

ART: ULLMAN'S WATER WORKS

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'Connected Vessels' is on display in Tel Aviv.



Micha Ullman's 'Connected Vessels'. (photo credit:PR)

Micha Ullman is never one to mince his words or, more precisely, the messages he conveys visually through his artwork. For close to half a century, the 77-year-old artist has been pushing envelopes, and emotional and political buttons. His latest exhibition, "Connected Vessels," on display at the Givon Art Gallery in Tel Aviv, oozes with undisguised intent. The first part of the show title is a tried and tested theme in Ullman oeuvre.

The 2009 Israel Prize recipient's past unabashedly political endeavor includes his Messer- Metzger Project when, with the help of youngsters from Kibbutz Metzger and the nearby Arab village of Messer, he excavated pits on the land of both communities and simply switched the sandy-soily content between the two sites.

Borders and interfaces are a constant in all Ullman's works in the current show. But the feisty septuagenarian's delineations are more a matter of going with the flow – literally – than getting out the stakes and barbed wire or electric wiring and making a manmade statement of territorial ownership. Most of the exhibits are watercolors on

paper, measuring 70 cm x 100 cm, and are of a predominantly amorphous abstract nature.

However, each of the paper works has one more or less recognizably shaped objects. They all reference a chair, the chair of the artist's father. In some water colors, you can clearly discern the seating item, while in others the placing of the chair on the paper left only the faintest of impressions.

"Water water everywhere," the oftquoted line from English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's iconic 1798 work *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, would make an apt theme for "Connected Vessels." And it is quite a textural transition for Ullman, from bits of terra firma to liquid which, by definition, is far tougher to work with.

"Some of these works took six months to complete," notes exhibition curator Noemi Givon. "He worked really painstakingly on all of them."

The laborious process involved Ullman's adding layer upon layer of water to the paper substratum, after suitably long interim periods of waiting and drying had elapsed.

"You can see all the places the water reached," Givon observes. "He pours the water, but he also has to control it."

That sounds like something of a contradiction in terms, but the curator says that Ullman gave it his best shot.

"He closely monitored the quantities of water, and here he added water colors to the water," she notes pointing to a nebulous area of one of the paper-based items on the wall. "I don't call these aquarelles. For me they are paintings made using water. He used the color of the aquarelles [water colors] in the water."

In an unintentional nod towards the theme of the sixth annual Biennale for Drawing in Israel, initiated and produced by the Jerusalem Artists House, currently under way in Jerusalem, Givon says that Ullman was looking to test the physical and conceptual limits of paper base.

"Each time Micha poured water onto the paper, he had to wait and to make sure that the last boundary had, indeed, been formed [with the previous pouring]. And, right at the end of the whole long process, he had to make sure that all this did not go beyond the boundaries of the artistic language," she explains.

While the forming of borders tends to infer separation and keeping people apart, there is a clear togetherness element to the exhibition, as befits its title. This comes across in the thematic hub object of the whole show. Tables, for example, are viewed by Ullman as a meeting place, where everyone sits and eats together.

There is plenty of running – actually, almost surreptitiously moving would be a better term – water around in the exhibition's eponymous centerpiece. Ullman took a skeletal iron table and constructed a sort of grid of receptacles – bowls and cups – as well as connecting channels from stark wrought iron. For those well versed in the

intricacies of Jewish mysticism, the placement of the bowls and the connecting iron-grooved slats will surely conjure up an image of The Tree of Life, a central symbol in Kabbala.

“There are lots of levels to this work,” says Givon. “He made this and started pouring water onto it.”

Part of the physical and cognitive interchange in Ullman’s works also includes some surprising tactile connection connotations.

“You know, of course, that pouring water onto iron is disastrous for the metal,” Givon points out. “But Ullman is always looking for the threshold.”

Clearly, the artist has a strong spiritual aspect to his creative ethos, too.

While the central item in the exhibition addresses the upper reaches of spiritual attainment, when you climb up to the upper level of the gallery you see a somewhat comical work that references the other end of the body and the spiritual ladder.

Duplex comprises a symmetrically interconnected complex of pipes, with two toilet bowls and flushing water tanks. Over the years, Ullman has made a habit of addressing of the human bodily equation.

Duplex conveys, in no uncertain, and almost simplistic, terms another common denominator between all living creatures – we all have to offload harmful waste. And by placing the lavatories back to back, Ullman underscores the universally shared bodily function. The artist has brought his domesticity into his work before, including a series of works on paper based on the architectural plans of the duplex building he shares with his neighbors.

“Connected Vessels” is riddled with metaphor, but there are also some pretty basic sentiments in there as well.

The exhibition is on display at the Givon Art Gallery in Tel Aviv. For more information: <http://givonartgallery.com>