

Givon Art Gallery

“Reality surpasses the wildest imagination” (Micha Ullman)

The new works by Micha Ullman, on view at his show at the Givon Gallery, are all related to water in one way or another. This may first seem as an exception to the rule according to which Ullman – at least as he registers in Israel’s cultural memory – is first and foremost an earth and sand artist. But, as should be noted right away, water too had always constituted a key element in his work. No doubt, from his *Messer-Metzer* land work of 1972 to the tens of sculptural pieces he went on to create, where sand is the key substance, and on to his “sand throwings” of recent years – all works are links in the chain of a complex body of work of which the basic constituent remains the grain of sand. That said, it is likewise clear that Ullman had persistently challenged the received notion that links earth to a specific place, to a sense of permanence and rootedness. Over the years it became clearer that Ullman is essentially an artist of the fleeting and the temporary, for whom land is given to displacement and is interchangeable, a metaphor of doubt and uncertainty. The tension between a substance that is blown away with the slightest breath of air and the pursuit of permanence is at the heart of his artistic conception. Land possesses a raw and amorphous fluidity in his work, even when it is arranged into neat shapes. Elusive and runny, Ullman’s sand approximates water.

At times his sand intimates another archetypical fluid, much thicker than water: blood. This is the case with the abovementioned *Messer-Metzer*, where he dug up a small square of land at an Arab village to then bury-plant it at a nearby Israeli kibbutz, as if in a ritual alliance sealed in blood; or yet the puddles of reddish sand covering the floors of the very sites where he performed his “sand throwings,” strewn with the traces of human footsteps and furniture and bringing to mind the gruesome scene of a terrorist attack in the aftermath of bloodshed. Some of his aquarelle drawings also come to mind, where the composition is generated by the dynamics of water coming in contact with grains of sand: Droplets of water sliding across the page, guided by meticulously handled movements of the paper support to define the contours of lines as canals tunneling between heaps of sand.

At other times water is merely water – and, as such, plays a major role. This is the case with his *Water* from 1996–97, a Jerusalem environmental piece. Two iron sewer covers from the city’s municipal water system were impressed with the artist’s handprints, the one installed in East Jerusalem and the other in the city’s Western part. This gesture harbors a lesson: Above the ground we constantly clash with each other and are unable to find a way towards peace while bellow water runs freely and uninterrupted, through one and the same water system that equally services East and West, regardless of divisions of religion and nationality. (In its invocation of the physical principle of “communicating vessels,” this work can be said to prefigure a later work of Ullman’s by that name, on view in his current show.) 1999 gave birth to yet another water-related work of Ullman’s, his *Hochwasser* (“Flooding”), a site-specific sculpture built on a small island in Lower Saxony, Germany, near the Werra River. A few kilometers from the site of the sculpture, on the banks of that same river, stood the childhood home of the artist's father, one of seven siblings who arrived to Palestine by boat in 1933. Ullman cast a small boat with a capacity of seven passengers he found in the vicinity into the land of the island. On rainy days the water rises and the boat disappears underwater for 2–3 weeks, then resurfaces as a sculpture when water subsides. The work brings a typical Ullmanian combination of memory, disappearance, fate, language, private histories and the earthly and cosmic cycles of nature.

In a way, the rusty water that runs through the pipes in his *Communicating Vessels*, the central piece at the current Givon show, can be assimilated to mud; in a previous works of his' Ullman has already accustomed us to the kinship of mud and rust – a reminder, perhaps, of the dialogic nature of his approach to art and life. Ullman creates art from the fundamentals of our existence, from the earth we tread on and the water we drink and which constitutes such so much of our world and our very own bodies. To him there is no reason why this totality should not be broken down to smaller units and particularities with reference to the different categories.

