



Boundless Painting

By Irena Gordon

"The paper is a space where different elements coexist together"

David Gerstein

'...my love is building a magic, a discrete/ tower of magic', wrote the modernist American poet E.E Cummings and his words seem to be whispered lovingly by the works of the Israeli artist David Gerstein: the revelation of line, shape, color

and movement, which are created in a few magic strokes, are intrinsic to his works. Much like E.E. Cummings' poems, Gerstein's creations are outwardly simple and transparent - their existence airy and light - as they strive to touch the untouchable. Both his paintings and sculptures, embrace a quintessential quality of form and of matter. They appeal to their viewers without bashfulness or hesitation, seducing them into a world of art, full of enchantment and delight.

As a painter and a sculptor, an excellent draughtsman and a dexterous designer, David Gerstein seeks to expand the limits of two-dimensional paintings into three-dimensional sculptures. In his choice of subject matter he wishes to break down the existing barriers between the work of art and its audience by creating enchanted and straightforward images, which render, at times, intimate, dream-like naïve scenes and at other times, cinemascope-like, large scale, choreographed events. His easily recognizable artistic colorful syntax have developed gradually, reflecting a search for a distinct voice, which ranges from the local to the universal and echoes several levels of representation simultaneously.

Gerstein maintains a conscious dialectic between the hand-made "original"/"unique" work of art and the reproduced work of art - between the "aura" of art and its commercial manufacturing. Therefore his art sustains, in a self-aware manner, an aesthetically and socially charged tension of high art amid low popular culture. His versatile body of works consists of indoor wall-sculptures formed as multi-layered cut-outs, outdoor works, sculptures, paintings, prints, drawings, and multiple designed objects, which can be found in museums and galleries, private collections, indoor and outdoor public spaces, as well as in private buildings.



As a prolific artist, Gerstein manages to create a universal, colorful and representational imagery of human behavior that is based on daily, intimate moments. This behavior is set against various backdrops that vary from the urban to the rural. Moreover, his art as a whole, in spite of its appearing detachment, systematically contains and retains many autobiographical elements. Consequently, any contemplation on or consideration of the works evokes an experience, which is both collective and personal.

This survey of Gerstein's work follows the various transformations his art has undergone. It traces the formation and crystallization of his artistic language and its remarkable characteristics, while trying to pinpoint the full range of Gerstein's encounters and interactions with leading concepts of modernism and post-modernism to which he addresses openly. It also attempts to shed light on the way his critical stance has developed and changed from sarcastic criticism to sheer individualistic optimism and joy.

Early Scenes - Late Influences

"Of all the art made under these conditions and to this purpose, the most unusual is that in which childhood verve and playfulness emerge unscathed though profoundly informed by childhood hardship and its aftermath – art that looks like in order to recapture the energies that made initial survival possible in order to apply them to the still harsher constraints and more strenuous exaltations of adulthood – art that, instead of complaining, confides and celebrates."



Although Gerstein does not speak much of his childhood and of first influences, an abundance of landscapes, of figures and of sensations from this period flood his work, both in paintings and sculptures. Childhood scenery and sensations reminiscent of infancy are very much alive, pounding throughout his art's changing forms. Their various incarnations can be traced back to his first works as a mature artist: The figurative paintings of the 70's, his family members – parents and twin brother - appear in numerous compositions, most of them dramatic. The family figures in these works, which are mainly in watercolor, are set either indoors, in lugubrious, somewhat threatening, rooms or in specific outdoor settings like the Dead Sea, where the family used to spend their annual vacation, and which are rendered as static and oppressive.

Yet, the intimidating atmosphere is always accompanied by elements of irony and of the grotesque, even humor and playfulness, which are imbedded in a frantic line and much exaggerated appearance of the figures: they are either very thin or very fat; their facial expression is theatrical in its caricaturist and dramatic presence and they are disclosed in apparent embracing, intimate or awkward situations. In later family watercolors of the late 70's and early 80's, Gerstein's own children appear – their figures interchanging with those of his parents and brother in the early works.

