

- Published 03:52 24.02.11
- Latest update 03:52 24.02.11

The jeweler became an artist

Shirly Bar-Amotz is getting recognition for her cutting edge jewelry, most notably with her recent Andy Prize win, but many still see what she does as the creation of fashion accessories and not art

By [Yuval Saar](#)

When Benny Bronstein begins to teach first-year Jewelry and Fashion students of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design along with jeweler Shirly Bar-Amotz, he introduces her by saying: "This is Shirly Bar-Amotz; she was my student, a really crappy one. She nearly failed my course."

Bar-Amotz recounts the time with a smile.

"I wasn't a great student," she says. "As a kibbutz member who had moved to the big city, I would leave my home in the center of town, walk on King George Street to the bus, and sometimes the city would wink at me and I'd cut class, reaching Bezalel in the afternoon, but staying until midnight. The sense of excitement, of setting out from my doorstep into the crowd where no one knew me, was magical."

She points to her time as a student as a significant time in her life.

"Four years of classes and research, not in order to reach a final goal, but to get feedback on what you're really doing," she says. "It created a basis for all my work afterwards."

Bar-Amotz was born in 1974 on Kibbutz Ma'abarot, where she still lives and where her studio is located, on the first floor of the building which formerly housed the first children's house on the kibbutz: a Bauhaus structure from the 1930s which looks out on the surrounding fields.

On the first floor, kibbutz members' clothing is still ironed and folded.

The phone or the baby

Since she finished her degree at Bezalel, Bar-Amotz has met with success and international recognition. Her work is displayed in museums and galleries in Israel and abroad, and last month

she was awarded the prestigious 2012 Andy Prize for Decorative Art, established by Charles Bronfman and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The award carries a NIS 50,000 prize, an exhibit at the museum next year and the purchase of two works for the permanent collections at the Tel Aviv Museum and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

The announcement of the prize caught Bar-Amotz while she was on maternity leave. "I'm holding a four-month-old baby in my arms, sitting on my parents' sofa, my mother next to me, and the baby had just woken up," Bar Amotz recalls the unexpected telephone call. "There's a call and I can see it's from abroad, so I say 'okay, I'll see who it is.' I answer, Charles Bronfman is on the line, the baby's just woken up and is starting to cry, and my mother asks me why I'm talking on the telephone: 'You never do that when she wakes up.' My mother takes the baby and all I can say on the telephone is 'I don't believe it, I don't believe it.' I told him I was sorry but my entire English vocabulary escaped me at that moment. It was really amazing, and very unexpected."

Though Bar-Amotz applied for the prize, she says it had completely left her mind.

"I didn't think that I had to get it because I deserved it, I simply hoped the moment would come, and I am of course very glad that it's happening now," she says. "It is a huge reinforcement to get while on maternity leave, in the middle of the emotional storm of first motherhood, the totality of raising an infant, exactly the time when I began to miss working."

The panel of judges for the Andy prize noted the balance between narrative elements and the quality of materials in Bar-Amotz's work, a sophisticated use of what might be termed "highbrow" materials (gold and precious stones) and lowbrow ones (a telephone), her meticulous treatment of them along with an openness, freshness and lightness. According to the judges, "Bar-Amotz's works transmit a poetic feeling, narrative fragments that stretch an expanse of dialogue and imagination before the viewer."

Einat Leader, the head of the Bezalel jewelry and fashion department, says that Bar-Amotz's work represents what she terms "free craft" in work methods, choice of materials, technical composition and the way she expresses ideas.

"While her technique is rooted in the history of fields such as enameling, surface work and the setting of gemstones, at the same time it has its own rules, which are open and liberating," Leader says. "Her jewelry creates surrealistic reliefs of romantic figures, which soften a difficult reality. In her recent works she has created slices of nature containing various animals, which are apparently superficial, flattened and powerless, but which take on an almost magical aura due to their composition, their materials and sparkling coatings, such as gold leaves or precious stones."

Bar-Amotz says the inclusion of animals is nothing new.

"These are animals from 'there' and not 'here': a swan, rabbit, hippopotamus, rhinoceros, a camel that turns into a deer, a tiger, the king of the jungle from European fairy tales which arrived here and became something new: something local, Israeli, with a longing for European fantasy, for memory. It takes me back to my childhood memories: my parents were Israeli emissaries in

France and Belgium in the 1970s and 1980s. I was young, but I have a lot of memories from this period: a memory of the sky and the scent of the air, which was very strong. What I'm trying to do in my last series of works is to join memories of there to the place where I live, to bury the figure inside the material, in the earth."

She says she would not describe the work as particularly Israeli, though.

"It is not foreign to what is happening in the world of jewelry making abroad. Perhaps it contends with questions of Israeliness and localness, with questions of local identity."

Adding dimensions

"To go back to my first year at Bezalel, it was very difficult for me, mainly from the point of view of technique," she says. "I had studied printing before university, and images were a big deal for me. At Bezalel I attended print workshops from morning until night. I wanted to bring images into jewelry, and I knew that's what I had to do, that it would be my justification for making jewelry. Images excited me and it was difficult for me with jewelry; when I could combine them the work turned into a narrative. Depth, dreams and fantasies - everything I wanted to express - entered into the piece of jewelry."

