

The Arts

A Tale of Two Cities

Jerusalem is known for its religious hot spots, Tel Aviv for trendy secularism. But what they share, as any gallery-goer will clearly see, is a love for the visual arts.

By **Sara K. Eisen**

"There are no real galleries in Jerusalem," declared one Tel Aviv curator with a derisive wave of her hand when I told her my assignment—to seek out 10 "must-see" art galleries in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. I was not surprised by the conceit (although I believe she was expressing her conviction about selling art versus living it); the healthy overdose of self-esteem and the sibling rivalry with Jerusalem are among the charming idiosyncrasies that define Tel Aviv, particularly its cultural scene.

As for the capital: Jerusalem is known for its historical and religious landmarks, which somehow loom larger than its rich cultural life. But Jerusalemites are serious about broadening their horizons and their collections (although they are less likely to hold culture sacred for its own sake) via theater, music and art.

DESPITE THEIR DIFFERENCES IN approach, both Jerusalemites and Tel Avivians, down to the last bespectacled sophisticate among them, welcomed with disarming warmth the presence of my (at the time) 5-month-old baby boy on our great June art tour. Shaged and I bumped up and down several flights of granite, chrome and stone; we smiled at curators, collected information and commenced a very, very early contemporary culture education. We could not, sadly, afford any of the art, although we were genuinely tempted several times, almost to the point of drooling.

Here, then, are the galleries we'd like to recommend for your next visit to either of these great cities.

Jerusalem

While there are significantly fewer art galleries in Jerusalem than in Tel Aviv (there was some basis for the curator's comment), that's not the same as none.

A good example of a place that might have pleasantly



Show and Tell Neil Folberg displays photos in his spacious gallery; (opposite page) 'Milk or Wine?' by Nurit David, displayed at the Givon Art Gallery.

surprised her, even though it has a commercial bent, is the Artspace Gallery in the German Colony. Owned and run by poet, art agent and collector Linda Zisquit, the gallery (which doubles as her husband's law office) is located in half of her romantic old Arab home; the dappled light of late afternoon, arriving through the high windows surrounding the long, narrow stone gallery, is especially striking, almost church-like.

In addition to more seasoned talents like conceptualist Larry Abramson and conceptual realist Ruth Ben-Dov, Zisquit represents a number of emerging artists. The gallery recently hosted a retrospective by students of the Jerusalem Studio School; there's always something in the tiny place worth dropping by to see.

But what is most special about Zisquit's gallery is her

consignment room in back: It's a treasure trove. My favorite artist in the copious and always surprising stacks is a young Israeli woman (currently working abroad) named Noa Shay, whose visceral hyper-realism, including exquisite rendering of necks and shoulders, gives me the shivers. I asked Zisquit to save for me (for a day) an arresting painting of a boy asleep. I could have talked to Zisquit for hours. She is an engaging hostess and an amazing promoter of her artists.

ON OUR NEXT ART OUTING, SHAQED AND I VISITED THE Jerusalem Artists' House in the center of town. Once the Bezalel Academy building, this official home of the Jerusalem Artists' Association collaborative is a historic, large stone villa with an inviting courtyard.

On view in the changing exhibition space upstairs was "Pilgrim," a photography show from actor Richard Gere, a Buddhist who produced an impressive collection of images from his treks through Mongolia and Tibet. Gere's focus was the blurring of the natural and the esoteric in that part of the world and the intersection of the spiritual with the everyday. No better place to hold such an exhibit than Jerusalem.

But Shaqed and I spent most of our time in the front room, where artists deliver their pieces for show and sale—this is *the* source for work by the city's artists. Manager Shulamit Efrat had infinite patience in discussing the contents of her crowded consignment room where, she says, artists "bring things fresh."

From the Artists' House we walked to Rivlin Street, by all accounts a happening part of town. By day, the pedestrian-only cobblestoned street is full of business lunchers, tourists and window shoppers; by night, young people hang out at the cafés, clubs and jewelry stands. Above it all (literally) is Vision, Neil Folberg's photography gallery, one-of-a-kind in Israel in its exclusive dedication to that medium. The gallery is a restored 100-year-old stone house perched at the top of a steep flight of stairs above a popular restaurant courtyard—totally charming but hard to ascend with a carriage.