Gerstein was born in the Gheula neighborhood in Jerusalem in 1944 as an identical twin brother to Jonathan. Although born four years earlier, Gerstein and his brother belonged to the first generation of the newly born Israeli state – a



generation of children who were supposed to be free of the recent horrifying past in Europe, while embracing a clear stance of self confidence accompanied by an overpowering sense of freedom and rejuvenation .The Gersteins were a hard working family with modest means and with little connection to art. David's father was the son of a leather worker, who came to Palestine on his own at the age of 18, his only baggage was a set of simple knives that his father, David's grandfather, gave him in order to continue practicing the trade and earn a living. He and his brother (David's uncle) were the only survivors of their family who stayed behind in Europe. At the age of four, the

Gerstein family moved to the city of Ramat Gan, where David's father opened a small leather workshop and David or Dudu, as he became known, worked with him side by side during his adolescence.

In an interview taken in 2002, Gerstein acknowledges: "Childhood memories are the most dominant element to someone who makes art. I'm sure that things that were experienced in childhood become a motif in adolescence. When I think why I am now cutting shapes and figures I get back to my father who was a leather cutter. He had a workshop for cutting leather and I would help him. This thing of taking and cutting up a shape seems to be essential in my life. Making paper cutouts is a popular Jewish tradition which I'm probably part of. My drawing line, which is very clear, cuts the shape. It is a definite closed line which lends itself to cutting."(The Big Book of Illustrators, p.120).

Though close to his father, and influenced by the handiwork and craft embedded in the trade, there is no doubt David was especially close to his mother whose figure had penetrated many of his works. She was exceptionally talented in traditional women's crafts like sewing, knitting and crochet. Her changing yet unfailing portrayal as the woman/wife/mother figure that appears persistently in a multitude of compositions and forms in his work is unavoidable.

We see her present in family scenes that populate his watercolors and drawings during the 70's: the figure of a mother lying on a sofa or a bed in a simple looking room and the little child peeping from behind the open door; the motherly character in numerous intimate and ironic scenes in the "Balcony" series. Soon after, in the Dead Sea paintings, she makes her appearance in the woman's role in of social and matrimonial interactions that take place against the static, morbid and powerful, landscape. When Gerstein decides to create sculptures, the first cardboard cutout he makes, is inspired by his early childhood memories of his mother riding bicycles. In later even recent paintings she appears as a different persona in each – once as the woman-child, both innocent and seductive, once as the reclining lover, once as the embodiment of the Jewish-Polish mother.

Gerstein's entire adolescence was absorbed with painting and with scenes and landscapes of urban houses and streets of the suburban town as well as those of the big city — Tel Aviv. He and his brother were both immersed in art from the age of four. Painting was their mutual inclination and hobby while they were child protégé as far as art was concerned.

They used to draw and paint together hours on end, competing and learning from each other, making each other enthusiastic and excited about art – quite an unusual preoccupation at that early age. Some of Gerstein's very early paintings show a great liking for bold color and intensive movement which predominates his identified style today. The love and appreciation of art were his own autonomous and individual aspiration, an aspiration nurtured, to a great extent, by the bond and the rivalry between him and his brother. They both roamed the city streets, together, its galleries and cultural events, trying to absorb as much as they could. Tel Aviv was then the White Bauhaus city. The prosaic urban modern conglomeration was very different in its ambiance from Jerusalem.



His brother Yoni was the first to travel to Paris after his military service and immediately enrolled in the Beaux-Arts, where he was much appreciated and praised. David followed him two years later. One can depict the image of twins in several early works by David Gerstein. In all of these the image of the twins has a certain sinister and uneasy atmosphere about it. They are dressed alike and they either cling to each other or are situated very closely together as if someone has glued them together. Their expression is an unhappy one: "I used to draw lots of identical twins in my paintings in order to break

free, like exorcism."(The Big Illustrators", p.120). A few years after returning from Paris, Yoni became religious and disconnected himself completely from his family and previous life. Gerstein: "Since then an immense gap opened between us...Although he has returned to painting and does illustrations for religious books and caricatures for newspapers of the Orthodox community, he had relinquished all independent judgment... It is heart breaking to see how Yoni's immense talent is being wasted away..."(Jerusalem, 22/8/97)

