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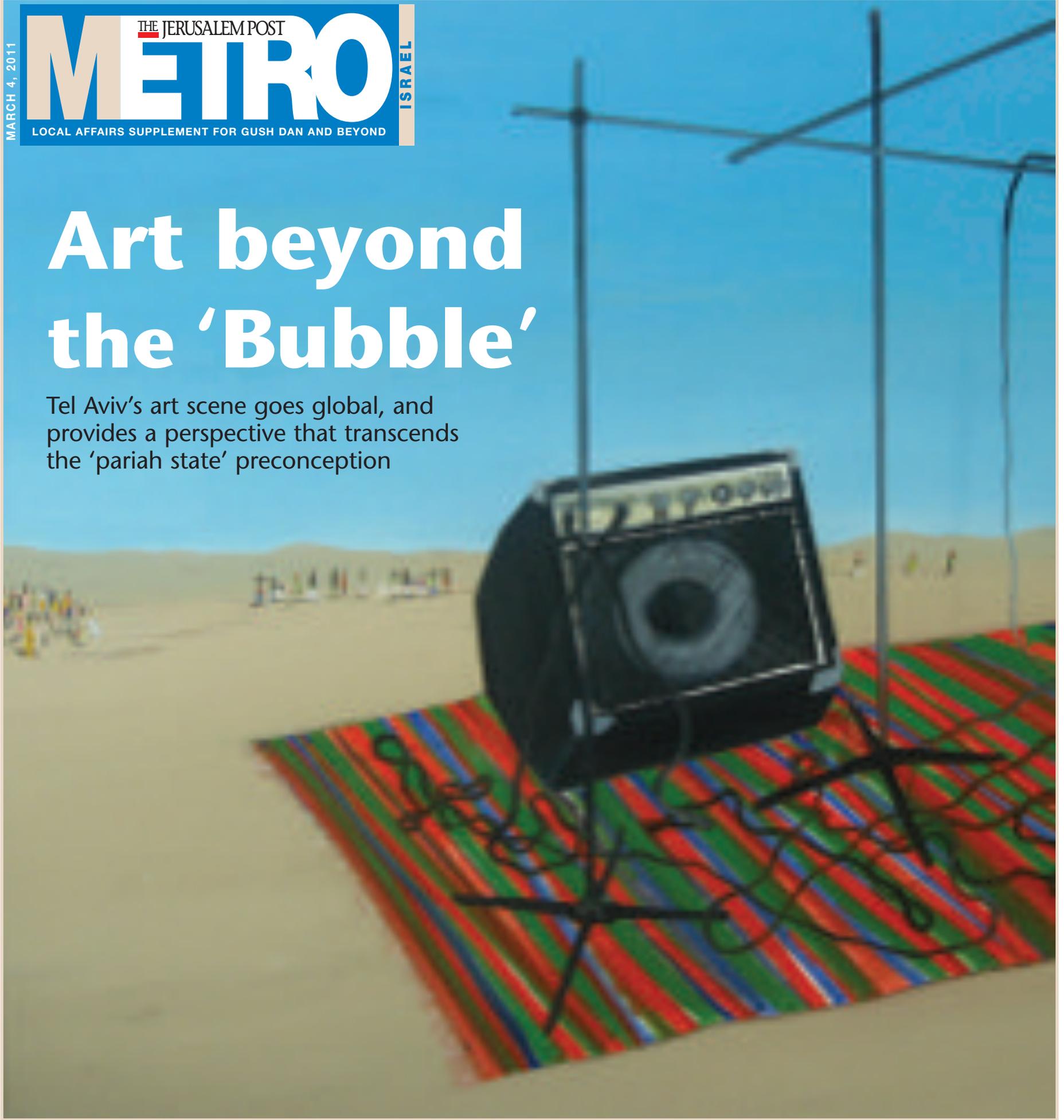
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## Art beyond the 'Bubble'

Tel Aviv's art scene goes global, and provides a perspective that transcends the 'pariah state' preconception



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Yael Bartana is a video artist starting to enjoy international recognition with video works such as 'Mary Koszmary' (Mary Nightmares) about Jews returning to Poland.

# Art beyond the 'Bubble'

*Tel Aviv's thriving contemporary art scene goes global, providing the international community with a new way of understanding the Jewish state*

• By JOANNA PARASZCZUK

Tel Aviv's first art museum opened its doors in 1932, in the house of the city's first mayor and spiritual father, Meir Dizengoff. Ever since those early, pre-state days, the first Hebrew city has enjoyed an undisputed status as Israel's capital of culture.

In recent years, Tel Aviv – and to a growing extent its suburban satellite neighbors Bat Yam and Holon – have become more than just local hubs for Israeli art. They have been transformed into sites of international cultural exchanges.

