and none of the works reflected upon the country's current political situation.

However, at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art – a section of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art that opened in 1959 – some engagement with the reality of living in this city was apparent. The title of Michal Heiman's recent exhibition there, 'Attacks on Linking', was taken from Wilfred Bion's eponymous book, which was published in 1959 as part of Bion's innovative work on psychosis. Heiman investigated the idea of a link as a third form created between two subjects, attempting to convert the museum space into a therapy room in which viewers were invited to reveal themselves through memories, diaries, clinical studies, photographs, films, psychoanalytic texts and works by various artists. A large part of Heiman's oeuvre challenges conventional readings of documentary photography, asking whether photography is employed as a truth-speaking tool or

one that serves the ideologies of interested parties – a debate that obviously has particular relevance in Israel.

There are four art schools in Tel Aviv. The Kalisher School of Art is located near the Carmel Market and shares its courtyard with the Contemporary Center for Art; its focus is technical and media-based. More politically active is the privately funded Minshar for Art, which is run by Oded Ydahyah, a political activist, photographer and supporter of ‘Anarchists Against the Wall’, an Israeli group established in 2003 that works closely with Palestinian people in response to the wall Israel is building on Palestinian land in the Occupied West Bank. Less high profile is the Avni Institute of Art and Design, which was established in 1936 by a group of Jewish artists, and is located on the invisible border between Jaffa and Tel Aviv. Finally, although based in Jerusalem, Israel’s national school of art, the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, which was founded in 1906, offers an MFA programme in Tel Aviv.

Although artist-run spaces are not common in Tel Aviv, some graduates of the Bezalel MFA course recently opened Darom Gallery in the Florentine neighbourhood between Tel Aviv and Jaffa, to show the work of young Israeli and international artists. More and more galleries, including the prominent Rosenfeld Gallery, are moving to this southern part of Tel Aviv, where the Bezalel MFA is based, and where many artists live, work and have studios.

Over on Rothschild Boulevard is Sommer Contemporary Art, one of the most high-profile galleries in Tel Aviv. Run by Irit Sommer, the gallery is known for showcasing local and international artists, including Yael Bartana, Adi Nes, Wilhelm Sasnal and Wolfgang Tillmans. Last autumn, the gallery collaborated with Dvir Gallery – one of the most established galleries in Israel – and the non-profit organization ARTIS NY to establish the new biennial ART TLV.

Tel Aviv was also central to David Reeb’s recent show, ‘Abstract Paintings 2007–2008’, at the Tel Aviv Artists House – a public gallery that was founded in 1948 – and also at the Givon Art Gallery, which was founded in 1974. In Reeb’s paintings about Tel Aviv, the normality of the city is no more than the normalization of the occupation and its integration into daily life. Reeb shows government power and the boom in the economy as part of the urban landscape. For example, his painting Kirya (2008) is named after the headquarters of the Israel Defense Force, the buildings of which can be seen in one part of the picture’s composition; similarly, his painting Tzniut (Modesty, 2008) – a Hebrew term used to describe both modesty and humility, as well as a

group of Jewish religious laws pertaining to conduct – includes the image of a sign declaring ‘modesty is beautiful’ hanging in front of the city’s reconstructed Habima Theatre. Reeb’s show at the Givon Art Gallery opened during the recent invasion of Gaza. Alongside his more abstract paintings, he screened videos of recent demonstrations in Tel Aviv against the attack. Reeb has been documenting protests for the past few years; in a recent interview, he said that his material could help demonstrators facing legal action. Seen within the art space, they offer a rare glimpse of life beyond the bubble.

Tel Aviv was host to another international art event in February: the c.sides Festival for Independent Electronic Music and New Media Arts. The concept of the festival was first mooted in 2003 – as the result of an exchange that took place between independent German, Israeli and Palestinian musicians, artists, activists and organizations for human rights and social change, and it came to fruition in 2005 – when the first festival was held in Jerusalem. The last c.sides festival opened during the war on Lebanon in 2006; this year it showcased over 30 artists, musicians and performers for the first time in Tel Aviv, just after Israel declared a ceasefire.

Although there are many committed artists in Tel Aviv who are struggling to respond to the realities of living here, and who oppose the Israeli State’s policies, generally speaking the citizens of Tel Aviv are mainly interested in celebrating. Expectations that the recent horrific events in Gaza would generate protest were exaggerated – polls reveal that most Israelis, including those living in Tel Aviv, supported the invasion. For as long as Tel Aviv continues to pretend it’s not part of Israel or the Middle East, nothing will change. What can be done to wake this town up to face the realities of its existence?

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