Communicating Vessels consists of a group of interconnected vessels of varying sizes in the shapes of cups and dinner plates. Connected by a series of “canals”, the vessels contain water. The principle of “communicating vessels” states that the surface of a fluid running freely between interconnected vessels always aspires to the same level – a principle that, in the context of Ullman’s work, frames a plethora of possible readings. The system put up by Ullman alludes to a dining table – that it, to the realm of daily routines and activities. At the same time, a dining table connotes a much wider field of meaning, that of the spiritual and emotional affinities that tie together the members of a same household. There is, then, something of a short story that is being unraveled, succinctly and with a simplicity of means, which relays a complexity of interpersonal and emotional states. At the same time, one could pour a different meaning down the pipes of this system of “communicating vessels” and read in it the ethical and political significance of social solidarity, without which no progress is possible. The interconnectivity of the vessels easily lends itself to a metaphor of reciprocation as a fundament of society.

In its overall structure, *Communicating Vessels* recalls diagrams of The Tree of Life as featured in illustrations to the book of Kabbalah. In Kabbalic literature, the very concept of “vessel” carries the meaning of an earthly container inhabited by the spiritual. On the one hand, The Tree of Life symbolizes the different spheres of godly manifestation in the world; but on the other it stands as a representation of the human body as a microcosm of creation, across its capacities of the mind and the intellect, its practical resourcefulness and spirituality. While Ullman clearly isn’t one to bluntly and literally illustrate religious and Kabbalic concepts, seen from the standpoint of the associations made between form, substance and religious and spiritual tenets, such ideas serve him as metaphorical inspiration. Ullman conceives of the world as a dialectical system where all things mutually reference one another. As to the body: Three times a day we sit at the table to consume meals whose times and frequency are dictated to us by the body and its needs. Ullman’s works have always contained references to the human body – and, as a primary reference point, to his own – even when dealing with issues of general historical and existential significance. In many of his works we find clues to bodily cycles and systems such as the blood stream and the respiratory cycle, or yet to organs such as the mouth, the womb and the orifices – organs that, for Ullman, provide the individual an outlet with which to connect to the surrounding world. In a work modeled on a dining table, clues to the digestive system are almost self-evident. And as to the cosmos: On this table, meal times are governed by celestial bodies and cosmic systems. The very principle of communicating vessels applies to every drop of water in the work with respect to their distance from the core of the planet. As with many of Ullman’s works, an overall physical-cosmic context builds up to become part of the work’s contents.

A second sculptural work in the show, titled *Duplex*, bases itself on the dual image of two identical toilets.¹ Installed back-to-back from the opposite sides of a single wall, water tank against water tank, this is yet another system based on the principle of communicating vessels.

While Ullman's table piece deals with the upper regions of social and familiar relationships, with the would-be elevated category of speech organs, language, interpersonal communication and the digestive system in its upper and cleaner end, *Duplex* is rather about the nether regions, the evacuation orifices through which the body's harmful waste is disposed of; it is rather about excretion and the abject, and as such, it is rooted in shit. For Ullman, who is notoriously fond of imagery that holds both ends of an equation, there never is, nor ever was, any kind of moral hierarchy between the different bodily orifices.

Duplex is among Ullman's works that draws directly on his personal experience and focus on his family home. In recent years he produced a series of works on paper based on the architectural plans of the duplex that he shares with a neighboring family. As is typical of two-family homes, the toilets of the two living units are located on opposite sides of a "separation wall" – a situation that creates something of a forced physical intimacy, and which served Ullman as his inspiration here. If we were to seek of an allegorical meaning to this work, it would be lodged in a simple equation: Any failure in the neighbor's sewage system directly effects your own. Can we draw any political implications from this in a reality where two peoples share a same land? It can hardly be otherwise. Recently, Ullman was charmed by a reply given by Israeli painter Nachum Gutman in an interview. Asked whether his paintings might contain a political dimension of some sort, he said "maybe," then added, "furtively."