Tel Aviv frequently mixes international and home-grown art events – such as "100% Paris," a display of French video art on Sderot Rothschild during last year's White Night festival; Holon's Design Museum showcases work by leading global designers alongside that of local artists, and Bat Yam's ambitious plans to put itself on Israel's artistic map include its International Biennial of Landscape Urbanism and art exhibitions addressing local and global issues.

WITH ALL these artistic riches, it's hardly surprising that tourists and other foreign visitors to Tel Aviv are frequently impressed by the richness of the city's formal and informal contemporary arts scenes. And as the world wakes up to the idea of the White City as an artistic powerhouse, Israeli artists are starting to attract attention from international art critics and from an art-loving public eager to experience the work of

some of Israel's best and brightest creative minds.

Vardit Gross, a curator and art critic at Artis, a nonprofit that helps promote Israel's contemporary art community internationally, says an interesting process occurs when people visit Tel Aviv for the first time.

"At first they are shocked, and then they fall in love," says Gross. "They want to come back."

Launched in 2004 with bases in New York as well as Tel Aviv, Artis helps introduce Israeli art to the international art scene through cultural exchanges and projects, public art programs, and professional development for Israeli artists. Artis also organizes research trips to Israel for international curators and art journalists, to immerse them in the country's dynamic contemporary art scene.

Timed to coincide with Tel Aviv's Fresh Paint contemporary art fair, the trips are an eye-opening experience for their mostly non-Jewish participants.

"Something exciting has come out of each of those trips," says Gross.

On one trip, Klaus Biesenbach – then chief curator of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and now director of MoMA PS1 in Queens – visited artist Sigalit Landau's Tel Aviv studio. So impressed was Biesenbach that he brought Landau to New York for a solo exhibition at MoMA.

Another trip participant, art historian Nait Banai, wrote an in-depth feature discussing the history and politics of Tel Aviv's vibrant art scene for British contemporary art magazine *Frieze*.

Perhaps part of the reason for these reactions is surprise at the vast gap between visitors' preconceptions of Israel as a much-criticized "pariah state" and the flourishing reality of Tel Aviv's predominantly secular and modern art scene. As increasing numbers of influential critics and curators visit the city and experience its artistic richness firsthand, and as more Israeli artists get gallery space abroad, interest in contemporary Israeli art is spreading.

According to Gross, Israeli video art in particular is enjoying a great deal of international attention.

"Israeli video art has already developed a name for itself," says Gross, pointing to artists like Keren Cytter, who in 2009 was ranked by leading Italian art journal *Flash* magazine as No. 2 on a list of the world's top 100 emerging artists. In the same year, Jerusalem-born video artist Omer Fast won Germany's most prestigious art prize, the Preis der Nationalgalerie für junge Kunst.

Yael Bartana is another Israeli video artist starting to enjoy international recognition. Her film *Wall and Tower*, depicting an imaginary scenario in which post-Zionist Jewish pioneers return to Poland to build a kibbutz near the site of the Warsaw Ghetto, is currently on show in *Out of Place*, a group exhibition in Austin, Texas.

Taken from the title of Palestinian scholar Edward Said's memoir, *Out of Place* explores themes of displacement in Israel-Palestine.

BARTANA'S FILM is a direct reference to the so-called "tower and stockade" method employed by Jewish pioneers in British



'THE PAST and Future in Our Hands' by Karen Gillerman Harel.

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*American-Israeli Idoe Cohen recently launched Omanoot.com, a nonprofit online hub that provides an easy way for people to connect with and share Israeli culture. Cohen has a strong belief in the power of Israeli art to offer a glimpse into the richness and complexity of Israeli culture, and as a chance for people to see past the 'pariah state' preconception*

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Mandate Palestine, who would hastily construct settlements with just a fence and a tower; the film also alludes to the terrifying memories of the Jews' almost-extirpation in Poland.

Are the political themes of art like *Wall and Tower*, which offer insights into the roots of the Israeli-Arab conflict, at least part of the draw for international audiences?

"[The interest] doesn't specifically come from politics," says Gross. "There is a lot of interest in understanding Israel, but not all of it is political, per se.

"People aren't looking for answers. That's too simplistic. One reason for the interest is that with artists like Bartana, people realize that it's possible to be critical about Israel but at the same time be very loving. That's something that's hard for people to understand."

Not all exposure to Israeli art is taking place in galleries, however.

American-Israeli Idoe Cohen recently launched Omanoot.com, a nonprofit online hub that provides an easy way for people to connect with and share Israeli culture. Cohen has a strong belief in the power of Israeli art to offer a glimpse into the richness and complexity of Israeli culture, and as a chance for people to see past the "pariah state" preconceptions imprinted in popular discourse.

