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Hot surprises

By [Yuval Saar](#)

Three days after she heard that she had won the 2008 Andy Prize for Contemporary Art, ceramicist Irit Abba still found it hard to believe the good news.

"The telephone rang," she relates. "I answered it and on the other end of the line, someone said, 'Hello, this is Charles speaking.' I asked which Charles, and he said 'Charles Bronfman.' He asked whether I was sitting down, and when I told him I was standing up, he suggested that I sit. I immediately thought it must be something bad - the penny hadn't dropped yet. Then he told me that I had won the Andy Prize. I was in shock."

Abba submitted her candidacy for the prize, but, she admits, "I didn't know when the committee was meeting. This year it also interested me a little less, because it was already the third time I had applied. Of course, it makes me very happy, both because of the personal achievement and also because it increases awareness of the field of ceramics."

Named after the late Andrea Bronfman and established by her husband and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the Andy Prize is being awarded this year for the fourth time. Seventy-seven people competed for the annual award for the Israeli artist who excels in ceramics, jewelry-making, textiles or glass work. The award includes a grant of NIS 50,000, an exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in the summer, and the purchase of two of the winner's works for the permanent collections of the Tel Aviv Museum and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Irit Abba, 55, is a graduate of the ceramics department of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem; since 1984 she has also been a lecturer in the ceramics and glass design department there. Over the years, her works have been shown in museums and galleries here and abroad that specialize in crafts, design and art. The jury chose Abba because "her work demonstrates contemporary and daring research within an extremely conservative discipline."

Abba does not agree with the perception that the field of ceramics is inferior to the plastic arts, and asserts that she is proud to represent it: "I am not ashamed of my craft. On the contrary: I am proud and enthusiastic about the fact that I am primarily a ceramicist: When I work on the potter's wheel, my head also spins."

She says that like other children, she, too, began to work in clay when she was young, in third grade.

"I remember the first thing that I made, a shoe of clay, but also particularly the strong desire to touch the material, and the surprise when you open the kiln and see what comes out of it," she relates. "To this day I am still surprised by what happens to the material during the process. The uncertainty and the surprise are what attract me to this day - not knowing until the end."

When Abba started working, after completing her studies, she made functional items - cups, pots, soup bowls, vases and the like - and sold them at fairs like Hutzot Hayotzer in Jerusalem.

"I got great satisfaction from this and learned a lot as I worked," she explains. "In the 1970s, there was a demand for this, there were people to sell to. Gradually, imported items started coming into the country and I felt a need to find my own uniqueness. To this day, this is a question that I ask myself: Why a potter's wheel, of all things? What is its place today?"

Why in fact should anyone study ceramics today? What is its relevance?

Abba: "A student who comes to study the field does this first of all because he thinks that he is gifted in the craft. Ceramics sometimes carries the connotation of [being for] bored housewives, who need to do something with their lives, and this is really not true. In the United States and Europe, most of the people who are active in this field are men; it is very difficult physical work. This is not something you do when you're bored."

Nevertheless, there is a feeling that people involved in making crafts don't confront the existential questions that those creating plastic art do.

"When I work, it is very private, but I am certain that everything gets expressed - the state of my health, the news that I hear every day. The fact that I don't invent some name for this doesn't mean that it isn't there. The choice of materials is also meaningful. Porcelain, for

example, has transparency, airiness, but also fragility ...

"There isn't any fundamental difference between painting or sculpture and ceramics; it's the skill and the material that are different. Definitions don't interest me. I love to be in the studio, to explore things all the time, to acquire experience, to improve my skills. Something different always comes out - connections between materials, experiments with color and so on."

To what extent does the final result have to be functional?

"Today this concerns me less, but I never forget that my source is the vessel, from which the essence of the work derives. My grandmother and my family background have especially influenced me. Ours was a Hungarian family, in which the grandfather sat at the head of the table with his knife and his fork, waiting to be served. The whole table setting fascinated me: the Rosenthal china, the large white tablecloth, the special tureen for the soup, the way my grandmother would hold it. One day they replaced the whole buffet and the table, which were made of wood, with Formica. I had the shock of my life. It just wasn't appropriate."

What other differences do you see between your work now and in the past?

"Today there are many more possibilities. It used to be that we would prepare the clay ourselves; nowadays you can buy it already prepared. The same applies to glazes, although I still enjoy preparing them myself. I was educated in the 1970s. There were a lot of rules about what was allowed, what was forbidden, how everything should be done. Today everything is much more open. I come from a classical and conservative place, but time does its work. I take many more risks nowadays."

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