

CULTURE

The ZAZ10TS arts initiative is helping to get Israeli video art works out to the public.
(Photos: Zdravko Cota)

Flying our video art flag in Times Square

• BARRY DAVIS

The trials and tribulations of the global pandemic just go on and on. And while restrictions are being alleviated, to a greater or lesser degree, in various countries, popping over to Ben-Gurion and jetting over to, say, New York for a much-desired shopping/ lounging around/ jazzy/ entertainment furlough is basically out of the question for a while. Let's face it, given the current situation in the Big Apple, no one really knows how long it will take until flying over to a favorite destination for Israelis becomes a viable option once again.

Even so, Israelis and their creative offerings are still very much present over there. But while our sizeable jazz contingent, like the rest of their professional counterparts, is limited to digital platform-assisted gigs and classes, artists in the visual sector are able to proffer the fruits of their blood, sweat and, no doubt, tears in hot pursuit of their ever-elusive muse.

So, how about a resounding round of – albeit – digital applause for our talented guys and gals who are currently honing their craft at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, or recently completed their education there. A full 20 works, produced by Bezalel students and graduates, have been brightening up a corner of New York's Times Square since just prior to the corona outbreak. Anyone who happens to drive past the famed metropolitan nodal point, or catch a view thereof online, will be able to enjoy a multifarious multifac-

eted polychromic feast for the eyes, as video art of all kinds of ilks and themes burst from the large split screen, imbuing these pretty dark times with some sorely needed color.

THE ONGOING display is the result of a synergy between Tzili Charney and Bezalel's Screen-Based Arts Department, and its head Tami Bernstein. Charney is a well-known New York-based Israeli curator and designer who also runs the ongoing cultural initiative that integrates art into the office building at 10 Times Square in New York City, which goes by the niftily initialized ZAZ10TS. The latter part of the eponymous anagram refers to the address of the prime downtown location.

The video art and experimental cinematic works are also available online, so even New Yorkers who are still unable to get out and about, and the rest of us who can't make over to NYC just now, can view the eye-catching images on the ZAZ Corner digital gallery, which references the physical confluence of Seventh Avenue and 41st Street.

The current project was curated by Charney together with Screen-Based Arts Department video stream head Sharon Balaban, and is designed to keep the artistic continuum in motion, while ensuring culture consumers stay abreast of at least some of the artistic action afoot around the globe.

"While everyone is at home and adjusting to this new way of living, ZAZ10TS has been keeping in close

touch with its art community," the project website notes.

The seed for the ongoing outdoor display, which was originally meant to run through March-April but has been extended indefinitely, as long as the pandemic is around, was sown just before outdoor life ground to a juddering halt.

"I was at an event in New York, of the Friends of Bezalel organization, in January," Balaban explains. "The gallery manager was also there and she told me they were starting to work with all sorts of academic institutions, like Columbia University [in New York], and she asked if our Screen-Based Arts Department at Bezalel could put together a program for the digital gallery."

With hindsight, that turned out to be pretty good pre-lockdown timing.

"If that had occurred a month or so later, this exhibition wouldn't have happened," Balaban laughs. "She told me it was urgent, and she asked me if we could get it together within a week or two."

They do say "haste is from the devil," but in the case of the ZAZ10TS project, there was not a moment to lose. Thus, when New York eventually got around to imposing restrictions on movement, the run out with works by the likes of Bezalel graduates Maya Yavin, Dan. R. Lahiani and Ron Mor, and students Rotem Rotenberg, Aviv Nachshon and Yonatan Swed, was up and streaming across the wrap-around digital billboard at Times Square.

Balaban came back from New York and immediately



sprang into action.

"There were all sorts of considerations to address," she says. "The works had to be visual only, without sound. And there couldn't be any brands featured in the video works."

The site and its urban and commercial milieu also had to be sized up.

"Video artists, in general, are very much aware of the elements of the advertising sector and consumer culture, and make sure their message is conveyed in a striking manner," Balaban continues. "Our students and alumni know all about that, too. They do that well, but in a subversive way. A lot of students relate to that world, but take a very novel approach to it."