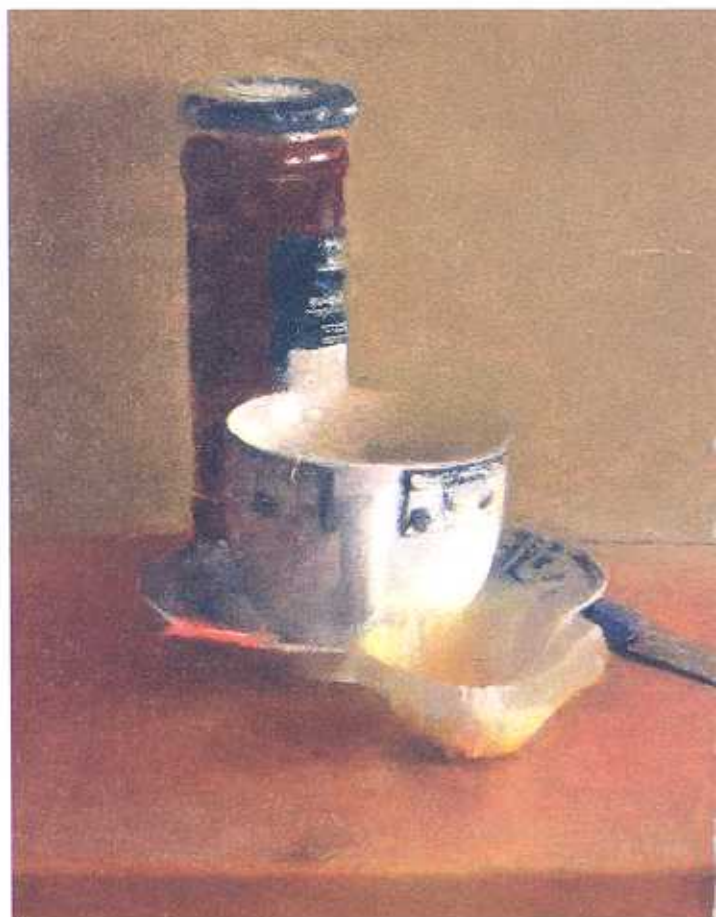
A student of famed photographer Ansel Adams, world renowned, prize-winning Folberg and his businessman father established Vision in 1981 in San Francisco; it was relocated to Jerusalem in 1998 after the senior Folberg's death.

Photography is my favorite visual art, and Folberg's images—a permanent display of his work is in the gallery's spacious backroom—are stunning. His latest series is a study of Impressionist paintings. Folberg stages famous scenes painted by masters such as Manet and Renoir and creates a photograph that mimics not only the

intense colors, but the appearance of having been painted in tiny strokes.

In the living room of the homey gallery is the changing exhibit. Photographers who display their works here (including those not exclusively represented by the gallery) will generally leave some behind after a show for Yehuda, Folberg's 20-something son, to sell. Yehuda runs the gallery while his father captures the world on film. I was shown prints by, among others, Ansel Adams, Auguste Salzmänn and Masotomo Kuriya—some of which are valued in the five digits and are not for sale.

On our last day in Jerusalem, Shaqed and I spent some



time under Teddy Stadium in Malkha, where there is a contemporary art gallery and a cluster of artists' studios that have been around since 1999, which, I am embarrassed to admit, was news to me.

Here's a great example of the power of one: Passing under the stadium after a game, artist Hedva Shemesh, now the gallery's curator, noticed lots of wasted space, a valuable commodity in the city. Shemesh asked the municipality to pay electricity and water and forgo land tax and rent, "underwriting" the work studios and exhibition space of a select number of young artists. She got a yes



Nouveau Art (above) a multimedia piece by Zvi Tolkovski from *The New Gallery*; Michael Rapoport's work at Rosenfeld; (opposite page) Noa Shay's jam and tea at Artspace.



from City Hall—with an agreement to finance catalogues, as well.

The result is *The New Gallery*, a concrete warehouse-like contemporary art haven, humming with the activities of resident artists; several doors encircle the cavernous exhibition space—these are their workrooms. The changing exhibit is generally culled from veteran talents—minimalist Joshua Neustein is a recent example—although occasionally the “tenants” of the gallery will exhibit here, too. On display at the time of our visit was “Family,” a multimedia study by six up-and-coming Israeli artists on that time-honored theme.

