

Boxing Clever

JUDI HERMAN peeps into the boxes made by finalists in the Alix de Rothschild competition

Can you pack your life into a box? It's a poignant question if you're Jewish. Over the last two millennia, so many individuals, families and whole communities have had to find out the answer the hard way. Often in haste and danger and taking with them memories rather than material goods.

So 'My Personal Box' was an inspired subject for the annual Alix de Rothschild competition, which has been running in Israel for more than 20 years. Now it's administered through the Israel Crafts Foundation, established nine years ago by Ruth Corman, the curator of the exhibition. And along with works by winners in two other years, the boxes are on display at the Ben Uri Gallery this Spring. They offer a very special opportunity to see works that not only demonstrate the finest contemporary craft work and ceramics coming out of Israel, but the extraordinary artistic sensitivity and eloquence of the makers.

The artists may be Israelis, but of course they have their roots all over the Diaspora, from Baghdad to Belarus. Their approach to the challenge of the brief and the materials they use often reflects those roots, and generations of carefully cherished memories and traditions.

Take **Sara Nissim's** gorgeously and intricately embroidered box (below), encrusted with a collage of beads and buttons embroidered to depict lush gardens complete with fabulous birds and beasts. She's called the box *Suham*, her name as a child

growing up in Baghdad and she means the work to be 'on one hand very personal and on the other hand multicultural'.

Nina Jawitz Moskovitz actually calls her work *Memory Box*. As she says "Having spent my life in transit and having lived in three different countries, I am constantly busy with the concept of packaging memories". Her box is covered in different texts, both hand-written and printed, often looking yellowed with age or partially obscured by smudged ink. And inside there are separate vertical panels you can pull out. She wants her box to be "like a library where you can take the artwork off the shelf and present it to the viewer". The effect is intriguing and tantalising – you want to read and understand more ...

The theme of memory and loss is even more transparent in the work of collaborators **Uriel Buzaglo** and **Sagit Dominitz**. Their rectangular boxes (opposite below left) are all subtly different in construction and size. The size is dictated by the size of the sheafs, or stacks of photographs of which the boxes essentially consist. Solemn faced family groups staring out from sepia photos contrast with the smiling faces of a more recent wedding party. As they put it, their family photographs are "the most personal, private and precious objects we have...tied together like the many moments, events, experiences and relationships that make our life what it is. Today in the age of digital photography

these old printed photographs become more precious than ever".

Eyvatar Stern may have been born in Israel, but as he says "my work has often revolved around being a son to Holocaust survivors". His *Belligerent Structure* (opposite above) is made of wax-covered books that seem to splinter into matches. "In defiance of the burning of books in the Reich and on Krystallnacht, I present an alternative – the conservation of books with the help of wax...as a cultural battery or energy source... which hold words, secrets and stories". He is equally able to relate it to the present, mirroring "the lack of roots, the shabby constructions and the matches which signify weakness ...but also ...strength grouped together".

Russian-born **Sergey Bunkov** and **Boris Granditzky**, originally from Belorussia have collaborated on a delicate glass box (opposite middle right) that has both sensual and spiritual dimensions. You long to run your finger across the delicate raised shapes of crabs and flowers carved out of sandblasted glass on what they call *My Oriental Perfume Box*. And as they sum up "Glass has no smell so the essence of perfume stays 'clean' as the soul!".

And of course some of the boxes reflect life today, especially in Israel itself. The artist **Michal Kav** was born on Kibbutz Afkim and brought up on Moshav Kidron and she came to the visual arts through the performing arts, for she is a trained dancer and also designs for the



theatre. The subject matter of her box (opposite below right) is veiled stone throwers. As she explains “I saw them in photographs throwing stones. I saw the anger and fear. I saw movement with intent. I saw small Arab houses scattered in the desert like white cubes. I saw many stones that could be thrown”.

Her response to this vision is as disturbing as it is beautiful. A translucent square structure draped with a white *keffiyah* head-covering reveals at its heart a stone from the desert placed on a rug in the colours of the Palestinian flag. Michal has sketched and then embroidered the figures of the stone throwers on the walls of the box. And the box, displayed so that it's visible from all sides, is illuminated by a discreet lamp to bring out the transparency of the fabric.

For Michal, the stone “symbolises the struggle, a stone that symbolises a holy place”. It's no wonder the effect is disturbing for she admits “I embroidered with mixed feelings because I belong to the

other side; the side towards which the anger is directed and it's hard to bear”.

It's left to Lily Poran to express the hope for coexistence, most eloquently in her gaily decorated rectangular box (below left), again in the colours of the Palestinian flag, containing a little brocade slipper. “I am an Israeli woman making use of traditional Palestinian women's embroidered cloth” she explains. “The little girl's shoe expresses the hope and desire for life and continuity for both nations. I decided to change the title from *A Little Girl's Shoe* to *A Hope for Peace*.”

So these beautifully crafted artworks packed with memories carry too the artists' hopes and fears for the present and the future. They unpack all the variety of what makes each of them an individual, an artist – and a Jew. We cannot fail to be moved.

Judi Herman is a writer and broadcaster, specialising in the arts and religious affairs.



MY PERSONAL BOX is at the Ben Uri Gallery, London Jewish Museum of Art, from 2 April to 7 May 2006. See WHAT'S HAPPENING page 25 for details