That was a thematic baseline for Balaban as she slipped into fourth gear and collated an impressive batch of creations that do the artists and Bezalel proud over at the other end of the Pond.

The Bezalel teacher's job was made a little easier by the fact that she had a decent reserve of talent to draw on.

"There is a lot of work by Israelis out there in the video art domain," she says. "We have a lot of artists very active in the international arena."

The name Sigalit Landau certainly springs to mind in that respect, and the likes of Michal Rovner and next-generation representative Nevet Yitzhak also enjoy high profiles on the global video art circuit.

SO, WHY does Balaban think, like our jazz professionals who do such sterling work all over the show, that Israelis excel at video art? She starts out from a pretty telling macro view statement before homing in on the specifics.

"For me, video is the most interesting medium there is in the artistic domain. It allows the artist a language that connects so powerfully with the present and with the past. There is some kind of freedom, on the one hand and, on the other hand, an intriguing story that poses question marks about reality. Video art has become a very significant medium of expression for the artist to navigate."

That's not a bad overview for anyone looking to get something of a handle on the discipline. The curator also feels there is something intrinsically adventurous and groundbreaking about the way we go about life in general. That, she says, also fuels daring-do on the visual creative front.

"I think, maybe, it has something to do with Israeli chutzpah. Video art is a very overt, exposed, medium and very subversive. Maybe that's the connection."

Creating items for al fresco presentation is a very different proposition compared with exhibitions within the confines of a purpose-designed gallery interior where the lighting is tailored to the works on display, and the hustle and bustle of everyday life is neatly eliminated. That enables the viewer to concentrate on, and imbibe, the artworks.

So when you are putting video art, for example, out on huge digital billboards, on the corner of one of – in normal pandemic-free times – the busiest points in the Western world, there are a lot of peripheral elements that come into the curatorial equation.

"There is something very alive about art out in the public domain," Balaban notes.

If one considers the cross-fertilization relationship between life and art, that plainly stands to reason.

"There is a powerful interface between the [video art] images and the corresponding images of the world of advertising. That is a very interesting correlation. And creating an encounter between art and day-to-day life, away from the controlled interior of the gallery, is also a very powerful thing."

Indeed, if you are going to put the end result of an artist's labors, created in the definitively insular surroundings of the studio, out there on the street, you'd better know what you're on about. There is nothing worse, for any artist, than having their creation

ignored. Even a withering critique is better than no response at all.

"People rush by on their way, wherever, and they don't always have the time or the patience to stop and take in some sculpture or video art, and give it due attention. That's especially true of the intensiveness of Times Square, in normal times."

That was uppermost in Balaban's curatorial mind when she began collating candidates for the ongoing New York gig. She, once again, dips into the marketing industry analogy.

"Advertisements have to have a powerful visual aspect, otherwise they won't grab you and they will have failed in their basic aim. It is the same with video art, especially when it's outside on the street, in the center of a big city like New York."

The artistic discipline in question, Balaban feels, lends itself to a cosmopolitan line of expression. Hence, I wondered whether there was anything defin-

itively Israeli about the Bezalel offerings currently liv-
ening up the New York corner.

"In principle, video art uses a global language. But there are some works that have something very Israeli about them. There is a gorgeous work which shows someone jumping along the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem," she says, referencing *Walls* by fourth-year student Yonatan Swed. "It gives an impression of time, of history but there is also something very much of the here and now."

The Rotenberg contribution, which takes place on an Egged bus, is somewhat Israeli, too, but the majority could have been made by an artist from practically anywhere.

Still, as the corona crisis continues to obdurately work its way out, some of our artists have found a way to keep our artistic flag flying high and proud.

For more information and to view the works:
zaz10ts.com/zaz-corner



WORKS BY Bezalel students and graduates have been brightening up a corner of New York City's Times Square since just prior to the corona outbreak.



THE BIG Apple get an extended opportunity to get a taste of envelope-pushing Israeli video art works.