Two main differences distinguish this gallery from others in Jerusalem: One, there is nothing commercial about it; the New Gallery is a public institution and does not engage in sales. This is art for art’s sake. And two, there is

nothing “classic” or restrained about it. This is as avant-garde and experimental as they come. Both of these distinctions got us ready for Tel Aviv.

Tel Aviv

It is difficult to walk more than two blocks in Jerusalem without bumping into a synagogue; the same can be said of Tel Aviv and art galleries. It is untrue that Tel Aviv is nonreligious; it’s just that art (and possibly coffee) is the religion of the city.

Of the six shrines to the aesthetic gods that Shaqed and I managed to get to on our pilgrimage (and there were many more we missed), my favorite was **Rosenfeld Gallery** on Dizengoff Street. With its tall, narrow, boxy design, like a townhouse without any rooms, chrome fixtures, winding stairs, huge windows (for lots of natural light) and stark white walls, Rosenfeld is exactly what a gallery looks like in my imagination: minimalist, modern and classy.

In existence over 50 years, Rosenfeld is a Tel Aviv benchmark. Once a vanguard of conservative Israeli art (not prone to trends or the contemporary scene), it changed its approach about a decade ago when owner-director Eliezer Rosenfeld died and was succeeded by his son, Zaki, who is about as trendy as they come. The fact that Shaqed was accepted warmly at this gallery was my only indication that we were still in Israel.



Galleries

Jerusalem

Artspace Gallery
5 Hazefira, German Colony
011-972-2-566-2423; www.artspacegallery.co.il

Jerusalem Artists' House
12 Shmuel Hanagid Street
011-972-2-625-3653
www.art.org.il

The New Gallery
Teddy Stadium
011-972-2-679-2968; www.thenewgallery.org.il

Vision
18 Yosef Rivlin Street
011-972-2-622-2253; www.nelifolberg.com

Tel Aviv

A Time for Art (above)
36 Montefiore Street
011-972-3-566-4450; www.timeforart.co.il

Givon Art Gallery
35 Gordon Street
011-972-3-522-5427
www.interart.co.il/givon

Mabat Gallery
31 Gordon Street
011-972-3-523-6868
mabatart@zahav.net.il

Noga Gallery
60 Ehad Ha'am Street
011-972-3-586-0123;
www.nogagallery.co.il

Rosenfeld Gallery
147 Dizengoff Street
011-972-3-522-9044; www.rg.co.il

Sommer Contemporary Art
64 Rothschild Boulevard
011-972-3-560-0630
www.sommergallery.com

The younger Rosenfeld remodeled in the 1990's and, together with curator Diana Dallal, now seeks to represent young, upwardly mobile Israelis with an "edgy, intense realism."

Dallal says they do not show abstract art or anything where the concept overwhelms the implementation, meaning if the piece does not exhibit classic skill and is difficult to interpret. Excellence is key, and stars such as Orna Wind (whose magnificent bold images of women in the media was on display during our visit) certainly bear the standard well. While there is clearly a commercial element here, the backroom stays in back, by appointment only: There is no wandering in to buy off the rack.

That appears to be the norm in Tel Aviv—commercialism is downplayed as irrelevant to the real point of art, namely as a cultural and aesthetic value for its own sake that needs not justify itself via sales (although sales are a good thing). Three other galleries we visited were, probably, more representative of Tel Aviv than Rosenfeld (if only in terms of aesthetics).

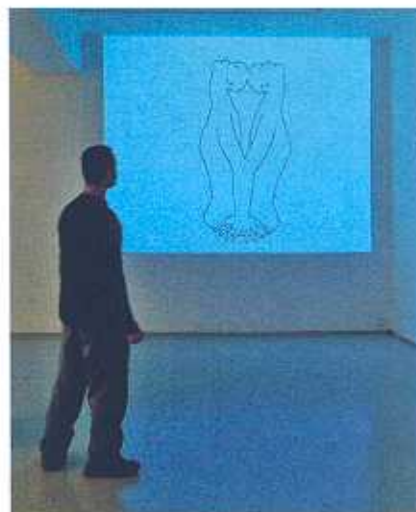
Givon Art Gallery, Noga Gallery and Sommer Contemporary Art are all stark, accessible modern venues. They are mainly concerned with promoting young talent, although Sommer is the most openly commercial and Givon more likely to have thematic mixed-media retrospectives from several artists.