Between Pop and a hard place

In the mid-sixties, when he was twenty-one years old, Gerstein started his art studies at Bezalel School of Art in Jerusalem. Bezalel was then more graphics and craft oriented than pure plastic arts oriented. He studied for a year, overcome by the feeling it was not enough and that these were not the art studies he had wished for. He felt things were too confined and set apart from the international scene. Subsequently, he decided to break away and go abroad with the hidden wish to "conquer" the world. Paris was his first obvious destination. He joined other Israeli artists at the time, most of them his senior, such as Lea Nickel, Yehiel Shemi and Igal Tumarkin, who had also wished to break away from the narrow borders of the local Israeli art scene, and had found their way to Paris, the pre-war capital of art. Between 1966-1968 Gerstein studied at the Beaux-Arts School of Art where he labored on acquiring the very "profession" of painting, as he says, in its most classical and traditional sense. He took part, as a student, in the Parisian Student Revolution of 1968, working on posters and propaganda leaflets. He discovered Bonnard and his use of color, post-impressionist painting and French painting of the second half of the 20th Century, such as that of the painter and sculptor Jean Dubuffet and his Art Brut. In Paris he met the Israeli painter Avraham Ofek, as well.

He knew Ofek from Bezalel. When he came to enroll in the Art Department at Bezalel, it was Ofek who gave him his entry

exam: "After a quarter of an hour of model drawing he told me to go and sign in." Now in Paris they roamed the city



streets, visiting the galleries in the Cartier Latin, sitting in coffee houses and meeting other Israeli painters who lived in Paris such as Avraham Hadad and Modechai Moreh. "My Paris will always be the Paris with Ofek", wrote Gerstein in his obituary article in the newspaper after Avraham Ofek passed away. (Kol Hair, 19/1/90, p. 65 "Kav HaOfek). Paris was a very political city at the time and post-war French Abstract avant-garde art had its resurgence. However, he soon realized, especially after visiting exhibitions of American artists such as Jackson Pollack and Barnett Newman that the forefront of the art world had long ago shifted to New York City. There, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art and the origins of Minimalism had flourished and ruled the 50's and 60's, drastically changing the face of art, its raw materials and subject matter.

At the end of 1968, Gerstein left Paris, making the "Big Apple" his new home. He enrolled in the Art Students' League, but more importantly, he was there, in the midst of the art and culture buzz of the late 60s, with Pop Art, Hyper Realism, the Flower Generation, Performing and Happening art and others.

The artistic happenings that were taking place in galleries, museums, and on the street, day and night, fully captured his entire being. He absorbed the overwhelming vibrating artistic thrill, which much later would turn up in his own works. The art scene was ruled by artists like Jasper Johns who took abstract representative graphic signs such as numbers, letters, or symbols and turned them into pictorial compositions, revealing their painterly nature as images, while denying their symbolism and subjective identification. Dennis Oppenheim, the Conceptualist sculptor took his large-scale sculptures out of the galleries into open spaces. Claes Oldenburg, like other Pop artists, rehabilitated the object by taking the most mundane, commercial products, radically changing their scale, and imbuing them with artistic and critical qualities. Towards the end of the 60's, Conceptual art started to rule the American art scene, led by artists like Sol LeWitt and Yves Klein who insisted that the idea was the most important aspect of the work of art, more than the means of achieving it and more than the work of art itself.

Gerstein was taken by the spirit of American art, which was full of diverse energies, splashing colors and bursting forms. However, he stood aloof from the conceptualists who adhered to words and ideas. He wished to create an object. He wanted to produce art in the traditional sense – art which has a physical presence in the world and which may start as the most abstract idea, but must materialize finally as a concrete being: "Since I was a child I wanted to make an object, something tangible to which people can relate, and use painting as a space for depicting objects. Remaining in the realm of concept has never meant art, for me personally." Albeit, he did join the underlying debate of 20th century art between the figurative and the abstract, and gave it his own independent interpretation, especially in his later sculpture series from the 80's onwards.

The 70's – Clinging to the Narrative

In the early 70's Gerstein returned to Israel, where the spirit of Minimalism and Conceptualism had started to reign over the local art scene, almost bypassing the Pop revolution in the full American or European sense. These did have both an important and fascinating influence on the work of artists like Igal Tumarkin, Henry Shelesnyak, Raffi Lavie, Yair Garbouz and Zvi Tolkovsky, but ultimately was channeled into the hands of conceptualism and Protest art. Gerstein: "When I returned from New York I was still very young. I immediately began teaching at Bezalel and I had to make a crucial decision for myself as an artist: should I turn to what is popular and accepted, meaning the minimalist or conceptual approaches, or go my own way and be less popular, for the moment at least."

