

ART



**Staying afloat**  
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# Staying afloat

A cancer survivor finds a creative – and therapeutic – outlet in papier-mâché



Self-portrait  
(Photos: Courtesy)



'Emerging'



'Resting Woman'

• By BARRY DAVIS

**P**eople find all kinds of ways to deal with tragedy and challenges in their lives. Some are less successful than others, and eventually buckle under the strain, but Nehama Bar-Nissan has clearly found a

healthy outlet – not only for her loss and physical trials, but also for her creative bent.

All of that comes through loud and clear in Bar-Nissan's new exhibition of sculptures at Tel Aviv's Enav Cultural Center, called "Anchor in Instability." The show comprises 26 works that demonstrate numerous facets of the artist's personality, as well as a range of techniques. All items on display are made with papier-mâché and convey a broad spectrum of emotion and intent, from the highly emotive to the downright funny.

Bar-Nissan started out on her creative path in a different medium, primarily oil painting with some sketching in the artistic mix, too. But all that changed 14 years ago. "I stopped painting 18 years ago, when my life turned upside-down," she recalls. "My husband was killed in a plane crash, and around a year later I tried to resume painting but it wasn't the same for me anymore. It simply didn't work, and I struggled with painting, so I gave it up."

There were more challenges in store for Bar-Nissan. "I contracted cancer in 2000, and I decided to change my life. I had a store at the time, and I closed it and took a history degree at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem."

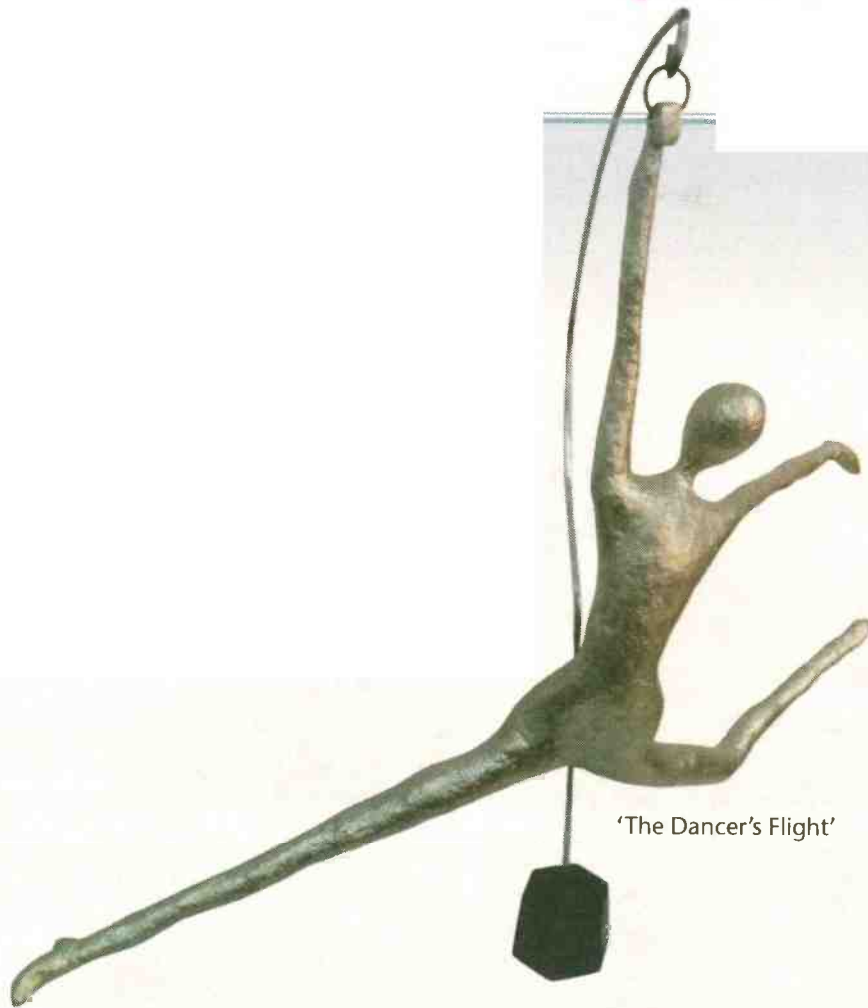
Thankfully, Bar-Nissan returned to full health and resolved to do what she could to help others to deal with the illness. "I went to volunteer at the Israel Cancer Association [in Givatayim], where I got to know [association director] Nurit Zin," she says.