Coincidentally, at the time of our visit, all three had politically charged shows—in the case of Givon and Sommer, around the matter of Israeli conscience (or its lack) during the second *intifada*, which began in 2000. This was Tel Aviv at its most Tel Avivi.

Givon is larger, more upscale than the other two galleries and more established (around for 30 years, as opposed to Noga's decade and Sommer's five years), representing Israeli art paradigms like Raffi Lavi and Moshe

Gershoni. Like Rosenfeld, Givon is a family business where the heirs—Shmuel Givon's daughters, Naomi Givon and Nurit Wolf—began courting a more contemporary cadre of artists to keep the cultural pulse alive within their walls. And while Noga and Sommer are located in the trendy White City, Tel Aviv's revitalized center of Bauhaus architecture and now a UNESCO World Heritage site, Givon sits on Gordon Street, once arguably the heart of Israel's art world.

While Givon has survived the de-



cline of Gordon, one landmark there is struggling. Mabat Gallery is almost the diametric opposite of Rosenfeld and Givon in that the small, one-room, just-below-street-level gallery pays little attention to the aesthetics of its exhibition space; a lot of attention to its cavernous, overflowing backroom; and carries its sense of history as a badge of honor, even as that history seems to be evaporating. There are no plans to change direction; Mabat is a landmark above all.

At the epicenter of the (now fading) Gordon Street art scene since 1967, Mabat owner Ephraim Ben Yakir says that most Israeli artists above a certain age once passed through his gallery. During the 1970's and 1980's, in Gordon's heyday (think Soho), Ben Yakir's gallery represented cantanker-

(LEFT) COURTESY OF A TIME FOR ART, TEL AVIV; COURTESY OF NOGA GALLERY, TEL AVIV



Heart of the City Eliezer Sommenschien's political work at Sommer (above); an installation at Noga (opposite page). Both galleries focus on young talent.

ous sculptor Igaël Tumarkin and exhibited artists Benni Efrat, Moshe Kupferman and Micha Ullman (the last two are now represented by Givon). All of these and more are now featured in the back, mostly for sale.

Ben Yakir—who waxes eloquent about Teddy Kollek's patronage of the arts ("There are no more enlightened men like that," he sighs)—spent some time talking about the sad state of affairs in the Tel Aviv art world, stemming, he says, from "a lack of culture, lack of tourists and apathy."

One senses he is somewhat justified in his malaise—the train has indeed moved on without him; the genre of deliberately consequential, museum-weight art (Benni Efrat, Itzhak Danziger, Avigdor Steimatsky) has been replaced by a brasher, more contemporary variety (shown at Givon and Noga). But Ben Yakir is overly pessimistic: Art is alive and well, it's just younger and a bit less approachable, more coy—art in Tel Aviv has become something of a starlet.

The greatest evidence of this shift—more striking than the Givon and Rosenfeld transformations—is A Time for Art, a spectacular, remod-

eled three-story house on Montefiore Street in the heart of the White City. Art director and chief curator Gideon Ofrat has created a museum chic enough (the very apex of chic, perfect down to the dark, New York club-style bathrooms) and just small and accessible enough to be called a gallery—but barely. It hosts lectures

and cultural events and generally acts like a museum; it represents several emerging art celebrities, but exhibits are highly theme-centric, with works culled from other art institutions.

The street-level entrance is a stylish restaurant called Artichoke; the airy, well-lit exhibition space spans two levels, which are connected by a fabulous stairwell that is also part of the show. On exhibit in June was "Love Is in the Air: Romantic Love in Contemporary Israeli Art," which, of course, sought to deconstruct both, along with popular romantic culture.

An excellent retrospective, "Love" spanned photography, painting, video (a close-up of two mouths kissing to a whispered dialogue was an interesting dissection of the physical nature of this universal romantic act), sculpture and more. But I'm glad my older kids weren't with me, as there were several, "What's that, Mommy?" installations—for example, two pink and red male lovers urinating together amid a flurry of hearts.

"Shaged," I whispered, "we're not in Jerusalem anymore." **H**

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