KIBBUTZ YAD MORDEKHAI

Art and the Kibbutz

Rachel Dvir founded the Dana Art Gallery at Kibbutz Yad Mordekhai in memory of her daughter Dana, adding a new layer to both the commemorative sites at Yad Mordekhai and the Israeli art scene.

> by Heidi J. Gleit



When Dana Dvir died of cystic fibrosis at the age of 27, her mother Rachel sought a way to commemorate her. Rachel Dvir had raised her daughter at Kibbutz Yad Mordekhai, which is home to more than a few significant memorial sites (see box on page 68), so she had a variety of models nearby to serve as inspiration. Recalling her studies at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design and how her daughter had shared her love of art, she decided to create an art gallery in her daughter's memory.

Though the Israeli art scene is based mainly in Tel Aviv today, culture has been central to kibbutzim throughout their history, prompting them to devote resources to art and artists over the years. In this case, Kibbutz Yad Mordekhai contributed a building and Dvir established a nonprofit organization to raise funds to renovate the building and provide ongoing support for the initiative. In recent years, the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sport as well as Mifal Hapayis, the Israeli national lottery, also have provided assistance.

The Dana Art Gallery opened its doors in 2007, after renovations transformed the building into a modern display space that is more similar to a Tel Aviv art gallery than a kibbutz workshop. No signs remain in the small, one-story building of the kibbutz bakery it was constructed to house in 1945 or of the tailor's workshop it later became. The tailors now work from one of the adjacent buildings and the bakery's oven is on display nearby in the kibbutz memorabilia collection. The gallery, which is open on Tuesday and Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., is located midway between the memorabilia collection and the tourism center of the kibbutz's legendary honey factory, just down the hill from the From Holocaust to Revival Museum.

"The Dana Art Gallery is a non-commercial contemporary art gallery that hosts site-specific exhibitions that aim to foster dialogue with different aspects of Kibbutz Yad Mordekhai and the surrounding area," explains Ravit Harari, who has been the gallery's curator since 2009. "I pay attention to what is happening at the kibbutz and invite artists to create exhibitions that relate to this. Artist Hila Amram collaborated with the person responsible for all of the kibbutz's beehives on the current exhibition; previous exhibitions dealt with the kibbutz's memorial sites and architecture, memory, the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, the desert, and southern Israel.

"We also try to cooperate with other cultural institutions in the south. For example, we are participating in Desert Spirit, which will feature a series of exhibitions on various aspects of the desert at venues throughout the south from February to April 2014," she adds.



Until her death in January, Dvir worked closely with Harari and the artists on each exhibition at the gallery, offering assistance and guidance along with artistic freedom.

Artist Dana Yoeli recalls how supportive Dvir was of her throughout the whole process of creating her exhibition, "Automaton," for the gallery.

"Rachel came to visit me in my studio when I was first starting to formulate the idea for the exhibition. She is an amazing woman – so energetic and intelligent, especially her emotional intelligence, and positive, willing to help, and open," Yoeli recalls. "She established this gallery with love and thanks to the love that surrounded her. It was a privilege to work with her and I'm sorry that she is no longer with us."

Photographs courtesy of the Dana Art Gallery

Above and facing page: Hila Amram's exhibition is on display at the gallery until mid-September.

Previous page: Shahar Marcus' exhibition, "The Memorial Laborer," sparked much discussion on the kibbutz.







Above:
Assaf Shoshan's exhibition, "Territories of Waiting," featured photos and his 2007 video, "Unknown Village."

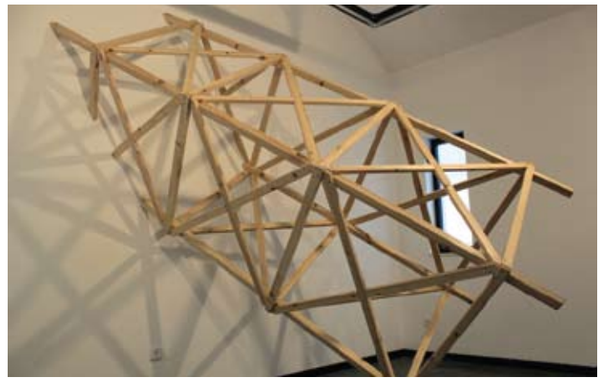
The exhibitions have been attracting attention not only among Yad Mordekhai's 229 members and 200 residents and residents of nearby towns, but also in the Israeli art scene. They feature the work of young Israeli artists on the rise, some of whom, but far from all, have ties to a kibbutz or southern Israel. Most of them rarely venture outside of Tel Aviv and find leaving their regular environment to respond to the world of the kibbutz and its issues a refreshing challenge, Harari notes.

