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Daring to discover

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07/03/2013

Part gallery, part museum, the Jerusalem Artists' House is one of the few places that show relatively unknown artists.

Between the Nahlaot neighborhood and the city center, off King George street, stands the Bezalel building, a large, beautiful stone structure with a prestigious past. The Jerusalem Artists' House is currently situated in the historic building, which once housed the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts founded by Boris Schatz in 1906, today the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design. For a time the building housed the Bezalel National Museum, the precursor of the Israel Museum. When the Israel Museum opened, the collections of the Bezalel National Museum were transferred to it, forming its initial core collection. Today, the magnificent building is shared by Bezalel's architecture department and the "Artists' House" – a public gallery established in 1965 by a special act of the city council.

The Artists' House is neither a museum nor merely an art gallery, though it shares features with both. It is second only to the Israel Museum in terms of exposing works of leading artists to the public. For Artists' House director Ruth Zadka, the role of the House is crucial in shaping the place of art in Jerusalem and beyond.

"Over the years, art has become a consumer issue," Zadka tells In Jerusalem in the courtyard of the Artists' House. "But it is not just another consumer good, it is firstly a luxury consumer item, one that goes with money. Lots of money. So naturally, since this city is far from being rich, the art business is not to be found here, but in the Tel Aviv region, where the big private galleries are."

Since 1965, the House has served as home to the Association of Jerusalem Artists. In this capacity, the House has become a dynamic center for exhibitions, displaying unique and varied works of both Israeli and international artists. The annual exhibition plan includes a series focusing on prominent young artists exhibiting their works for the first time, as well as a series of retrospective works by veteran artists. In addition, the Artists' House displays group exhibitions on a wide range of subjects as well as joint presentations by Israeli and international artists, and offers a variety of other activities.

There are only a few private art galleries in Jerusalem, none of which can afford the risk of presenting unknown artists. At the Israel Museum there is plenty of attention paid to Israeli artists, but only after they've already attained a minimum level of exposure, which, again, leads to a need for some dignified solution for the rest of the artists.

"If the business of art dealing is only to be found in Tel Aviv, and the Israel Museum is the right place for those already recognized as important artists," continues Zadka, "what choice and opportunities do the others have? Those who might well become the great names of tomorrow, but are still not there at the moment? No private gallery will invest the time and attention they deserve and need in order to break out, only us, at the Artists' House; that's our mission and vision."

The House rules are rather simple: any professional artist can submit a request to present his or her works, and a public committee, consisting only of artists, decides twice a year which works and artists will be presented. Once a proposal is accepted, all that is needed to achieve a complete presentation is included in the agreement – a curator chooses the works, artistic research is carried out on the presentation topic, a catalogue is produced and the exhibition is presented to the public through all the required channels, including, of course, PR and advertising.

Usually only artists already considered "sure investments" have access to such facilities in the art business. Zadka stresses that while the public committee of the Artists' House ensures the presented art is high quality, it is nevertheless an extraordinary way to offer artists at the beginning or still not at the peak of their careers a place to present their achievements to the public.

"It is a wonderful platform to reveal and expose to the residents of Jerusalem and visitors, including from abroad, high-quality art, before the 'art as business' phase."

Despite being a public gallery supported by the city council, Zadka remarks that the place has managed to preserve total artistic independence from the establishment. “Otherwise, it wouldn’t deserve the title of art venue,” she says.

Zadka adds that without caving in to pressure to become a stage for political or subversive positions, the place has nevertheless coped more than once with sensitive issues. For example, beside the official ceremonies for the 40th anniversary of the city’s reunification, the Artists’ House presented a special exhibition that tried to summarize in works of art the other meaning of that anniversary – namely the 40 years of occupation.

At that exhibition, artists from all over the world (including of Arab origin) as well as local Israeli artists participated, giving a tangible form to the term “pluralistic city.” After the most recent exhibition (“Journey to Jerusalem”), which presented artists’ positions on religion, tradition and taboo and featured works by artists from Israel, Turkey, the US and Syria, a new exhibition opened last month. It includes works (scanned works on-line in the exhibition room) by Peleg Dishon, and charcoal works by Max Epstein. On the eve of International Women’s Day, a special evening of art and the study of Jewish texts will be presented by scholar and artist Ruhama Weiss.

With an annual budget that comes partly from the public (NIS 400,000 from the Ministry of Culture and Sport) and NIS 200,000 from the Jerusalem Municipality’s culture department, to which are added about NIS 1 million from renting the first story out to restaurants and other income sources, the House is able to ensure high quality treatment for the artists it exposes. “This is a real home for the artists of Jerusalem,” concludes Zadka.

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