

Lotus in the Backyard

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Liat Livni's exhibition is the product of site-specific research and practice. Livni, an emerging artist who holds a master's degree from Bezalel, explores the relationship between Kibbutz HaZorea, which houses Wilfrid Israel Museum, and the East Asian art displayed in it.

Wilfrid Israel Museum was established in 1951 around a collection of East Asian Art bequeathed to the Kibbutz by Wilfrid Israel. At the time, the debate surrounding the necessity and function of a museum in a kibbutz sparked controversies among the kibbutz founders, between those who saw the museum as a foreign element and culture lovers as well as the friends of Wilfrid. Livni works out of a real interest in this conceptual and material multilayered dialogue, and formulates through the artworks the Museum's connection to the kibbutz that serves as its home.

In her exploration of the Kibbutz' farming branches, Livni found that two of these have a direct link to Asian aesthetics: aquatic plants, including lotus plants that are a prevalent image in Buddhist art, and koi fish – an ornamental carp that is particularly popular in Japan. In Buddhism, the lotus that grows out of the mud symbolizes the transformation of suffering into compassion. In most Buddhist statues, the Buddha is depicted sitting in meditation on a stylized lotus. Three of the pieces Livni created for the exhibition are based on a photograph of lotus ponds and made of very fine sand in different shades. These pieces evoke reflections on localism and rootedness, belonging versus foreignness and otherness. The lotus plants were brought to Kibbut HaZorea ponds as a foreign plant, an immigrant that assimilated into the living conditions in Israel. Livni flattens and creates an abstraction of the image of the lotus, making it once again look like the landscape of a different, faraway place.

The sand, which represents a connection to the land and to the place from which it was collected, was used by Livni in some of her previous works. Its beauty and wealth of hues have fascinated her since childhood: her father had a collection of different types of soil collected in construction sites across Israel, on which he worked as an engineer. Two additional pieces, which bring to mind Chinese scrolls (Scroll 1,2), delineate landscapes with fine and delicate lines using soil from Kibbutz HaZorea ("Sower" in Hebrew), which Livni gathered and glued to plastic sheets from the local factory "Plastopil." Despite the disparity between the earth and the plastic, she fuses together the natural with the artificial, allowing these two seemingly insignificant materials to form a dialogue with the scrolls in the Museum's collection, creating a real synthesis between here and there, between "the sacred and the profane."

According to the artist, she creates a connection between the collection and life: "the thought that accompanies me is how the Museum is a part of the Kibbutz. An art museum is perceived as a temple. I am interested in connecting the Kibbutz – a place where people live – to the Museum.

What will make them feel a part of what takes place in it? I see the role of the artist as the creator of a reality through visual materials and with the help of the imagination.”

The views of the Kibbutz, captured from a drone’s perspective, and images of Chinese landscapes that Livni found in the Museum’s collection, form the basis of the landscape in these works. The familiar Kibbutz landscape transgresses its localism and starts drifting amid Chinese mists, among which we catch glimpses of the Kibbutz’s dining room, water tower, museum, and the serpentine, stylized lines of Nahal HaShofet (“The Judge’s Stream”). Livni adopts the bird’s-eye view. The mountains, water, vegetation, and structures are seen on several planes, disappearing and appearing in the empty ethereal space characteristic of Chinese landscape painting. The view, which feels very familiar yet utterly different, seems to underscore the question: is there a clear distinction between local and foreign landscape?

The green forested landscape identified with Kibbutz HaZora did not always look like it does now. Photographs from the early days of the Kibbutz show a group of tents against a backdrop of clear hills. The immigrants who came from Germany – the founding core of the Kibbutz – brought with them the familiar European landscape to the arid land.

Today it seems only natural that the founders decided to establish a museum in their kibbutz out of a love of culture. But as mentioned earlier, its establishment was accompanied by dilemmas and struggles. The model of the museum as a temple of art did not go hand in hand with the kibbutz’s egalitarian ideology. At the same time, the format of a culture house that serves only the needs of the community did not comply with the will left by Wilfrid, who wished to donate a pavilion of East Asian art and knowledge, in which his art collection will be displayed, and that will transform the Kibbutz into a unique culture center in the periphery. Eventually, it was decided to erect a humble structure for exhibits and cultural activities, on the condition that the kibbutz members will work in it voluntarily, on their own free time.

In homage to the Kibbutz’s founders, Livni created two Indian style statues of goddesses with multiple arms – the Goddess of Creation and the Goddess of Construction. In each of their many hands they hold a different tool, symbolizing the almost super human number of labors that were necessary for the fulfillment of the pioneers’ vision, and perhaps the many hands that contributed to it. The construction and creation, as two inseparably intertwined realms, are what made the Kibbutz and the Museum in it possible. In Indian mythology, the eighteen-armed goddess Durga symbolizes the power to protect and defend the universe. In the exhibition, the two goddesses are presented as the guardians of the temple and its values, and with that – in a way, they are reinstated in their original role.

Other works that connect the local imagery with Asian art offer a tongue-in-cheek approach: a fragment from van Gogh’s *Sower* is painted on a Korean fan, disseminating its seeds above the Kibbutz’s lotus pond. Fans that Livni had brought from artists’ residencies in Taiwan and Japan became “souvenirs” on which she created images from the photographs of the Kibbutz’s archive: a proud tractor driver, fisherman, or the image of a power with his horse in the fields, as a distant

silhouette from a different era, when farming was still an object of desire and longing. These hybrid objects conjure up a sense of simultaneous distance and intimacy.

At the end of the hall spreads a Zen garden. While in Japan, the Zen garden is designed for quite observation and mediation, here it is made of meticulously raked plastic crystals culled from the Kibbutz's factory. The ancient rocks are replaced by rocks made of plain brown wrapping paper. The appearance of the rocks, which look like artificial islands floating at sea, is associated with the series *Maps of the Island of Israel* that Livni created in Taiwan in 2012, inspired by ancient maps of Formosa Island. In this context, Israel Wilfrid Museum could be perceived as an island of Asian culture in the Kibbutz, and the Kibbutz as an island of social utopia within Israeli society. However, the isolation and calm embodied in the image of the island are not the options Livni selects in her path as an artist. Like a culture alchemist she fuses art with life, works with everyday materials, and brings together seemingly distant cultures.

Livni's works combine meticulous aesthetics, refinement, and materials sensibility with an inquisitive process and a desire to uncover the logic that underlies ideas and concepts associated with the place and the time. And perhaps the words published in the bulletin *This Week in Kibbutz Artzi* on the occasion of the Museum's inauguration in 1951 are more relevant now than ever before: "The awakening of Asian nations we are witnessing these days, the nations that created the finest works in this collection, heralds a renewed and productive meeting of East and West, and with that, fulfills the wishes of Wilfrid Israel."