In a second body of works on view at the show, a series of drawings on paper, water had played a crucial part in the execution. The drawings open up a world of hallucinatory shapes to the viewer, both mysterious and enigmatic, which triggers the same 'ontological desire' discussed by Roland Barthes in his attempt to describe the force that compelled him to try and understand what is it, precisely, that we see when we look at an ordinary photograph. I would suggest reading these drawings like short detective stories, their unidentified shapes presenting a mystery to the viewer that ought to be solved, and that the artist, in turn, seeks to expose. In reading these drawings we therefore reconstruct in our mind's eye the steps that were taken to realize them – in a way, we are pulling a thread to untie the bundle. This reading would reveal that each drawing began with an object, a cup or a chair placed on a sheet lying in a bed of low water: They are at the origin of the ghostly images that formed on the paper, before being removed and the paper left to dry. Like a fortune teller reading residue signs at the bottom of a coffee cup, such a reading indicates that one cup contained a dark fluid that spilled over the water-soaked paper; that another was rolled across it; and that a third was left to stand still; also it tells us of a wooden chair that was once laid sideways, and, in another drawing, on its back. Both the paper and the water it was soaked in played a part in creating the ensuing images: Fragments of color and matter emanating from the "flesh" of the objects were mixed with the fluids that likewise participated in the game, pervading the veins of the paper that accommodated them to be sucked in and driven in its hidden tunnels, lengthwise, deep and across, until finally settling in and becoming part of it. This menagerie of matter and water particles, of physical forces such as fusion and gravity, had all yielded to the basic rules of the game as laid out by the artist – "All I do is set a few rules according to which the forms behave and take shape," says Ullman – to make these fantastical landscapes emerge on the paper, as if voluntarily and somewhat unexpectedly, through a process that took days and weeks to complete.

The mysteries of detective stories have to do to a large degree with human dealings and relationships. If we keep to the method of interpretation as suggested above we could try and speculate how the cup was removed and where to; what was it that caused the fluid to spill and taint the white of the paper; or yet, why does the ghostly image of an empty chair knocked on its back give such feelings of solitude, loss and futile expectation?

Another outdoor sculpture created by Ullman in Germany, a table-like stone-board sunk into the ground, its legs hidden and only the upper board showing as would a gravestone, can signal a direction for interpreting the table of *Communicating Vessels* discussed above and the drawings I'm describing here: "In *Mahlzeit* ('Dinner'), created at a Christian cemetery in Stuttgart, rounded shapes the size of cups and dinner plates seem to circulate in the confines of the bright rectangular shape. Only one of the cups is open at its bottom, all the way down to the dark cavity that Ullman dug underneath his piece: A black hole on the backdrop of a 'dinner table' and of the white rectangle of the 'gravestone,' which, in Ullman's formal vocabulary, represent life and death. The cyclicity of life is represented by the rain 'pouring' into the low vessels, which fill up and dry in alternation [...] The image of dark fluids brings to mind the daily routine of the poet's in Paul Celan's *Death Fugue*, whose repetition, precisely, gives rise to the powerful image of black milk: 'Black milk of morning we drink you at dusktime / we drink you at noontime and dawntime we drink you at night.' The set table is simultaneously empty and full, abandoned and inviting, on the verge of disappearance yet present." In a haiku of his' Ullman writes the following: "Four legs / Two cups / Half empty on top / Could also be bellow / Where I consume myself / Would someone pass the water please".ⁱⁱ Exploring the poetical and imaginary dimension of spaces and elements, French thinker and phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard saw in water an "inspiration for a reverie", pointing to the deep-seated associations in culture and in the human imagination between water, despair, melancholy and death.ⁱⁱⁱ It is the stream of water, he reminds us, that cradles Ophelia's drowned body, and likewise water on which Charon, in Greek mythology, ferries the souls of the newly departed on their journey to the underworld. Here is yet another facet to help us construe the dark undertones of Ullman's emotionally-charged landscapes in this series of drawings-gravestones.

The images form in a way much like photograms, a technique where objects are placed on photosensitive paper which is then exposed to light, thus imprinting the paper with their contours: A "revelation" of sorts that, in their ties to the photographic medium, recalls a number of Ullman's works; in particular, his "sand throwings," where people and objects were poured over with sand to leave a trace that remained when they themselves were no longer present.