He settled in Jerusalem and began teaching at Bezalel. He was fascinated by the city and could not get enough of painting its urban landscapes. He focused on Jerusalemite figures in groups and alone and created stylized portraits and architectural interiors: "when I returned to Jerusalem. I was drawn to the city and to the work of Avraham Ofek."

Dr. Gideon Ofrat, the art historian and researcher, devoted special attention to the substantial differences between the two art scenes of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, which, in spite of the small distance between the two cities have always represented two worlds apart. Even the reaction to the same



international approaches, especially American Pop and Minimalism, took very different directions and interpretations among Tel Aviv and Jerusalem artists. And so he writes in the chapter "Two Cities with Two Epistemologies, 1970-1985", in *One Hundred Years of Art in Israel*: "During the late sixties there still existed a discernible artistic dichotomy between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv; especially, between myth-related art and essentially anti-mythical art [...] Many articles by art and literature critics... depicted Jerusalem as a romantic city that takes notion to a near metaphysical extreme, with Tel Aviv portrayed as prosaic and ironical." (p. 257-258). Even the approach of conceptual artists in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv was different and stemmed from diverse cultural approaches. (Ofrat: 266-268).

Indeed, when Gerstein first arrived in Jerusalem, starting his art studies at Bezalel School of Art (since the mid 70's, The Bezalel Academy for Art and Design), he was immediately drawn to the contrasting beauty and allure of the city – so different from that of Tel Aviv – and began to paint themes which are connected to and rise from its unique and forceful ambiance. At that time, his realistic style had touches of naïve and primitive painting, and he made many paintings of the city's landscapes, especially its outskirts of hills, cypresses and olive trees or indoor ambiances of old stone houses. Observing his landscape paintings from this period, one finds a fascinating connection to the works of his seniors like Ofek, Bezem, Marcel Janco and others in the geometric-cubist partitions, in the usage of symbolic images which are submerged in the scenery and in the monochromatic-brownish palette.

The more "popular" path in Israeli art at the time was the conceptual and/ or minimalist one, partly because of New York Art scene influence, and partly but more importantly because of the growing need to make political-social art which would respond to the reality in Israel and not ignore it or idealize it. It was significant to Gerstein to deal with his own biography,

with his own story, and to do it his own way. He was a narrative-figurative painter with a local orientation and in this sense an outsider, very much like Avraham Ofek, whose circle Gerstein followed. Whatever the criticism had been and there has



been, even in the more primal stages of his career as an artist, he has been consistent in following his integrity as an artist, openly insisting on avoiding dealing with political subjects while clinging to the human and to the mundane.

The connection between Gerstein Ofek, figurative art and Jerusalem is presented most poignantly in Breitberg-Semel's "Figurative with no excuses", an article on Gerstein's exhibition at the Artists' House in Jerusalem in 1972: "Jerusalem is the only place in the country where one can find figurative artists who don't excuse figurative painting with surrealistic motives, and who reach very impressive achievements. These artists cling to the human portrait, while ignoring abstract, which celebrates its victory, and describe human conditions and experiences through men and women.... I refer mainly to Ivan Schwebel and to Avraham Ofek, to whom has

lately joined young David Gerstein. ...Gerstein, a young artist whose works we have started to see in galleries in the last two years, presents a mature exhibition which shows a technical knowledge of transmitting experiences and world-views in an interesting way." (Davar Newspaper)

Just two years after settling in Jerusalem in 1971 and starting to teach at Bezalel Academy as a senior lecturer, Gerstein took yet another break and left for London for two years of post-graduate studies at St. Martin's School of Art. While in London, he did mainly etchings that summarized his preoccupation with Mexican painting. He was especially influenced by the work of the Mexican artist Jose Luis Cuevas. Cuevas, a self-taught artist and master printer played a pivotal role in Latin America's drawing and printmaking renaissance of the sixties and seventies. He is also associated with Latin America's neo-figurative movement, along with artists such as Fernando Botero and Antonio Segui. Cuevas has said that his drawing represents the solitude and isolation of contemporary man and man's inability to communicate. It is for this reason that he often distorts and transforms the human figure. This sensation of solitude and human reclusion can be found in all Gerstein's works from that period, till the very late 70's. Its peak reflected in the "Balconies" series.