Since the gallery's building previously was a tailor's workshop and Yad Mordekhai has so many memorial sites, one of the first exhibitions Harari curated there explored the connection between the act of sewing and the act of commemorating. Titled "Seam Line," it featured works by 10 Israeli artists that provoked thoughts about a variety of issues simmering in Israel, such as commemoration, borders, militarism, and globalization, from the unexpected angle of sewing.

This was followed by a series of solo exhibitions and a group exhibition in which contemporary artists responded to works by Yitshak Danziger (1916-1977), who greatly influenced Israeli art in its formative years. In one solo exhibition, titled, "The Memorial Laborer," artist Shahar Marcus made cardboard cutouts of himself dressed as a soldier from World War II, set them up at the kibbutz's commemorative sites, and photographed them. Two video works that he filmed at some of these sites completed the exhibition. As expected, "The Memorial Laborer" generated much discussion at the kibbutz. Marcus' work was amusing, but he was not laughing at the commemorative efforts, but questioning the ethos of memory and commemoration. His exhibition was an exploration of the hero and the antihero, the idea that heroic figures lose depth when they become symbols, and the less heroic aspects of commemoration, such as maintaining monuments. A few months later, Yoeli's exhibition addressed the architecture of commemoration as well as brutalism, an architectural style that was widespread from the mid-1950 to the 1970s in Israel in general and on kibbutzim in particular. Yoeli, who grew up and works in the urban settings of Tel Aviv and Rehovot, recalls that when she first visited Yad Mordekhai, she was particularly impressed with its architecture. While "Automaton" built on her previous exhibition in Tel Aviv, she drew the physical outline for it from the building created for Yad Mordekhai's From Holocaust to Revival Museum, which is frequently cited as an example of brutalism. Architect Arieh Sharon designed the building in 1968 with his son Eldar and received Israel's prestigious Rechter Prize for its unique design. They did not use 90 degree angles in the building and the result is a series of unconventional spaces instead of rectangular rooms. Over the years, the interior has been changed to accommodate the displays, but the exterior remains untouched.









Subsequent exhibitions at the gallery featured the work of artists Orly Sever, who grew up at Kibbutz Kabri; Lihi Chen, who attended a kibbutz high school; Assaf Shoshan, who grew up in southern Israel and now lives in Paris; and Shirley Wegner, who grew up in Israel and lives in New York. Though Shoshan and Wegner chose to live outside Israel, their work focuses on Israeli identity, among other issues, as if the distance from their homeland enhances their perspective.

The current exhibition, "Colony Collapse Disorder," which will be on display at the gallery until mid-September, was inspired by the epidemic that has been wiping out colonies of bees. Dvir introduced Amram, whose art relates to ecology and nature, to Eitan Zion, who she had grown up with at the kibbutz and now oversees all of the kibbutz's beehives.

"He invited me to visit the hives and I learned something each time – about the bees' lives and the amazing things they do," Amram recalls.

She also learned that life in a beehive is very orderly. Amram decided to disrupt this order by putting various household objects into the hives. The bees ignored a few objects, mainly balls and other round items, but integrated most of the other objects into their world, building honeycombs on them and even starting to store honey in them. In the process, the bees created thought-provoking connections between some of the disparate objects Amram had chosen to put in their hives. The result is a series of intriguing works that explore the interface of nature and culture while raising questions about materialism, home, and transition – all issues that Yad Mordekhai members are grappling with as the kibbutz continues to evolve. ■

Above:
The Dana Art Gallery has hosted exhibitions by Dana Yoeli (top left), Orly Sever and Lihi Chen (top right), and Shirley Wegner (bottom).

Visiting Yad Mordekhai

Kibbutz Yad Mordekhai not only has an interesting history, but also has a variety of tourism attractions that tell its story. That combined with its location – just off Route 4 eight kilometers south of the seaside city of Ashkelon and about an hour's drive from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem – make it a good choice for a daytrip for visitors of all ages. Plan to spend at least half a day to see everything. Arrangements can be made for groups to tour all of the attractions, as well as the kibbutz facilities (including the cowsheds), in a wagon. Tours can be given in English or Hebrew and guests are welcome to have lunch in the kibbutz dining room (lunch is served until 1:15 p.m. and groups must make reservations in advance). The kibbutz also can host seminars on a variety of topics for up to 500 participants. All the attractions are open on Saturday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. as well as by appointment at other times. Some also are open on additional days, as noted below. More information can be found on its website, www.ym-tayarut.co.il (Hebrew only), or by phoning (08) 672-0559.



