



## A Brief Guide to Israel's Complex Art World, From Tel Aviv to Jerusalem



ARTSY EDITORIAL  
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A small country edged by the Mediterranean Sea, surrounded by Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, and in the throes of an ancient conflict, Israel is more often associated with discussions surrounding politics than art. But with a rich cultural past and creative community spanning its some 8,000-square-mile footprint, Israel has also become a hub for contemporary art—especially that which investigates its history, Israeli-Palestinian relations, and the limitations (and potential) of politically engaged art.

Is it possible to understand a complex and layered contemporary art scene in just seven days? In a best-case scenario, one can scratch the surface—and maybe achieve a bit more. Over the course of a week this fall, courtesy of Artis's week-long research trip in Israel, I explored the country's myriad museums, galleries, alternative spaces, artists' studios, and restaurants. Amid the political violence—often the main topic of discussion beyond art (one that admittedly, at times, made art-spectating feel trivial)—I came away with a familiarity with, and keen curiosity for, art in Israel. Below are my takeaways, centered around the art spaces,

curators, and artists of its two largest and most vibrant cities, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

*It's worth noting here that though my last name is Israel, and I am Jewish, I had never been to Israel previously. Also, while Artis supports artists regardless of religion, race, or ethnicity, because of their focus on art in Israel, they do not formally work with artists living in the West Bank or Gaza—though they have in the past, and now regularly facilitate connections between foreigners and artists and art professionals located there.*

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## Tel Aviv



*View of the waterfront and beaches of Tel Aviv. Photo © Adobe Stock / allegro60.*

Israel's art scene largely revolves around Tel Aviv, the country's beach-oriented, gay-friendly, nightclub-filled cultural nexus. Alongside an impressive array of museums, galleries, and residencies, the city is also home to a trove of iconic Bauhaus buildings (some 4,000, together dubbed the "White City"), a growing cache of world-class restaurants, and long stretches of sand that border the city center. The palm-dotted metropolis is also somewhat insulated from the conflicts engulfing the rest of the country and wider region.



## Museums



*Photo of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art by Andrzej Wójtowicz via Flickr.*

The Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel's premier modern and contemporary art institution, lies at the heart of the city's art ecosystem. Founded in 1932, it is situated on Shaul Hamelech Boulevard, not far from "The Campus," an area containing Tel-Aviv's government buildings and the Israel Defense Forces base. After a 2011 renovation and expansion, it's now housed in one of the country's most impressive buildings, designed by architect Preston Scott Cohen. The faceted gray structure features 200,000 square feet spread across five floors of large, light-filled galleries organized around a spiraling 87-foot-tall atrium.

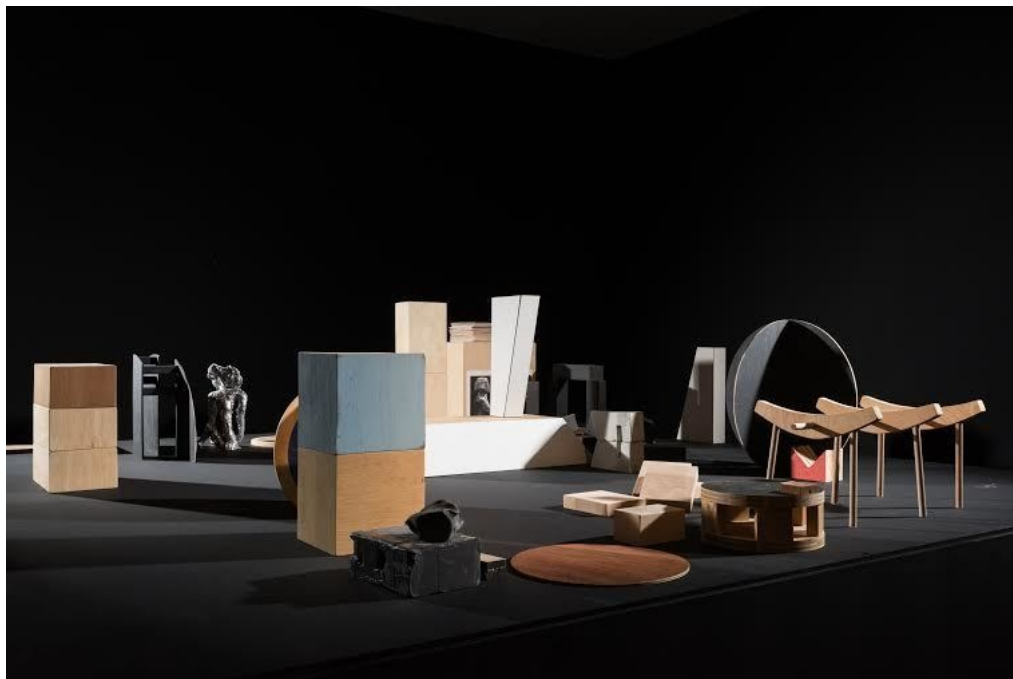
The museum is currently host to collective Public Movement's *National Collection*, a durational six-week performance, the first of its kind to be included in a major Israeli museum. Dressed in white shirts, pants, and skirts, 11 of the group's performers labor over and act out ceremonies and short speeches that use the museum as its canvas. As the troupe plunges through basement storage spaces, elevators, and stairwells, they discuss the ties between the State of Israel and its cultural institutions. Fittingly, the declaration of the State of Israel occurred in 1948 in the Tel Aviv

