

Designs on cross-writing

• By BARRY DAVIS

As exhibition monikers go, “Metabolism” definitely pertains to the funky end of the titular spectrum. It also spells out the project’s thematic anchor pretty clearly. One definition of the physiological phenomenon talks about the production, maintenance and destruction of the material substance of an organism. That implies a checks-and-balances state of affairs, and that comes across in the exhibition which opened at the Museum for Islamic Art in December and is due to run through to April 7.

“Metabolism” curators Yuval Saar and Orly Amrami have done a good job in portraying the added value to be had from the interface between Israeli Jewish and Muslim aesthetics.

It is, says Saar, part of a naturally evolving cultural mind-set continuum which has been unfolding for some time now. “Every year I go to student exhibitions all over the country, from every department of every school – textiles, plastic arts, fashion, everything. I see thousands of works. Around five years ago I suddenly noted that I was seeing Arabic in the exhibitions.”

This, says Saar, indicates a sweeping cultural game changer, rather than creators just taking a stab at seeing how the shapes of a different alphabet fuse within a general decorative milieu.

“I was seeing more works that referenced what we might call Mediterraneanism, or Middle Eastern or Eastern elements,” Saar adds. “I think I started noticing that because, simply, either they weren’t there beforehand, or weren’t there in sufficient quantity to stand out.”

The co-curator puts that down to political sensibilities across the sociopolitical board, which impacted on Arab students, too.

“It’s not as if this is the first time Arabs have graduated from arts or design programs at one of the colleges or schools, but the Arabic language had less presence,” says Saar. “Perhaps there was less legitimacy for it beforehand, or maybe the students weren’t encouraged to do so. But I think it probably has something to do with the emergence of Mediterranean or Middle Eastern discourse in recent years.”

THE SOCIAL-ETHNIC backdrop to “Metabolism,” which was initiated by Shenkar College of Engineering and Design, is as varied as the items on show.

Aravit is a final-year project by Shenkar College student Liron Lavi Turkenich. The name of the work is a hybrid of *Aravit* (Arabic) and *Ivrit* (Hebrew) and references the visual rapport between the two scripts, whereby the upper part of the letters on show are Arabic, and the lower half is in Hebrew.

The result, with the Hebrew letters that make up “*safa*” sitting atop “*lura*” in Arabic – “language” in both vocabularies – makes for an alluring aesthetic end product that conveys the requisite sense of linguistic, and cultural and possibly sociopolitical harmony.

The work was prompted by the fact that most street signs in Lavi Turkenich’s hometown of Haifa appear in Hebrew, Arabic and English.

“The title reflects a fusion of tongues: every reader can choose the language in which to read the sign, without ignoring the presence of the other,” the artist suggests.

While Lavi Turkenich was inspired by the quotidian street furniture around her, Shany Dvora, a graduate of the department of visual communication, Holon Institute of Technology, went for aesthetics on a far grander, official and religious level. Her *Concealed Designs* offering references the national flag and the Ten Commandments.

There is another basic different between the two young artists. Dvora’s family has roots in Iraq and Iran; hence, her interest in non-Hebraic lettering comes, emotionally and culturally, from closer to home.

Around a year ago Dvora set about considering the cultural gaps that evolved between her grandparents and her generation of Israelis. Some of that was fueled by officialdom, and some by the natural cross-generational continuum.

“Shany decided to examine what would have happened had the people who designed all of Israel’s state symbols – passport, flag, city emblems, the IDF emblem and banknotes – come from Eastern [Arabic] countries, and not from Europe,” Saar explains. “All the designs from the creation of the

Hazar Grably incorporated fabric and ceramic tiles she inherited from her grandmother, in an exploration of her dual identity as an Israeli Arab and Palestinian Arab, and as a woman in Arab society. (Hazar Grably)

EXHIBITION



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state and thereafter were all made by people who came from countries like Russia and Germany. They were educated in those places, at some stage they made aliya. Those were the designs they were taught, and they brought them here with them.”

Dvora’s intriguing exploratory work was part of her final project at HIT. She concluded that there was a dearth of Middle Eastern images and symbols in the visual landscape of what was then the newborn State of Israel.

“Shany wanted to see what might have happened, had the country’s official designers brought different cultural baggage to their work,” Saar continues.

Amrami offers another, wider perspective to Dvora’s line of thought. “What she was looking for was the connection between design and Judaism. There was a [Jewish] tradition of calligraphy and ornamentation that were connected to Judaism, that fed off a connection between Judaism and Islam. She looked for this link.”

The curators say the Islamic aesthetic departure came from both sides of the Ashkenazi-Sephardi social-cultural divide.

One might naturally expect artists whose parents or grandparents made aliya from Arab countries to use their craft to dig into the family heritage and get a better understanding of their antecedents’ personal backdrop.

That began in music around 30 years ago, when internationally acclaimed oud player-violinist Yair Dalal performed a cultural about-turn. Dalal’s parents were born in Iraq, but he started out on blues-rock guitar, only rediscovering his roots music quite a few years later.

Tal Levi also has Iraqi blood coursing through his veins. He addressed his cultural heritage by creating a Passover Haggada in Hebrew and Arabic.

“It has Hebrew, Arabic and also Hebrew words transcribed to Arabic,” Saar explains. “He remembers Seder nights, from when he was a kid, which took place in Arabic.”

There were some politically tinged motives to Levi’s artistic exercise.