It was the confluence with Zin that eventually led to Bar-Nissan's current creative outlet. "Nurit badgered me about taking up papier-mâché sculpting. She never let up. But I wasn't interested; I told her that papier-mâché is for kids."

Zin's persistence gradually paid off, and Bar-Nissan experienced an artistic epiphany. "In the end I went to try the papier-mâché workshop, and it was amazing," Bar-Nissan recounts. "I am not into mysticism and all that, but I really felt drawn into the material. I couldn't believe it. For me, papier-mâché was something you played with, not something to be used in a serious artistic pursuit."

Once hooked, Bar-Nissan threw herself wholeheartedly into her newfound discipline. "There is something about this material, that if you give yourself to it fully, and it gives itself back to you," she notes, adding that she immerses herself in her work. "For me, it is like meditation. When I work on something – and it doesn't matter if it is a vessel or a sculpture, although it happens a lot with vessels – I lose myself in it."

"I start with the structural stage, with bits of newspaper that I wrap in masking tape. I sometimes ask a metalworker to make me a metal shape as the starting point, and when I begin building up the layers of paper. I find that totally addictive."



'The Dancer's Flight'



Nehama Bar-Nissan with 'Optical Illusion' (Barry Davis)

It is, naturally, a highly tactile activity, but Bar-Nissan has taken working with papier-mâché a step further. "I really feel the material - where I have to add something, or reshape it. I have this sensitivity in my fingers that enables me to know just where to take the sculpture. It may sound clichéd, but I really feel as if God is flowing out through my fingers."

Bar-Nissan takes the conduit theme a step further. "It is as if I am a vessel, and something flows through me - as if it is not I who makes the sculptures, but something that passes through me. It is as if God is making the works."

It is evident by now that, for Bar-Nissan, working with papier-mâché is far more than just a creative pursuit. "Sculpting, for me, is therapy, passion and love at the same time," she declares. "It controls my being and draws creativity from within me. I lose myself in the sculpting and enter into a concealed world, like with meditation. And when I come out of it I suddenly see the body, the hand and the leg, and I wonder if I have made them, or someone else did."

Bar-Nissan talks fervently

about her work, and there is clearly a lot of emotional baggage in the sculptures. One of the most emotive items in "Anchor in Instability" is a work in which a woman appears to be trying desperately to extricate herself from a rock.

The figure stretches out an arm - possibly for help - but her facial expression is open to interpretation. The original title of the work was "Emerging, Sinking," before Bar-Nissan eventually settled on the more optimistic first part of the name.

Not far away from the rock-set woman there is another moving work called *The Ravages of Humanity*, a figure of a pelican that appears

to be in some trouble. "I did that after seeing pictures of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico [in 2010] on the news," explains Bar-Nissan. "It was heartbreaking to see the wildlife trying so forlornly to fly, and to get away from the oil that had covered them." That pathos comes across distinctly and painfully.

At the far end of the hall is an intriguing item with a powerful-looking forearm and hand, with the dainty figure of a small woman dangling from the outsized fingers. The work is called *Dependence*. "That was

inspired by a good friend of mine whose husband died a few months ago," says Bar-Nissan. "She was always so dependent on him, and I was angry with her for not standing on her own two feet - you can see in the sculpture that her feet are suspended. I was also angry with him for being so dominating.