Museum's original location on Rothschild Boulevard.



Left: *Public Movement*, National Collection, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2015. Photo by Kfir Bolotin. Right: Michael Helfman, *While Dictators Rage*, 2013, performative installation after “*The Triumph of Death*” by Felix Nussbaum, Tel Aviv Museum Collection. Photos courtesy of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

Also on view at the museum is Michal Helfman's installation-cum-musical-performance, *While Dictators Rage* (2013, 2015), featuring large kites painted with faces pulling a range of expressions—from angry to solemn to shocked—hovering above a broken wall, while an exuberant score plays eerily. In a short talk, Helfman described the project's inspiration as German-Jewish Surrealist Felix Nussbaum's last painting, *The Triumph of Death* (1944), which he completed while hiding in Belgium several months before he was killed in Auschwitz. After some research, Helfman discovered that a piece of sheet music painted into Nussbaum's composition represented *The Lambeth Walk*, a song from a highly popular 1937 musical “*Me and My Girl*,” used as a rallying cry by the British against the Germans during the onset of the Second World War.



Installation view of "Ohad Meromi: Resort," 2015, CCA. Photo by Youval Hai, courtesy of the Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.

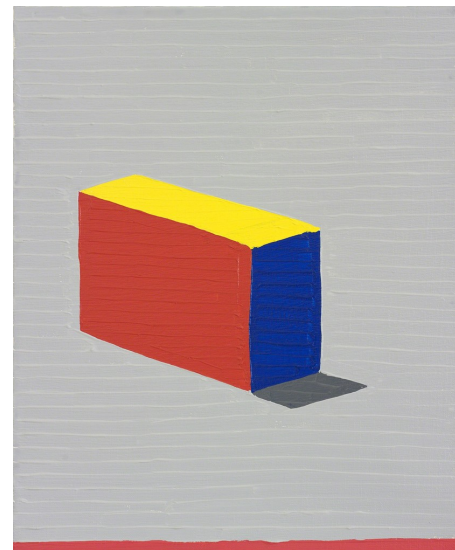
The city's other major contemporary art nonprofit, the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA), focuses primarily on contemporary video and moving-image work, as well as installation-based practices. Up now, Israeli artist Ohad Meromi's "Resort" explores urban space and border politics through performance. In the first section, what look like wooden toys of a ferry, a border checkpoint, a hotel room, a beach, and an archaeological site come together as a set that relates to a play Meromi wrote. He's turned the second half of the space into a black-box theater, where other artists, via an open call, can stage plays, performances, and happenings that use his script, and the charged urban landscape it evokes, as a jumping-off point.

