

Ready for the World Market

Israeli decorative arts come of age.

By Bobbie Leigh

For Israeli craft artists, persuading a gallery like Heller in New York or R. Duane Reed in St. Louis and New York to represent them is the equivalent of garnering three stars from Michelin for restaurants. Now, add to this the distinction of having their works, as relatively unknown artists, featured at Collect, last January's international fair devoted to the decorative arts at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

Yet some 18 artists, living and working in Israel, are gaining considerable acclaim internationally after first exhibiting at SOFA Chicago (the International Exposition of Sculpture Objects & Functional Art) in 2003 and 2004. Since this debut, their works have appeared in major galleries, museums and international art fairs. A third group of artists working in glass, ceramics, fiber and jewelry will be at the now-familiar Association of Israel's Decorative Arts (AIDA) Booth One at SOFA Chicago 2005 (October 28–30).

Until that first SOFA show, Israeli craft artists had a low profile in their own country as so few galleries there show decorative arts. Here, they were for the most part totally unknown, although



their work, as gallery owner R. Duane Reed says, was new, imaginative and of the same high quality he seeks for his clients.

It was this same respect and admiration for quality, provocative ideas, mastery of materials and exotically beautiful surfaces and forms that captivated Dale and Doug Anderson, and Andy and Charles Bronfman. Both couples, serious decorative arts collectors, along with a group of benefactors formed AIDA, whose purpose is to assist in the development and awareness of Israel's decorative artists. AIDA also sponsors exchanges and residencies at the Watershed Center for Ceramic Arts in Newcastle, Maine, among other institutions.

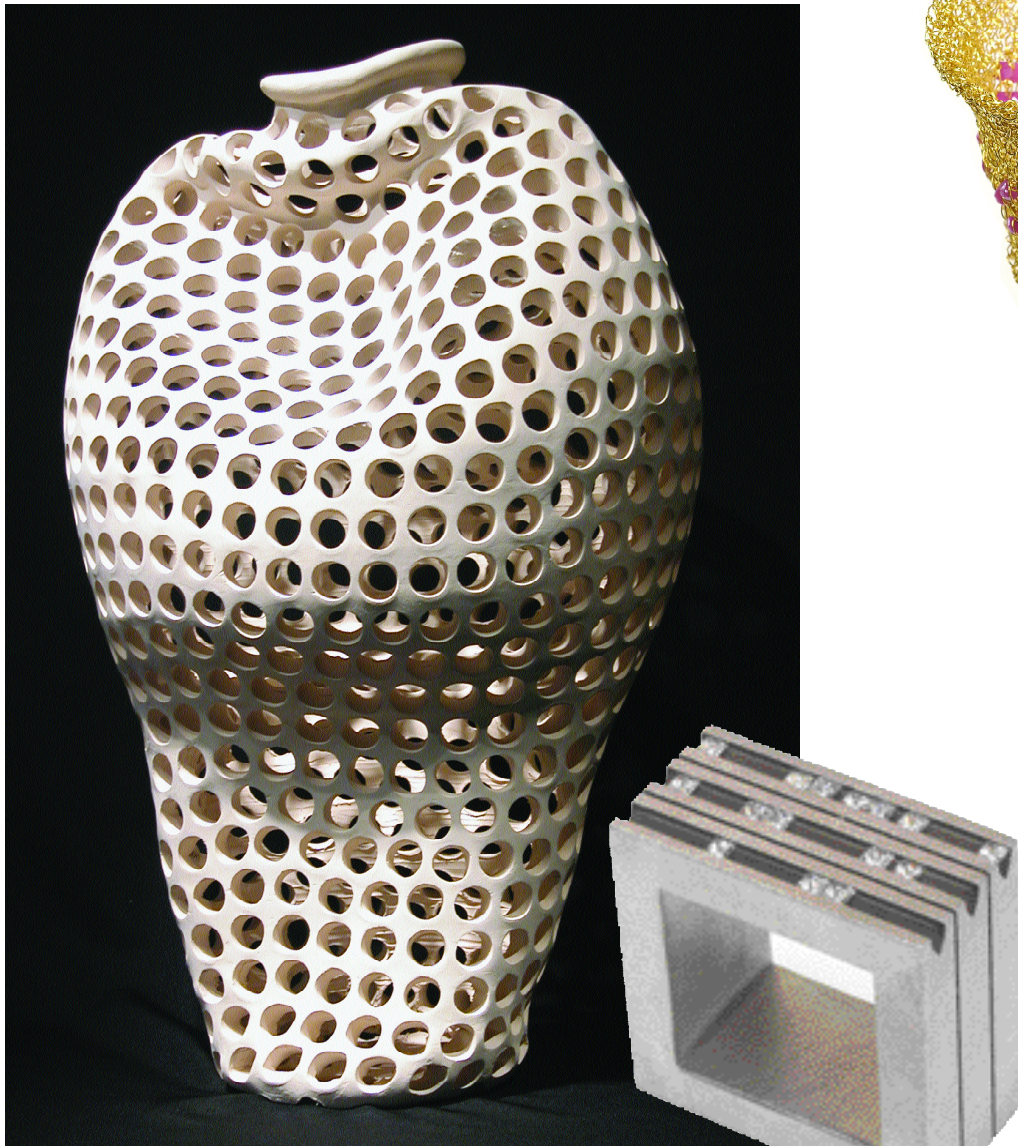
All of the artists participating in AIDA's programs have been selected by a rigorous jury process and vetted by a select group of curators and museum advisers. Their criteria ranges from incredible workmanship to technical sophistication. "We get hundreds of submissions, but our selection is comparatively small," explains Dale Anderson. "We look for refreshing ideas, beautiful execution and above all, artists expert at revealing the special potential