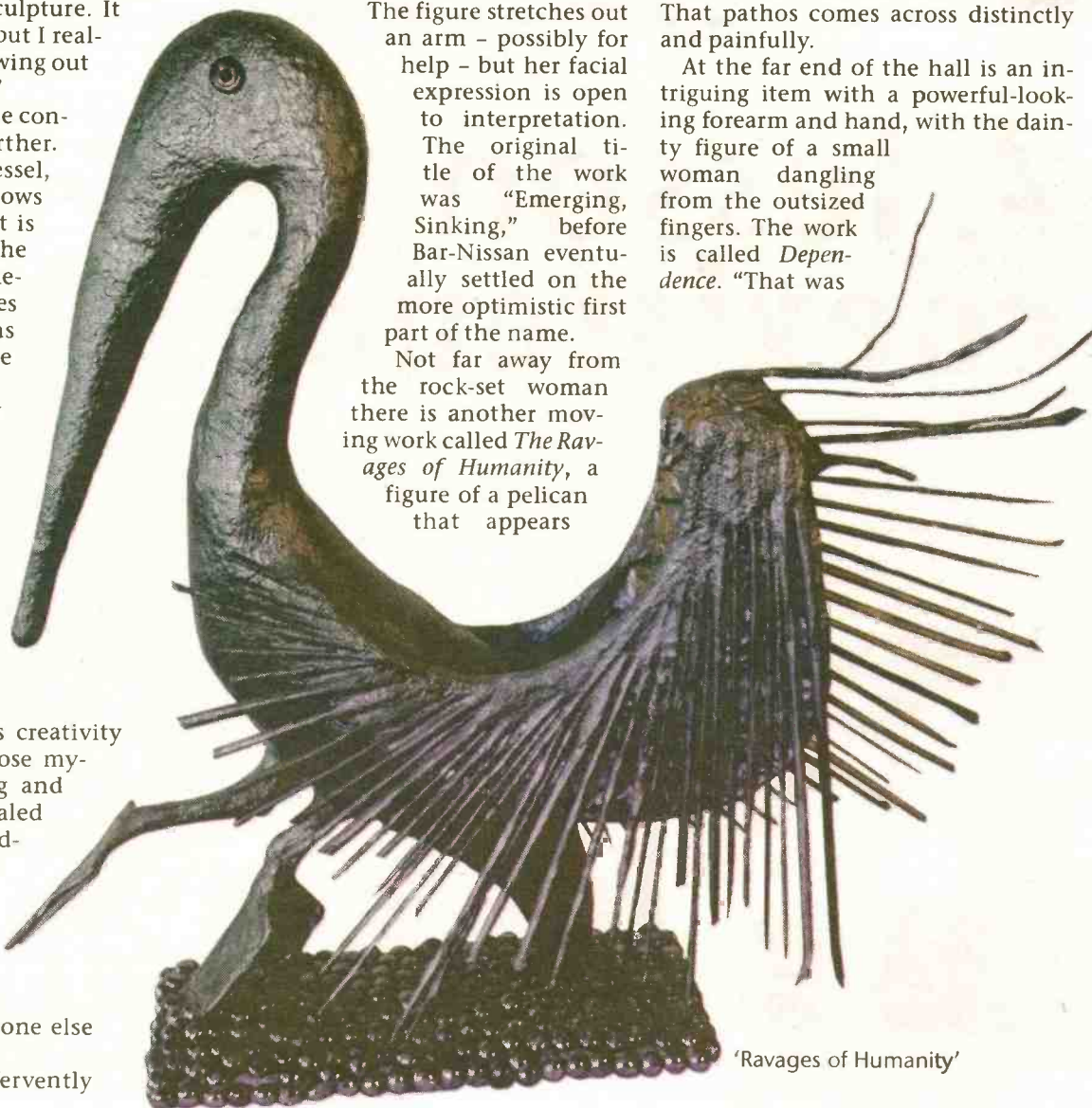
"Now that he is gone, she feels lost. I hope she recovers soon, and starts to find her own place in the world."

But *Anchor in Instability* is certainly not all doom and gloom. *Dog in the Wall*, for example, shows the rear end of a canine creature which appears to be following the front part of the torso into a pillar. "I have seen people going around to the other side of the pillar to see if the other part of the dog is sticking out," chuckles Bar-Nissan. There is also a somewhat surrealistic figure of a man reclining while reading a newspaper, only there is no chair underneath him, and no paper between his fingers.

Other fun figures in the exhibition include a dog in boots on a skateboard, and even "hunting trophies" of a deer head and the head of a rhinoceros suitably positioned high up on one of the walls, as in the manors of old.

The mix of "heavy" works with the lighter stuff seems to also reflect something in Bar-Nissan's own personality. "There is this dissonance between seriousness and comic elements," notes curator Issi Vinter Aboukasis. "It is as if Nechama developed her own anchor, her own base of stability through her work."

The exhibition is open Sunday to Thursday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., through December 31. Admission is free. For more information: (03) 521-7763.



'Ravages of Humanity'