



Putting Ceramic Art on the Map

*Ester Beck describes the new Benyamini
Contemporary Ceramics Centre in Tel-Aviv*

*Outside view of the building at night.
Photo by Shai Levy.*

THE ISRAELI CERAMICS COMMUNITY HAD THE good fortune to have its long-time dream fulfilled: the creation of the first national Ceramics Centre which opened mid-June of 2011 and will be the showcase and study centre for professional ceramists as well as for the public at large about anything to do with the field of ceramics.

This project was made possible by an endowment from the inheritance left by the potter-couple Issachar and Judith Benyamini specifically for the ceramic arts. Marcelle Klein, herself a well-known veteran ceramics artist and, in her function as trustee of the endowment, has for the past 10 years toiled at working out the concept for the centre, finding the appropriate building to buy, taking upon herself the supervision of the renovation. The result is a well-planned and aesthetic renovation of an old industrial building, located in South Tel-Aviv, formerly a down-trodden neighbourhood but now rapidly becoming cutting edge with new galleries and artists studios. Klein is the first director, supported by a team of five ceramists who each volunteer and is responsible for one of the functions in the Centre.

The concept of the Centre declares itself the minute one opens the

entrance door. All is visible to the visitor at first glance: one sees the large studio space through its glass doors and the activities taking place in there; the offices of the active Israel Ceramics Association (representing 600 registered members) are just at the entrance to the right, as well as a small display area with ceramic works for sale; to the left the open space reveals the library as well as the 'lab', the smaller of the two galleries housed in the building; the staircase (leading to the main gallery on the first floor and to the open usable rooftop space) is also visible. The space is full of natural light and has clean white lines; it exudes a feeling of intimacy immediately felt by the visitor (as has repeatedly been reported) by its sensible unpretentious proportions, a feeling the Centre set out to communicate. It is the home of the ceramics community in Israel and a showcase to the outside of what the ceramics world represents in content and in ethos.

The activities at the Centre are manifold. Besides the active studio and the opening nights of exhibitions and the related gallery talks, the centre offers evenings of lectures and movies on varied aspects of ceramics, as well as hands-on demonstrations of Israeli and foreign ceramics artists visiting Israel, all open to the public at large. Residencies are offered to ceramists from abroad, desiring to spend some time in Israel and wanting to work on a project.

The Studio offers a wide range of courses on a high level of learning, taught by accomplished ceramics artists, as an alternative to purely academic studies. It gives beginners an opportunity to be introduced to working in ceramics, as well as providing working ceramists courses to strengthen special techniques or ways of working that interest them, offering them the possibility to choose their own combinations of courses.

In addition, there are specialised workshops with guest artists from home as well as from abroad. Artists from other disciplines who want to work on a ceramics project are able to get studio time. One corner of the studio, called 'First Studio' is given over to two chosen graduates from the academies who are able to work there as a grant on furthering their work for one year, after which they will be rotated with a new pair.

The Centre is intended to expose to and teach the public about the wide range and depth of the field of the ceramic arts: one way of doing this is through the open library, which the visitor or student immediately encounters when entering the Centre. It plays an essential role, since the wealth of literature on the field is usually a surprise to even art lovers as well as to local ceramists not always able to encounter and be exposed to the scope of internationally available material. We update regularly all of the important journals as well as new international



Top: Marcelle Klein, director of the Centre and ceramic artist.

Above: Screening happening from the studio on to wall of opposite industrial building.

Above photos by Ester Beck.

The Centre has received considerable attention and praise from the general public, the press, as well as from artists, designers, curators and the media, all sharing the surprise of discovering the wealth of expressive possibilities and aesthetic ideas of ceramics.



Top: *The Lab* opening exhibition. June 2011. Photo by Ester Beck.
 Above: *The Lab*. Part of *Voyage* Exhibition. December 2011. Photo courtesy of Benyamini Centre.

publications of books and DVDs. The library content is available in a data base in the Centre's web site, to encourage people to use it and also for research purposes. The library is also building up a historical and up-to-date data bank specifically concerning local ceramics, a project that will also be a first in the country.

The other important vehicles for exposing the variety and sophistication of the ceramics field are the two gallery spaces. The opening exhibition of the Centre, called provocatively *Whose Earth is it anyway?* was a challenging group exhibition in both spaces, curated by Eran Ehrlich, teaching at the Bezalel Art Academy. The artists ranged from recent graduates, including Shelly Shavit and Yoav Admoni, to established local and foreign ceramists (Claude Champy and Claudi Casanovas from private collections) and Israeli artists from other fields integrating earth in to their work (Micha Ullmann and Ygal Tumarkin).

The next two exhibitions that opened in September, curated by the house curator Ronit Zor, were quite different: Yael Atzmoni used the 'The Lab' for a more experimental work, showing a double video based on her ceramic

installation in the waters of the 1500 year old underground reservoir in the old Arab Jewish town of Ramla. In the large gallery was a first-ever retrospective of the work of the late ceramist Maud Friedland, featuring 60 beautiful lustre bottles, giving a unique opportunity to see such a comprehensive private collection of her accomplished work. This exhibition was accompanied by the launch of the book devoted to her work.

After the third exhibition *Voyage*, curated by gallery owner/curator Tirza Yallon-Kolton, the upcoming group show is called *Ueber-Kitsch*, just to give an idea of the breadth of subjects through which the gallery wants to challenge the public to discover a wide range of ideas being expressed in our medium. The Centre also invites curators from different fields other than ceramics to curate thought-provoking exhibitions in the ceramics medium, enabling a dialogue with other art perspectives as well.

The aim of the exhibitions at the Centre is to show the field of ceramic art at its best and most varied, whether it is giving a sense of the breadth of local ceramics creation and exploration on all of its components and whether being a venue to show work of foreign artists. Giving a stage to young artists in their first stages of their career, thus encouraging them to pursue their creative search with a sense of a place to show is paramount in the agenda. The interest is also to encourage dealing with

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Upper gallery. Maud Friedland exhibition. Photo by Ester Beck.

subjects that will create a dialogue with the other arts and crafts.

As has proven itself in the meantime in the daily reality, one of the big agendas of the Centre is already being accomplished: giving the young generation of ceramists a place to continue their professional involvement after coming out of the academies. Instead of encountering the disorientation of being left in a vacuum in the real world after years of intense professional interaction, the young have a place to continue to interact among themselves and talk about their specific issues, engage themselves in the ceramics community around a place that provides a focus, taking on projects and bringing their refreshing input, meeting the older generation, getting to teach in the Centre, getting to pursue projects and, if wanted, to continue training in specific areas.

The Centre, as a foundation, is separate from the Israel Ceramics Association. In actuality, however, the Centre is becoming a focal venue and gathering space for the Association's members around the different activities it offers. Thus it supplements the many other activities provided by the Ceramics Association around the country. Having for years had a strong and successful Association in Israel paved the way and made the time right for the creation of such a home.

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