“Tal said he thought up this project when he heard there was a Knesset bill to confer ‘special language’ status on Arabic, which meant that Arabic would no



Jewish and Arab Israeli former Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design students Ohad Hadad and Hilal Jabareen challenge cultural-ethnic stereotypes with their Aravi-Ma’aravi (Western Arab) project. (Tomer Zmora)

longer be an official state language,” Amrami notes. “Tal said that, for him, Arabic has always been a ‘special language’ because it is the language of his grandparents, the language of his heritage and tradition.”

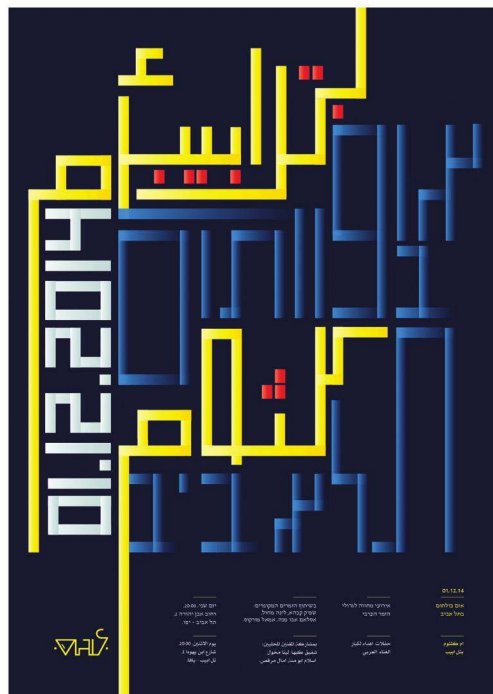
Nadim Sheiban feels that language goes far beyond the practical matter of day-to-day communication.

“Language is about identity and place,” says the museum director-general. “This is a matter of the majority vis-à-vis the minority in this country. That is

the discourse behind this exhibition.”

THERE ARE some pretty funky designs on show in the exhibition, including Hadar Tidhar’s *Alhambra* final project for his degree from the department of industrial design of Shenkar College.

Tidhar got the idea for his project from a chain of five ornamental silver coins brought here by his grandmother when she made aliya from Yemen.



Left to right:

Nawal Arafat plays around with Arabic and Hebrew typography to connect with her mother tongue in an abstract contemporary way, while making the information on the poster accessible to Hebrew speakers too. (Nawal Arafat)

Omri Avraham connects with his Yemenite roots and highlights the importance of original Hebrew pronunciation. (Omri Avraham)

Tal Levi’s Haggada revisits his Iraqi Jewish family’s customs. (Tal Azulay)

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Adi Karni's Animated Embroidery uses 3D printing of a traditional Palestinian decorative flower element. (Ronen Zian)



Noa Snir references the Moroccan Jewish version of Cinderella, Smeda Rmeda. (Photos: Shay Ben-Efraim)

He researched the chain motif, which pointed him in the direction of Islamic art and arabesque. He took the basic design format and ran with it, producing 3D arabesque forms, which he then incorporated in three electrical appliances – a sound system, a light fixture and a ceiling fan – based on a fusion of the language of traditional Islamic art with that of contemporary Western design.

Like Levi, Amir Zobel also opted to address religious ritual, touching on some political sensibilities in the process. His *GMHH* (a Great Miracle Happened Here) work references Hanukka and the custom of playing with dreidels, or spinning tops. Zobel designed three dreidels with the initials of the original Hebrew sentence – *nes gadol haya po* – which adorn each face of the regular dreidel, appearing in Arabic on one of the works. The second uses an arabesque pattern that recalls the *misbaha*, Muslim prayer beads, and five points that represent the Five Pillars of Islam. The third top is a blend of the other two.

SAAR BELIEVES we have some way to go before we can set our preconceptions to one side and simply take works such as those in the “Metabolism” exhibition at face value. “You saw the almost hysterical reactions to the street posters for the [second season of the] *Fauda* TV series [on Yes].” The item in question showed an obviously Arab, keffiyeh-clad man with one Arabic word, which, it later transpired, simply spelled “Fauda.”

Saar hopes the current show at the Islamic Museum is a harbinger of calmer, more accepting, times. “I would like to hope that, in five or 10 years’ time, we will see that this exhibition was slightly ahead of its time, and that such things [as Arabic lettering] will be considered more legitimate, and that we’ll see more of them.”

For more information: (02) 566-1291 and www.islamicart.co.il



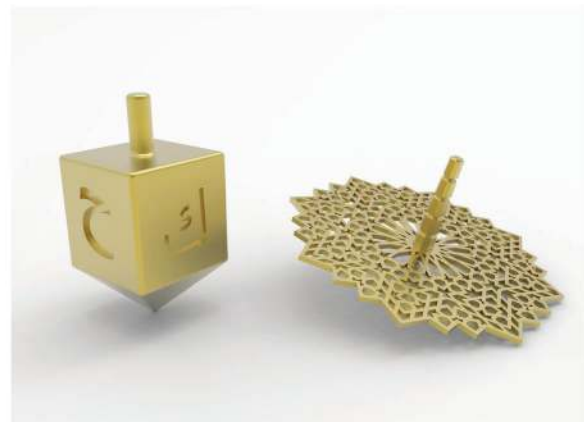
Gilad Bar explored his family's Persian Jewish roots through video clips about Persian poetry and the Farsi language. (Gilad Bar)



Hadar Tidhar looked to bridge the gap between his Yemenite grandmother's roots and contemporary Israeli culture.



Helit Colony's Zalabia bowl and eating utensils project took her back to her grandmother's house, and the smell of frying zalabia, a Yemenite pastry dipped in sugar.



Hebrew and Arabic lettering meet and fuse in Amir Zobel's Great Miracles Happened Here Hanukka spinning top. (Amir Zobel)