The "Balconies" include a large number of introspective oil paintings, etchings and drawings. The series was first exhibited in August 1980 at the Horace Richter Gallery in Old Jaffa, both as a memory of his childhood and as homage to Tel Aviv, presenting a culmination of his work created during the 70's. Characterized by a monochromatic palette of colors, the paintings in the series are populated by dramatic, almost theatrical, intimate scenes taking place inside urban apartments and viewed from their balconies. The light, the shades, and the architectural style – all play a part in those early, semi-realistic paintings. In more than one way, Gerstein's early staging and treatment of the characters that predominate his works during the 70's brings to mind the world of the Israeli playwright Hanneh Levin.

The sardonic atmosphere of the series is most poignant and absurd. Yona Fischer, one of the most prominent Israeli art curators wrote in the introduction to the catalogue that followed the exhibition: "Three stories, balcony facing balcony.

House no.1 relaxes in the shade of house no.2 which is exposed to the sun. They are all each other's neighbors; all well barricaded one against another. Everyone, with passive curiosity, spies on everyone else, a frozen expression between naps, a glance that never meets a glance...From his hiding place behind a window, he stares directly at, above or beneath the balcony opposite, stopping to record, as with camera's click, both horizons of the railing, the boundary between the revealed and the hidden, between the outside and in, between the street and darkened apartment. The marking of a strange living space, a kind of tiny, serene zoological botanical cage."

As emphasized earlier, Gerstein made a point of drawing upon scenes from his childhood in the city and from places like the Dead Sea, where he explored biographical themes and formal aesthetic notions such as light and color. This preoccupation would receive a much more central place in his later work. Many of the early realistic paintings, especially the ones depicting scenes of the Dead Sea, stem directly from his vacation trips with his parents. Another unique feature of the series is the use of watercolors. He adopted watercolor as his main means of expression during this period after using them in sketches for oil paintings. He was entirely captivated by the transparency and immediacy of the technique which makes a formative contrast to the intense content of the paintings. The voyages to the Dead Sea were to him part of a fascinating reclusive stage-like world of the grown-ups, the Jewish-Polish



generation of holocaust survivors. In these works, he portrays the very specific life style then and the small grotesque and sarcastic interactions between people against the surreal or apocalyptic backdrop of the Dead Sea: "It was a closed world which fascinated me as a child and later as a mature artist recollecting his childhood memories."

Levin constantly criticized Israeli society and its mainstream ideology while simultaneously confronting the basic human and existential issues of life and death (" the Labor of Life", Selected plays, /Translated by Barbara Harshav, Introduction by Freddie Rokem, Stanford University Press, 2003). Levin's characters are extreme in their loneliness, in their mediocrity, in their dead-end situations. In paintings such as 5559_12582 or 5559_12587, which are part of the Dead Sea paintings, a middle-aged couple is shown in each: the woman is in the foreground and the man is in the background, almost unseen, either on his back in the oily water of the Dead Sea or with his head peeping out from far away. The woman's look is desperate, motionless like the scenery behind them. In 12582 The woman at the forefront of the painting, who has a somewhat grotesque or over stressed wifely appearance, gazes puzzled at the spectators or at the painted characters while her expression is numb and lifeless. In the back, in the fading water, is the almost disappeared figure of an elderly man – her husband. The use of fields of a monochromatic bright palette creates an atmosphere of haziness and stress.

Gerstein himself refers constantly to Levin when thinking about this period. The curator Nomi Aviv, in her various articles on Gerstein's works, emphasizes time and again the connection between the Gersteinian world and the world of Hanocho Levin "Of the people in Gerstein's sculpture it can be said that 'they walk in the light' as opposed to Hanocho Levin's figures which "walk in darkness'. (Nomi Aviv, 2003, "David Gerstein works public space". p.36). The mention of Levin in connection with Gerstein, and his caricature like images, is not new. A Gersteinian 'walker ' 'walks as part of a universal

plan that cannot be revealed' to quote Levin.