Ullman likes to refer to himself as a photographer, saying he aspires to faithfully manifest reality across the breadth of its meanings, whether hidden or manifest; that he sees himself as a figurative artist in that he honors the tangible. (He says that "reality surpasses the wildest imagination.") Reality impressed itself onto these drawings the same way it is captured in photographs: It relegated itself onto the paper, etched itself on it. Hence it appears not as imaginary figment, nor as symbol, not even as inspiration. It is simply there, buried in the crust of the paper of which it became an integral part, like sweat stains locked into a fabric; like the oozing face of the Christ that impressed itself, as tradition goes, onto the Shroud of Turin, or to Saint Veronica's veil. Reality seals itself onto the paper, it adheres to it inseparably and is carried within it, wherever it goes. The image is no longer a cipher, a code or a language, it is the breath of the thing's very essence as *it* is or once *was*. The image is not recollection but trace. It is relic. Or, to use judicial terminology as befits a detective story: It is testimony or evidence.

The progress of time is registered into Ullman's drawings. The event imprints itself in a process not unlike early photography, where due to the extended exposure times needed a whole range of movement would be recorded on the photographic plate, resulting in the impression of ghostly apparitions. Such photographs harbor a past in them, a present, and to an extent even a future, too. We look at a drawing of Ullman's like at the phantom apparition of a theatrical presentation from the past and are reminded of Barthes in his assertion that a photograph is a *spectacle* – a word not far removed from *specter*, that is, a ghost. Yet unlike the photographic process, Ullman's drawings do not instill the sense of gloom that often follows the

disappearance – for good – of an object that divested itself from real life before leaving its imprint. These are not drawings of grief. They are devoid of tragedy. That which was *there*, before our gaze rested upon it, was wholly staged, an event that came about as the artist had willed it; a work of art. And indeed, looking at the drawings, at the edge of the arc of our gaze is a man. And not just any man but the artist himself. These are self-portraits. The event we witness took place in his studio, in his private realm of creativity, in his alchemist's lab. The cup is a representation of him, as is the chair. The man at the edge of the arc of our gaze does things purposefully, with a maker's intent, and it is this intention that keeps the deed within the limits of art's protective bubble – the one that, for us as viewers, keeps it away from oblivion, and us from sorrow.

Those wondrous drawings of Ullman's are fields of meaning that carry the tension between water as an element of oblivion and the final palpitations of reality's remains. One might argue that this forgetting amounts to void and effacement, that it erodes and annihilates memory, as Plato would have it; but one can say, conversely, with Nietzsche and others, that it is a vital and necessary resource. To me it seems that Ullman belongs rather with the latter – he, who in one of his talks spoke of “the virtues of plaster”. It is thus that the landscapes of the drawings, just like the changing of patterns in the encounter of sand and water on a beach, manifest the outcomes of a dialogue of equals between memory and forgetting.

As always with Ullman, dialogue remains an inseparable part of his ideas and work. His work distinguishes itself by the connections it makes between disparate systems of time and space. Each of his works is rooted in the extended epochs of natural, astronomical and physical phenomena, just as it deals with the intermediate time periods of ethics and human values, and, just as much, with the shorter scale of history and current political events. This is how the vast expenses of the universe are introduced into his works, to become part of their thematics, along with the private realms of the house and the family, the body and the soul. All those divergent scales and temporalities converge and accrue in each of his artistic products, inhabiting them to channel a myriad of possible, and sometimes paradoxical, meanings.

In this context, I cannot but recall André Breton's own *Communicating Vessels* (1932),^{iv} where the founder of surrealism ties poetical associations between the realm of dream and fantasy and that of concrete reality, seeking to prove that all things are interconnected.

Yigal Zalmona, 2016

ⁱ One could draw a thread of different contexts between Marcel Duchamps's *Fountain* and the long chain of toilet occurrences in art, but I don't see this possibility as particularly fertile in this current discussion.

ⁱⁱ Steinberg, Ronit, “Glasses and the Tables,” in: Yigal Zalmona (ed.), *Sands of Time: Micha Ullman's Work*, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2011, p. 425.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bachelard, Gaston, *l'Eau et les Rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, 1942.

^{iv} Breton, André, *Les Vases Communicants*.