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Photos by Dhad Matalon

## Wheel of Fortune

After decades of developing and exploring the limits of pottery, Irit Abba was honored this year with the Andy Prize for Decorative Arts || Yael Efrati

The moment Irit Abba was informed that she won the Andy Prize for Decorative Arts 2009 is forever etched in her mind: the telephone rang and the man on the other end identified himself as Charles. "I was sure it was a wrong number, and then he suggested I sit down. I didn't really understand what was happening, and then he gave me his full name - Charles Bronfman, and told me I had won."

The award for excellence in ceramics, goldsmithing, textiles and glass, granted by Andrea and Charles Bronfman in cooperation with the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, aims to promote and support Israeli arts and crafts. As in the previous four years since the award was first established, the winner will present her work in a solo exhibition in the museum, two of her pieces will be purchased for the permanent collec-

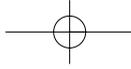
tions of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and she will be rewarded NIS 50,000.

"The award makes me overjoyed on the personal level," says Abba. "I am also excited that it encourages interest in artists in my field, whose work is generally seen by few." The exhibition, curated by Meira Yagid-Haimovich, curator of the department of design and architecture in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, opens this month and will be on display throughout September. "The exhibit catalog offers another opportunity to become involved in the art scene," Abba notes.

The artist defines herself primarily as a potter, who "sits on the wheel", and she disagrees with the customary dichotomic distinctions between high arts and decorative arts. "For years, I've been researching and seeking materials, ideas, techniques and textures to enhance my artistic language. I'm influenced by the materials of my life and surroundings, and seek to make utensils that will enrich the viewer with some sort of experience. That is the common denominator that drives artists," she explains. Explicating their choice, the Andy Prize panel of judges wrote that Abba's work is lucid and significant, exists beyond material and historic connotations, and constitutes a contemporary expression of investigative work that takes risks while maintaining discipline."

### Seventh Heaven

Abba has been working with ceramics for three decades, in her studio opposite the Machane Yehuda Market in Jerusalem. She grew up on Shmuel HaNagid Street in the capital, not far from Bezalel Academy for Art and Design, where she graduated in 1975, and where she has been a senior lecturer since 1984. Simultaneously, she taught for ten years at the Center for Visual Arts in Be'er Sheva, and established "Shmoneh Beyahad" (meaning, "Eight Together") and "Ruach Cadim" (meaning, "Pottery Spirit") together with her colleagues, the first local collectives that operated pottery galleries and shops. Over the years, Abba exhibited her work at various shows around Israel - at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Eretz Israel Museum, the Jerusalem Artists' House, the Israeli Ceramics Biennale at the Eretz Israel Museum in Ramat Aviv, as well as at various galleries in Israel and abroad. Her work is valued for its unique and precise artistic style that never stops reinventing itself. ▶



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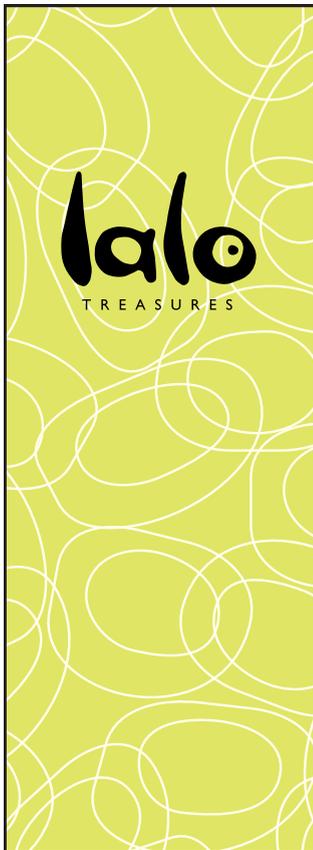
**“For years, I’ve been researching and seeking materials, ideas, techniques and textures to enhance my artistic language. I’m influenced by the materials of my life and surroundings, and seek to make utensils that will enrich the viewer with some sort of experience”.**

◀ For the first two decades of her career, Abba focused on learning and experimenting, in attempt to integrate functionality with shape – while struggling to earn a living. She traveled to arts and crafts fairs, kibbutz guest houses and presented her wheel-crafted containers to whatever audiences were available. “I learned so much during those years. It was an important process of professionalizing and honing my self-criticism, which helped me develop and renew later on.” In the late 90s, simultaneous with her studies of anthroposophy education at David Yellin College in Jerusalem, she had a thrilling chance encounter with a new material: porcelain. At Bezalel College for Art

and Design she had learned that working with porcelain demanded artistic maturity, and she perceived the delicate material as intended for royalty. However, the moment she kneaded and molded it, she understood she couldn’t do without it. “It was like falling in love, and I was in seventh heaven.”

She returned to her studio, and tried to work with the clay she was accustomed to using but could only think of the porcelain that excited her each time anew. In 2001 she presented “Small Pot” at the Periscope Gallery in Tel Aviv, an exhibition of porcelain works. The exhibit won critical acclaim. Two years ago, however, the artist decided the material’s pure beauty was no longer sufficient for her. The style was too “proper”, and she longed to explore new territories that were rougher and more colorful. Abba then developed combined techniques of coloring inspired by floral blossoming and landscapes.

As aptly worded by the Andy Prize judges, Abba is truly the “modest and courageous artist”, whose appreciation of functionality informs the restraint and elegance of her work.” ◻



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