

From 'Backyard' to front lawn

Some of sculptor Uri Katzenstein's more bizarre pieces include 'Butt Print,' a 'blood painting' using his baby's body, and a swastika chair. He's even writing a new language

A detail of the 'Backyard' exhibition. (Courtesy)



• By CARL HOFFMAN

One reason Uri Katzenstein's works are currently on display in a solo exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art is that he is the 2014 winner of the Dan Sandel and Sandel Family Foundation Sculpture Award. Yet aside from this, Katzenstein – a highly imaginative sculptor whose works have been shown in art festivals, exhibitions and galleries throughout the world – is also a fascinating performance artist; a musician who plays pieces seemingly written far in the future; a maker of cutting-edge, sometimes shocking videos about hybrids; a builder of robots; an inventor of secret codes; and an artist who paints pictures in his own blood.

He is probably also a genius, or nearly one. And with one arm tattooed with the names of people he says he loves, and a right earlobe elongated in the style of a Masai warrior, he is himself something of a work of art.

Born 64 years ago in Tel Aviv, he embarked on his path in life driven, he says, by an urge not to become like his parents.

"I think this is something like an inner coil that one listens to. And it takes you

places. So I think it was that," he says.

Asked about the parents he did not want to be like, he says, "They were the sweetest people on earth, really, but they were German. Tradesmen. Very hardworking. Industrious. They were total *yekkes* [German Jews known for punctuality and attention to detail]... but they were sweet guys. But I didn't want to be a tradesman. I wanted nothing to do with that world. I still don't."

And yet it was with the skills of a tradesman that he began his artistic life.

"There's this side of me... I like to get my hands dirty," he says. "I like to play with different materials and see where I can stretch them to. I am actually a carpenter. This is what I learned in high school, at ORT in Ramat Gan. I was there for three years, but I didn't last. I later wanted to go to the Bezalel Academy [of Arts and Design in Jerusalem] to study art, but of course they didn't accept me. So I studied at the Avni Institute [in Tel Aviv] for a year."

He left Israel for the United States in 1973.

"I was in the army. I left Israel after the 1973 war. I think that was my major reason for leaving," he says. "I started at a small university in Indiana, and then I went on to the San Francisco Art Institute, where I did my master's degree. I was in San Francisco

from 1977 to 1979, and from there on I lived in New York until 1985, which is when I returned to Israel."

Asked what he was doing during his years in New York, he laughs and replies, "Trying."

"I worked there for several years in a total vacuum," he recalls. "I did the whole shebang – the loft thing, working as a carpenter and trying to earn a living, and being married, with both of us working really hard, and living in Chinatown and blah, blah, blah, blah. You know, all this shtick. But I was working in a vacuum, and I was really alone, and I did this for several years."

His life changed, however, through the unexpected intercession of WBAI – a raucous, edgy, listener-sponsored New York City radio station whose *raison d'être* since the mid-1960s has been providing an almost limitless spectrum of programs, personalities and opinions that mainstream commercial radio has often been afraid to touch. An upstairs neighbor had a show on WBAI and asked Katzenstein if he would like to replace him. The erstwhile artist and carpenter needed little prodding.

"I said, 'Sure, Jack.' He then asked if I could play some ethnic music, some world music, and I said, 'Yeah, sure. I have a col-

lection.' So I did this job for some time. And this is where I learned a lot about radio. And meeting the people who worked there was amazing. That was a nice experience, and after doing this for a while, I started going to different performance places.

"The performance places in New York were very open to suggestions. So I started doing performances with instruments that I built. Singing, and doing things with mechanical instruments – mechanical and funny – and doing things like one-man bands. And then I started performing, doing performance art in several venues in New York where I worked, along with clubs or bars that would allow that. And in a very short time, I got to know the whole Lower East Side world. It was interesting, and the time was interesting. I feel I was very lucky to be in that world at that time. It was a time of shift in the arts, because it was a very post-conceptual time when a lot of people like myself really felt that it was their duty to fill the art world with stuff again, after it was totally vaporized. It was our rebellion."

RETURNING TO Israel in 1985, he continued to fill the art world with stuff again while living in Tel Aviv and teaching art at the University of Haifa. He is ambivalent about how much his return to Israel changed his artistic perspectives.

"I continued what I was doing, but I did it under a different light, different circumstances," he says. "I think I could be an artist anywhere, really, though some of my heritage and some of the social situations that we're facing here are also working as sort of a driving motor. It inspires thought, and provokes thought. You're attuned to it and work with it, but outside of it. I am an Israeli, and I do Israeli work because I live in Israel. But I don't really think that my work is deeply impregnated by the current conversation of Israeli art. The new generation here is fabulous. There are really some fantastic people here. My generation is somehow battered."