Bar-Amotz says her technique has advanced since making the transition.

"I try to break out of the two-dimensional boundaries of the image," she says. "To transfer an image from paper to metal was my first big leap. The second was to succeed into producing a raised surface in metal, and the third was to achieve three-dimensional volume. If there is something that makes me happy today and causes me to continue to work all the time, it is the fact that I managed to break out of the two-dimensional image. And so it also made me glad that the Andy Prize judges commented on this in their remarks, because from my point of view that's exactly the place where I am."

The awarding of the Andy Prize to Bar-Amotz testifies not only to her extraordinary personal achievements, but also to the existence of a contemporary jewelry scene in Israel, even if it is not particularly large and does not receive sufficient media coverage. One example is the group of nine jewelers (including Bar-Amotz) started two years ago by Prof. Deganit Stern Schocken, called Inyanim, offering a model that allows its members to combine commercial design work with their art. In April they will exhibit at Complete, a new contemporary jewelry gallery on Abarbanel Street in Tel Aviv.

Bar-Amotz is aware of the gulf between the recognition embodied in the prize and the amount of broader public acceptance of contemporary jewelry.

"There is a gap between winning a prize and feeling that you've won a prize," she says. "It hasn't turned my world upside down, but I am working all the time. To produce for an exhibit at the Tel Aviv Museum is great fun and also a good bit of work. Nearly everything I had in my studio was sold because of prizes and fellowships, but perhaps this is also the advantage in living on a kibbutz. I am active in the Tel Aviv scene but at the end of the day I go home to the kibbutz. I

am here and there at the same time. I won't really feel it until there isn't a museum opening, until the pieces aren't on exhibition. The prize is an incentive but I don't think about it all the time. In Israel, the contemporary jewelry scene isn't that big and that's a pity."

She guesses that jewelry in Israel, rather than being considered art, is stuck as a decoration, a piece of fashion, to the Israeli consumer.

"There is a part of the public that buys jewelry for bar mitzvahs, weddings and all kinds of events. But exactly because it buys this jewelry, the image of jewelry is captive to conventions about what jewelry is. As a student it was hard for me to say that I was studying in the jewelry department, because that meant I made jewelry. Today I no longer have a problem with this, because I know what I'm doing."

She imagines that students still face the same dilemma that she had over whether they are creating fashion accessories or art. Jewelry, she says, is like a sculpture you can't help but want to touch and take with you.

"You want to covet it, to hold it in your hand, turn it over, feel its weight, its substance," she says. "You haven't got this with sculpture. A sculpture exists in a certain place. Jewelry can be taken everywhere; it is in essence something you wear - you make a statement about who you are. Someone once said to me that not everyone can buy every piece of jewelry. When collectors buy statues they put them in their collection, at home or in storage. When they buy jewelry and have to or want to put it on, they are making a statement."

Though the Jerusalem International Book Fair continues through tomorrow morning, it's possible that last night marked the festival's climax, as two literary titans - A.B. Yehoshua and Umberto Eco - met and put on a performance for an enthusiastic, overflowing crowd. Even 20 minutes before the event's scheduled start, fans were being turned away, and the air had that electrified sense of anticipation that precedes historical events.

History was certainly something that infused the entire hour-long conversation between the Italian novelist and his Israeli interviewer, as Yehoshua acknowledged that "The Name of the Rose," Eco's 1980 murder mystery set in a 14th-century Italian monastery, inspired him to write his 1997 historical novel "A Journey to the End of the Millennium," set in Paris in the 10th century.

"When you deal with a character in the Middle Ages, someone who doesn't know many things that you know, how do you attribute ideas to him?" Yehoshua asked his guest.

Eco responded that, as a scholar, "I have lived in the Middle Ages all my life, I did my doctoral thesis about them. I'm sure I can reason like a Medieval person."

But he's also careful about attributing ideas to his characters that won't be anachronistic to the period about which he's writing. "In my last novel," Eco added, "I worked hard to learn the recipes of Paris restaurants in the 19th century. I wanted to be correct, almost hysterically so."

That novel, "The Cemetery of Prague," which came out in Italy last year, but has not yet been published in English or Hebrew, concerns itself with the virulent strain of anti-Semitism that infected Europe toward the end of the 19th century. All of its characters are historical, aside from the central, fictional protagonist Simonini - to whom Eco attributes writing "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion."

Yehoshua asked Eco what it was like, during the five years he worked on the novel, "to be living with a very dangerous anti-Semite."

Simonini, he said, is a "miserable rascal" and "I did my best in making him repugnant." After he finished, "I wondered how a book with such a disgusting character could please the readers." The book, in fact, has been a runaway best-seller in a number of countries.

Asked by Yehoshua to speculate on the "root" of what has been called the "oldest hatred," Eco said it was "a great mystery," but that his "flat, stupid answer" is what one of his characters says in the book: the human need to feel hatred.

"People always choose someone living among them," said Eco, and "you" - the Jews - "have been living with everyone."