"Israeli art is experiencing a kind of renaissance. There is the same creative energy in Israel in the arts as there is in hi-tech," says Cohen, who came up with the idea of Omanoot ("art") during his graduate studies at Columbia University in New York.

"It was during the second intifada, so the atmosphere on campus was somewhat heated," says Cohen understatedly. Upset by his peers' reactions to Israel and keen to show them the country beyond the media stereotypes, Cohen turned to Israeli culture.

"Culture is something people can relate to. We invited bands, screened movies and opened an Israeli-style cafe. Lots of people showed up, not just Jewish students," he says.

Back in Tel Aviv, Cohen founded Omanoot with seed money from the ROI Community of Young Jewish Innovators, an organization founded by American philanthropist Lynn Schusterman.

In addition to a free portal for film, music and visual arts, Omanoot will offer educational resources addressing various aspects of Israeli culture through group study of films and pop songs.

"I really believe Omanoot could be a virtual Israeli museum of culture on the web," says Cohen. "After all, when people visit a country, they want to see culture, they want



'UNTITLED' from Avishai Finkelstein's series 'Allenby Street.'



'ISRAELI ART is experiencing a kind of renaissance,' says Omanoot's Idee Cohen. (Joanna Paraszczuk)

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to visit museums, see art."

While Omanoot lets those interested in Israeli culture access it from anywhere in the world via the Internet, the US-based Foundation for Jewish Culture has taken Cohen's idea of using Israeli artists as cultural ambassadors out of the virtual realm and into the real world.

Via the Schusterman Visiting Artist Program, Israeli artists, musicians, filmmakers, writers and choreographers are sponsored for short residencies in North American universities and museums, with the twin aims of engaging American audiences with Israeli culture, and helping Israeli artists achieve exposure to an international audience.

Among the stars on the current program are filmmaker Yael Hersonski, best known for *A Film Unfinished*, a documentary about the Nazi propaganda movie *Das Ghetto*; writer Assaf Gavron, musician Ohad Fishof, dancer Noa Zuk and photographer Assaf Evron.

But the program does not just feature "highbrow" culture – last year, it hosted Ethiopian/Yemenite hip-hop duo AXUM at Emory University.

Yet as Omanoot's Cohen found out during his time at Columbia University, North American college campuses can be tough places to talk about Israel, even in Jewish circles. How has the Visiting Artist Program had an impact?

"It presents a face of Israel other than the embattled image so pervasive in the media and on college campuses today," Marge Goldwater, who acts as consultant to the program, told *Metro*.

"Just as important, of course, is that Israel is being seen by Jews and non-Jews as the center of a highly dynamic and creative culture, and that the program is encouraging others to explore Israeli culture."

THE RESPONSE to the program has been very positive, indicating a thirst for knowledge about Israeli culture, or at least a desire for space to discuss Israel outside the usual campus polemic.

"When [illustrator and art director] David Polonsky screened *Waltz with Bashir* and spoke at Brown University, there was a line around the block for people to get into the theater," adds Goldwater. "And I could book Yael Hersonski for a presentation for every single day she is here, such is the eagerness on campuses across the country to hear her talk about *A Film Unfinished*."

Despite these unmistakable signs of a growing international interest in Israeli art, Cohen believes Israel's government has so far failed to see the potential of artists as "cultural ambassadors." The response from officials at the Culture and Public Diplomacy ministries when he approached them to discuss Omanoot was, he says, at best lukewarm.

"I tried to set up a meeting with the Culture Ministry, but the official I spoke to kept delaying the meeting, and eventually we met for just a couple of minutes," recalls Cohen, who attributes the government's indifference to a lack of understanding about the impact Israeli artists are making internationally.

"The Public Diplomacy Ministry just doesn't know what's going on in the outside world," he adds. "Israeli artists are doing really important work but they just don't get noticed, not even by the Culture Ministry."

Perhaps one reason why Israel's public diplomacy efforts have shied away from artists is that many seem to be outspokenly critical of the country. The outraged responses to Arab-Israeli director Scandar Copti, who brought Israeli cinema to international screens with his Oscar-nominated movie *Ajami* but caused a storm back home after openly criticizing the country in a TV interview, for example, is a good measure of Israeli sensitivity to artists who do not toe the Zionist line.

Yet Cohen says that far from being a problem for Israel's image abroad, even outspoken artists like Copti are living proof of its thriving democracy.

Artis's Vardit Gross adds that though the government does not provide sufficient funding for the contemporary arts, the country's artists are doing a great deal for Israel.

"Artists like Guy Ben-Ner are doing more for Israel than 500 [public diplomacy] representatives," she emphasizes. "Even people who are anti-Israel, when they see work by bright and sharp artists, they start to look at things differently."

"Art and culture are a gateway for people to understand Israel."