Revolving doors – An Artist and a Critic

The Israeli art scene of the 70's and 80's was dominated by Minimalism, Conceptualism and Action Concept, as well as by the Italian Arte Povera, all reaching their peak in the exhibition "The Want of Matter" curated by Sara Breitberg-Semel



at the Tel-Aviv Museum in 1986. Other, more expressive and especially "figurative" or "narrative" artistic voices were mostly at the margins of the artistic discourse. In 1984 a new art group was formed. Its name was Radius and it brought together artists from both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Among its members were Zvi Tolkovsky, David Ben Shaul, Tova Berlinsky, John Bayle, Pinchas Eshet and David Gerstein. Its aim was to create a framework of identity and exhibition for artists who insisted on making figurative and realistic paintings. The group was active for three years and exhibited at a space in the Dizengoff Center Shopping Mall in Tel Aviv. "We believed in painting that deals with local subjects, with

Israeli and historical themes, with the Israeli light. It had a local connection unlike the conceptual art, which tried to runaway from the local and was at the time completely taken after things that were done in New York... We did not think we were wonderful, but we tried to figure out what is more right, and we believed that art should produce an object and not adocumentation of something that goes on in the artist's head. I didn't feel I'm defending conservative views, and that

there was a new painting and we were looking for the past. I had my own contemporary models among them Hockney, Jim Daal, and Pop Art. I believed in an art which is an object not a text." ("Last Tango in Paris", by Yuval Zohar, *Jerusalem*, 16/2/2001)

The group served its aim by making a statement in the local art world, even if it meant a mostly antagonistic and critical one. Although it broke up fairly quickly and did not heed to a rigid ideology, it managed to stir up a short debate: Raffie Lavie, one of the 70's and 80's most influential figures in the Israeli Art scene, an artist, a teacher and an art-critique, wrote a harsh negative column on the group's activity and approach to art. Gerstein, in return, wrote several letters to the Kol Ha'ir editors criticizing the art critics' endorsement of a singular artistic pervasive credo. The Jerusalem Kol Ha'ir, along with its Tel Aviv twin – Ha'ir, were local newspapers, young daring and influential. Both newspapers dedicated a considerable number of columns to culture and art. The editor of the Kol Ha'ir newspaper at the time, Yossi Klein, found Gerstein's letters unusually well written and interesting. He approached Gerstein and offered he write his own art column, as a critic. At first Gerstein felt reluctant to accept the offer since it meant criticizing his fellow artists. However, his initial assignment was writing about the unique Ingres exhibition at the Israel museum. This presented a tempting opportunity with no foreseen consequences or upheavals in the local art scene. He started writing and continued for the next year and a half with growing popularity. As a critic, he made his own voice heard – a voice which was very much contrary to the predominant trends. He supported and encouraged the more narrative and representational artists like Yosef Hirsch.

Writing became more and more demanding and time consuming, and Gerstein decided to quit. Yet it did not take long till he was invited to write again, this time by Adam Baruch, the editor of Yedioth Aharonot. Baruch was a prominent figure in

journalism and in art writing at the time. He entirely adhered to Conceptual art, and still appreciated Gerstein's stance as an art critic who favors a fundamentally different kind of art. Gerstein wrote in Yedioth Aharonot about the local scene while Baruch himself wrote about the New York art scene.

He gave his resignation after a year, not before recommending Itamar Levi, a psychologist and an art connoisseur, as his replacement. Here are the last lines of Gerstein's final column on the exhibitions of George Segal and Alwares Bravo at the Israel Museum, which illustrate his identifiable sense of wit and observance: "This note ends for me the chapter of surveying exhibitions in Jerusalem. The problem of the artist as a critic came up several times this year. It will certainly be the subject of a discussion in another forum."

The next time Gerstein wrote again was in the very beginning of the 90's. Once again, he was driven by the feeling that art criticism in the daily newspapers favored certain trends and discriminated against others. He approached the editor of Kol Ha'ir, Doron Galezer and suggested creating an exhibition space in the newspaper. His column was called "The Couch Museum". The name "Couch Museum" expressed the laid back, good humored, free approach of Gerstein as an art critic, which is not without irony and cynicism. Gerstein would ask an artist for images and sometimes even a text and present the images as the center.



Gerstein: "Looking back at I was always interested in exorcising the demons by being on the other side and I was always

interested in the dynamics of the art world." In his writing, he concentrated on the ability of the art critic to advance and encourage artists whose work he valued.

Simultaneously, he immersed himself in yet another area of activity, that of book illustration. The lightness of his line, the sensibility of his water colors and the permanent funny component of his figures and compositions paved his success in the field. His first book was "Siamina and the Cats of Yemin Moshe" written by Uri Orlev, who approached him and asked him to create illustrations. In 1979 he received the Israel Museum's Ben Yitzhak Award for the Illustration of a Children's Book for this work. Since then he has illustrated twelve children's books. Even so, he was yet to return to painting and to discover sculpting.