It may be battered, but it is also resiliently creative, if Katzenstein's current exhibition, "Backyard," is any indication. Presenting a selective overview of his wide-ranging oeuvre from the 1980s to the present, the exhibition, he says, "is by definition a midlife show, something like a small retrospective. It does not include everything."

It is structured around three sections – sculpture, robotics, and video art – and presents around 30 films and videos, along with bits and pieces of earlier exhibitions and performances. This is particularly true of the largest exhibition space, composed of shelves containing a dizzying array of small sculpture pieces – from household objects, to little men (all bald, like the artist himself), to a chair shaped like a swastika.

"It's something like a *mahsan*, a storage space," he explains. "It basically has objects and leftovers from performances, and sculptures, and reinstalled parts of dead installations, not the whole installations. The idea to do this was because I really felt that all these works needed an installation that would kind of be tedious and unnecessary. I thought that putting it all on a shelving, see-through unit may do it, and I did. And it seems like it's working. It's the 'backyard,' a huge belly of information and intentions

and possibilities for the front lawn."

Just off this space is another gallery, which one might call "the robot room." Containing several sculpture pieces that Katzenstein calls "post-human," its major attractions are *Wedding Band*, an ensemble of six robots that play short musical pieces in perfect rhythmic harmony, and *Storm*, a video showing the flow of all the junk that crowds our lives: soda cans, toasters, radios, credit cards, books, bread, alarm clocks, stoves, cameras, shoes, telephones, etc. This seemingly endless flow of detritus sometimes flies away from us, sometimes toward us. At times it swirls around us in a suffocating vortex. The configuration changes throughout the video's six-minute continuous loop.

Katzenstein says these two rooms are "a generous space. I offer a lot here. People come, look at what they want to look at, and take whatever meaning they want from what they see."

ONE OF the things people see is blood – specks of blood on some cards on one of the "Backyard" shelves, and again in two paintings in a corner of the large room. The blood is Katzenstein's.

"I've been doing it for years," he says. "It's marking material. It's DNA material. It's the first thing one stands behind. It's very elegant."

He points toward one of the "blood paintings" and says it is called "Butt Print."

"I dunked my baby into a tray with my blood on it, and I just made a print with his body. Very simple. It looks like a lot of blood, but it wasn't. People often say to me, 'Oh, you must use a lot of your blood,' but I tell them, 'No, not at all.' You know, with 40 or 60 cc of blood, you could write a whole book."

Turning to an adjacent painting of children, he says, "It's a print taken from a photograph of a choir of children on [Independence Day]. I then covered the whole print with dots of my blood, except for those areas where you see movement – a boy touching his shirt, other children touching shirts. They're all hanging on to something."

According to Katzenstein, "this language, the language of movement, is in all of my sculpture pieces. It all has to do with movement. Sometimes I take movements from one world and plant them into a different world, so they have different meanings. They become sort of a hybrid. I am very interested in hybrids. I totally enjoy them, and appreciate the possibilities they offer. Hybrids of all sorts. Even the swastika chair is sort of a hybrid. It's a hybrid of the invitation to sit and what you are actually sitting on. You are sitting on the most horrible symbol of the Euro-American world."

His fascination with hybrids becomes apparent as one notices that both the exhibition catalogue and the explanatory posters on the gallery walls are written in three languages: English, Hebrew and... something else. That "something else" is a coded font that he has developed, based on English, that is a hybrid of what appears to be Arabic, Thai and Hindi scripts and something from Katzenstein's imagination.

"This is a new language," he says, "and it will be my project for the next few years. My first step will be to write music and sing in it."



In the 30-odd films and videos in this exhibition, hybrids abound – mostly blends of human and android, and almost all looking vaguely like Katzenstein. My particular favorite is a video called *Home*, in which androgynous, sightless hybrids walk in synchronized lockstep, acquiring language and accumulating knowledge. A bald hybrid couple are then married under a canopy of wigs, their highly ritualized hand signals completing the ceremony while an androgynous hybrid audience applauds in mechanical synchronicity.

One of Katzenstein's most compelling videos, though, involves not hybrids, but actual human beings marooned on huge pieces of junk in a post-apocalyptic, water-covered world. In this more intelligent version of the 1995 Hollywood film *Waterworld*, we see people cheerily trying to carry on with life as they stand stranded on broken objects left over from what many of them wistfully refer to as "the old days." The film is called *Hope Machines*.

Asked what "hope machines" are, the artist replies simply, "Us. We are hope machines."

"*Backyard*" is showing until August 18 at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 27 Shaul Hamel-ech Boulevard. Visiting hours are Monday, Wednesday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Tuesday and Thursday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.; and Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The museum is closed Sundays. For further information: (03) 607-7020 or www.tamu-seum.org.il.