(Photography: Heidi J. Gleit)

Honey Factory Tourism Center

A handful of pioneers settled at a temporary site near Netanya in 1936 and began to prepare to establish Kibbutz Yad Mordekhai. This included learning how to raise honey bees. By the time they received a plot of land near Ashkelon seven years later, they had mastered the art of cultivating honey. Today Yad Mordekhai is famous throughout Israel for its honey. The tourism center offers activities for children of all ages as well as adults. A visit can include a guided tour of the center's displays on honey and bees, a honey tasting, a peek inside a beehive, and making candles from beeswax.



From Holocaust to Revival Museum

Originally conceived as a memorial to the kibbutz members and Palmah fighters who lost their lives defending Yad Mordekhai in the War of Independence in 1948, the From Holocaust to Revival Museum has developed into an institution that does that and much more, explains Linda Casher, a kibbutz member who is originally from Baltimore, Maryland, and is a docent at the museum. It is a memorial to the six million Jews who died in the Holocaust, all those who stood up to the Nazi regime, and all those who fought for Israel's independence. It also pays tribute to the rich Jewish culture that existed in Europe before the Holocaust, showing what life was like in the Warsaw Ghetto, and tells about the kibbutz's early years. The kibbutz is named after Mordecai Anielewicz, who led the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

It was important to poet and Jewish resistance fighter Abba Kovner, who was involved in designing the museum, to draw a parallel between the courage displayed by the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto and by the defenders of the kibbutz. This is accomplished via exhibitions featuring photographs, weapons, objects, huge maps, and a variety of detailed models, including a life-sized model of the bunker at Mila 18 that was the headquarters of the resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto.

One window looks out on the cemetery for the fallen from the War of Independence and the museum's memorial hall contains photographs of all the kibbutz members who lost their lives in Israel's wars or in terror attacks, including the father of Dana Art Gallery founder Rachel Dvir. The museum is open on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.



Water Tower and Mordecai Anielewicz Sculpture

Throughout the War of Independence, the kibbutz's water tower was targeted repeatedly. Despite the damage it sustained, it remained standing on the hilltop throughout the war, serving as a source of inspiration to those defending Yad Mordekhai. A few months after the war ended, the water tower collapsed and a debate ensued over whether to rebuild it due to its symbolic status or clear it away. Before a decision was reached, artist Nathan Rapoport was commissioned to create a commemorative sculpture of Mordecai Anielewicz for the kibbutz. Upon visiting the kibbutz, Rapoport not only abandoned his original design (a model of it is on display at the From Holocaust to Revival Museum), but also decided to build his statue next to the fallen water tower and create a dialogue of sorts between them. The sculpture was completed in 1951.

Battlefield Reconstruction

One of the more critical battles in the War of Independence was fought at Yad Mordekhai in May 1948. Strategically located on the southern coastal plain, the kibbutz interfered with the Egyptian Army's advance northward. In 1965, a life-sized reconstruction of the battlefield, complete with tanks, weapons, bunkers, and models of soldiers,



opened as a memorial site. The hilltop observations point enables visitors to look down on the battlefield and obtain a sense of what the battle was like. Visitors also can climb on tanks and peer into the bunkers. It is open daily from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.



Kibbutz Memorabilia Collection

Like at many kibbutzim, Yad Mordekhai members bring items they no longer need, from old kitchenware and defunct tools to furniture and decorations, to the children's house for the children to play with and learn from. Not everything is suitable or useful, but nursery school teacher Anat Rais accepted everything anyway for years. It was important to her to preserve Yad Mordekhai's past, especially since the kibbutz, which is affiliated with the Hashomer Haza'ir movement, has been changing drastically. Yad Mordekhai was privatized in 2006 and adopted a differential pay scale in 2008. Rais' collection grew over the years and today is displayed in a large building with sections showing each part of the kibbutz, from the communal shower to the kitchen to the children's house. Educational activities about kibbutz life can be held here. ■

H.J.G.