Dafna Kaffeman, "Tactual Stimulation," 2005, flame-worked glass and silicon. Yehudit Katz, "Cornucopia" (left), 2004, galvanized iron threads, copper and linen.

and character of their material."

Glass artist Dafna Kaffeman, who has had a successful solo show at Heller Gallery, fits Anderson's description. "She creates pieces that can appear to be seeds about to open or strange creatures with hundreds of spikes and quills," says Doug Anderson. Other Kaffeman works have a primordial quality, echoing bizarre life forms. "Her works in glass sit very comfortably with the best known and most accomplished in the field," he says. Kaffeman's pieces range from \$800 to \$6,000.

The words that come up most often describing the work of the Israeli craft artists are "refreshing" and "new." What attracted Duane Reed to fiber artist Yehudit Katz is her non-traditional approach. "She's a mature artist willing to take conceptual risks such as mixing silk with metal or creating 'tablecloths' that don't need tables to sit on," says Reed, who adds that the way Katz's pieces stretch, manipulate and appear soft despite their metal components is "magical." Depending on size and the material, Katz's prices



range from \$900 to \$6,000.

Another artist represented by Reed is Michal Zehavi, whose ceramic pieces suggest classic vase- and plate-like forms, but they are not functional.

Instead, most have surfaces punctuated with tiny circles. “We showed one in a solo show that looked like coral, but was very soft-edged and sensual. It was a grabber here and at the Palm Beach Fair,” says Reed. Zehavi’s ceramics tend to be around \$4,000.

Sienna Gallery in Lenox, Massachusetts, specializes in one-of-a-kind international contemporary jewelry. Owner Sienna Patti prefers “conceptual pieces”

like Yael Heman’s beguiling rings that cover four fingers in white gold and diamonds, traditional materials yet worked into an avant-garde setting. “These are fun,” says Patti, but they are also precious. A typical polycarbonate and platinum necklace might run around \$7,500. Sarah Shahak’s work also intrigues Patti. “Not many people can do



Sarah Shahak, “Cuff,” 2005, 22k yellow gold and rubies.

what she does,” she notes, explaining that Shahak meticulously weaves gold and silver, crocheting and interweaving her jewelry with metal wire. Her bracelets resemble the sumptuous ruffs of a Fragonard painting. One of her best and most wearable pieces is a woven 24-karat gold-and-ruby bracelet (\$4,400).

“Thus far, AIDA has been a highly successful endeavor,” says Jane Adlin, an adviser to the group and the assistant curator of 19th-century modern and contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “The Israeli artists do great work, but they are isolated, rarely venturing even as far as Europe. Coming here, meeting other artists, dealers and collectors, has given them a whole new sense of the possibilities for their art.” ❖

For More Information

- ◆ AIDA, New York. (212) 931-0039. www.aidaarts.org.
- ◆ SOFA Chicago. (773) 506-8860. Oct. 28–30. www.sofaexpo.com.
- ◆ Heller Gallery, New York. (212) 414-4014. www.hellergallery.com.
- ◆ R. Duane Reed Gallery, St. Louis, (314) 862-2333; New York, (212) 462-2600. www.rduanereedgallery.com.
- ◆ Sienna Gallery, Lenox, Mass. (413) 637-8386. www.siennagallery.com.

New York correspondent Bobbie Leigh frequently reports on international art for Art & Antiques.