## Galleries

Tel Aviv's galleries gather on the southern side of the city, showcasing both well-known international and Israeli artists, along with an exciting cohort of emerging creatives.



Nira Pereg  
*Ishmael*, 2014-2015  
Braverman



Guy Yanai  
*The Avant Garde*, 2015  
Ameringer | McEnery | Yohe

In the Neve Tzedek and Noga neighborhoods, you'll find many of the city's more established commercial spaces, situated on quiet streets next to hole-in-the-wall, but very hip, restaurants, boutiques, and record shops. Sommer Contemporary Art, which represents Israeli and international artists, showed Tal R's new work this fall, and in mid-December it will open shows by Croatian multimedia artist David Maljkovic and relative newcomer Eran Nave, a local painter and sculptor. Around the corner, Alon Segev Gallery recently closed "Words Without Letters," a group show curated by Israeli artist Guy Yanai, whose blocky,



vibrant still-lives of spiky plants are well known on the international art circuit, and is now showing Jerusalem-born, Tel Aviv-based Maya Gold's "Fireflies."

Just a few blocks away, in Noga, the eponymous Noga Gallery represents artists ranging from Keren Cytter to Ori Gersht to Matan Ben Tolila, and Chelouche Gallery for Contemporary Art hosts the work of international and Israeli artists like Nir Evron and Roxy Paine, in a stunning, Neo-Classical structure known in Tel Aviv as the "Twin House." Head a bit further south to Braverman Gallery for a solo by Nira Pereg.



Yudit Levin  
*Green*, 2015  
Dvir Gallery



Ron Amir  
*On the Shore of Sea of Galilee*, 2008  
Hezi Cohen Gallery

In the up-and-coming Florentin neighborhood—often compared to Brooklyn's Williamsburg for its population of young creative types—you'll find a slew of the city's galleries, often representing boundary-pushing emerging artists. At Hezi Cohen, see works by Sigalit Landau, Darren Goins, and Ron Amir. Down the road, the long-established Dvir Gallery, currently shows beautiful new paintings by Yudit Levin. One tiny street, Ha-Mif'al, brings together three must-see spaces, Rosenfeld Gallery (one of the city's oldest, founded in 1952), Feinberg Projects, and Litvak Contemporary.

## Residencies



*Artport, Tel Aviv. Photo courtesy of Artport.*

Tel Aviv is also home to Artport, a relatively new but growing residency program led by Vardit Gross. In two large, long buildings resembling dressed-up suburban storage facilities, Artport's residents work side-by-side in studios, with the long open-air space between the buildings acting as a common area. Current residents include Tamir Zadok, creator of the *Gaza Canal* (2010), a satirical video documenting the separation of Gaza from the rest of Israel through the means of a canal.

The night our group arrived in the city, the residents presented their work, after which we shared a multi-course dinner cooked by Yahaloma Levi—who runs a small, vegan-friendly bistro in the Levinsky Market at the heart of South Tel Aviv—at a long table underneath string lights draped between the buildings.

## Studio Visits and Artist Talks

Unsurprisingly, Tel Aviv's vibrant network of exhibition spaces is bolstered by an active community of artists, some of whom talked us through their practices, others who generously opened their studios, spread throughout the city.





Miki Kratsman  
*Hebron 1996, from "People I Met" project, as part of ...*  
Chelouche Gallery



Ilit Azoulay  
*Shifting Degrees of Certainty, 2014*  
"Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015" at Museum of Modern Art, New York (2015)

Among the most memorable meetings were those with Miki Kratsman, at Chelouche Gallery, who is well-known for his decades-long photographic documentation of life in the Palestinian territories; Ilit Azoulay, at Braverman, whose work is included in MoMA's current "Ocean of Images: New Photography 2015" exhibition; and Elham Rokni, who—in Los Angeles over the course of 2016—will have both a residency and an exhibition at Shulamit Nazarian Gallery.

During other visits, Nevet Yitzhak explained her adaptation of contemporary Afghan "war rugs" into animated projections reminiscent of video games, which recently made their U.S. debut at Yossi Milo Gallery, while Sharon Ya'ari talked us through his large-scale photographic landscapes, which subtly allude to political themes. A final visit with the charismatic Gil Yefman revealed his crocheted, simultaneously childlike and unsettling sculptures that engage with the Holocaust—the subject of his first solo exhibition in the U.S. last year at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

## Outside of Tel Aviv





*Exterior of Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, courtesy of Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art.*

Tel Aviv's suburbs also feature dynamic spaces for contemporary art with their own talented curators. For one, the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art is well worth a visit, and is currently hosting curator Maayan Sheleff's innovative show, "Preaching to the Choir," which explores contemporary art practices—primarily related to performance and video—that incorporate choirs and choral music, often as a tool to surface social and political commentary.

South of Herzliya, curator Hila Cohen-Schneiderman's "The Crystal Palace & the Temple of Doom," at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art, was one of the more creatively themed (and titled) group shows up during my visit. It featured large-scale sculptures and video installations by, among others, Elisheva Levy, Liz Hagag, and Hilla Toony Navok. Navok's contribution was a humorous video entitled *With the Wind, With the Water* (2015), reminiscent of playful video work by Bruce Nauman and Gabriel Orozco. The piece follows an enormous blue inflatable ball rolling through a typical Israeli suburban town. Another portion of the video observes Navok trying to move a massive section of yellow rubber, which looks like a gigantic Slip'N Slide, off a balcony and into a fountain.

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## Jerusalem



*Aerial view of Haram Al-Sharif (Temple Mount) with Dome of the Rock  
Jerusalem, Israel*

While Israel's art scene is currently centered in Tel Aviv and its suburbs, Jerusalem's encyclopedic Israel Museum, the country's largest cultural institution (which celebrated its 50th anniversary this year), is changing that. Entering the museum's grounds, which lead you up to a hilltop overlooking West Jerusalem, two monumental reflective sculptures by Jeff Koons, and a work by Anish Kapoor, greet you. The Kapoor is especially powerful; perched at the apex of the hill, it reflects the rocky landscape that surrounds the museum complex and the ancient city that sits below, nestled between the Mediterranean and Dead Seas.

Currently on view, "We the People: New in Contemporary Art" includes works by international artists (like Pawel Althamer, Cyprien Gaillard, and Wolfgang Tillmans) and takes its name from artist Danh Vō's 1:1 reproduction of the Statue of Liberty in 300 pieces, also included in the comprehensive survey show.

The museum's permanent collection, though less focused on contemporary art, is required viewing for anyone visiting Israel. Its rich collection of archaeological relics include what is thought to be the oldest figurine in the world, not to mention the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest surviving manuscript pages of the Bible. Don't miss the collection's nest egg of Dada and Surrealist masterworks, the product of a major gift from Italian collector and scholar Arturo Schwarz, best-known for his research on Marcel Duchamp.



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## Haifa, Ein Harod and Umm El Fahem



*View of Haifa from Yefe Nof promenade. Photo ©Adobe Stock / LevT.*

It's also worth taking a short trek north of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, to Beit Hagefen in Haifa and the Museum of Art, Ein Harod—one of the first art museums in Israel, originally founded in a hut on the site of the Kibbutz Ein Harod. In 1948, the museum made its home in a permanent building designed by architect Samuel Bickels. One of the earliest examples of an exhibition space relying primarily on natural lighting, it became an inspiration for Renzo Piano's De Menil Museum in Houston in the 1980s.

Ein Harod is currently home to "The Rough Law of Garden," featuring the work of Nahum Tevet and Olaf Holzapfel. Tevet's room-filling installation of hundreds of shaped, multicolored boxes, panels, and frames suggests a three-dimensional Peter Halley or Patrick Wilson painting.

In between Haifa and Tel Aviv, Umm El Fahem Gallery, directed by Said Abu Shakra and founded in 1996, is one of few spaces in Israel's predominantly Arab sectors to exhibit Arab and Palestinian contemporary art. As such, its aim to "create a meeting point for a meaningful dialogue between cultures" feels especially poignant.

—Matthew Israel

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