It All Begins with Drawing in Space

Picasso, the great Modernist father, is by far the greatest Artistic influence on David Gerstein. David Gerstein does not stand alone in this. Picasso influenced almost every artist in the twentieth century, European and American alike, both Abstract Expressionists and Pop artists, in his Neoclassical-like sculptural paintings and drawings, as well as in his cubist deconstruction and super-imposition. He influenced those who wished to deal with the human figure as their major referential subject matter as well as those who wanted to deal with form: "Picasso was the great modern fountain" (De Kooning, p.108)

In the late 1980's, beginning of the 1990's, Gerstein's personal orientation started to shift from embracing localism

towards more universal themes. His heroes changed gradually and so had international art. German Neo-Expressionism signified a return to painting. Conceptualism was slowly changing face into installation and video, while Minimalism such as Frank Stella's became more color and movement oriented. Gerstein witnessed this change first-hand during his visit to the large-scale retrospective of Stella at MoMA in New York in 1987, and was thoroughly moved and inspired by this.

Stella, one of the fathers of Minimalism in the United States, shifted dramatically from his innovative minimalist and geometrical language in the early 1960's, to dynamic wall painting constructions in the 1980's, in which he used bright colors with lively brush strokes. "Stella plays with a cartoonist representation of geometric depth that is as much conceptual as perceptual". More intriguing is Stella's range. While his earlier style is avowedly limited to flat perceptual geometries, it is strikingly different from his later work that is designed to invoke an interplay of three-dimensional depth structures, while the stylized shading cues simultaneously insist that it is simply a draftsman's illusion. Stella further includes components that physically protrude into the

viewer's space. These architectural elements demonstrate Stella's interest in expanding the exploration of the third dimension. (The Concept of Space in Twentieth Century Art, Christopher W. Tyler and Amy lone, p. 7.).



Gerstein began developing his own sculptural-pictorial language in the 1980's. When exhibiting the "Balconies", Richter, the owner of the gallery and an old friend of Gerstein, teased and reproached him that his paintings are too gloomy and morbid and his colors are too somber. As he left, the words infiltrated his mind: "Why not change everything, why not challenge his own convictions and habits".

It is a distinct characteristic of Gerstein to continually reassess himself, challenge his art and pay attention not to feel too comfortable, too at ease, almost religiously abstaining from stagnation. The major substantial shift was his move from painting to three-dimensional sculpture. At this time Israel was experiencing an economic boom, capitalism in its most relentless form had reached Israeli society, giving rise to the swift establishment of a nouveau riche class, to an increasing gap between social classes, and to the reign of consumer society and popular culture. It was then that Gerstein returned to the studio, this time as a sculptor.

He began playing with three-dimensional sculptures that retained their two dimensional features. As in the paintings, he started with family depictions, couples scenes, still-life and local landscapes. They were one of a kind, handmade sculptures created out of plywood and cardboard painted with colored pencils: "I decided I must make a change in my art. In the beginning of the 80's I started with the idea of cutouts made of cardboard and aluminum. Everything stood still and I sold nothing. The thoughts that I might be making a critical mistake did not leave me for a moment, especially because the response of family and friends to the change in my art. But I had a good feeling in the sense that I was glad to get up in the morning and go to the studio to make cut-out sculptures. I felt less happy when I went to paint. So between 1980 to 1987 I made half a year cutouts and in the other half, I painted." His cutouts were populated by human figures and as well



as still-life images, which soon received Gerstein's recognizable and distinguishable goofy-sad-innocent typecasting. He carved the pieces of the image, then glued them in layers and then painted. Gradually he distanced the layers, so that their overlap would happen in space, while the layers became slowly more modular. He investigated texture and color, by using various found and industrial materials and by making monochromatic expressionist reliefs. He broke up the flat surface of the canvas and made layers of still-lives and landscapes. His palette was still dark, expressionist and sinister.

"**M** Descending the Stairs" (figure Ko655), created in 1987, is a wonderful example of the power and playfulness of this period of transition in his work: The figure is both raw and stylized. It is one man or maybe more, in movement, standing in one place or moving in space, its face or multi-facets, its limbs or multi

limbs, present, in many ways the very essence of the Gersteinian figure – long, goofy, nervous man, always in frenetic motion. At the same time it is, of course, a tribute and a parody to Duchamp's "Nude Descending the Stairs." In 1985 he decided to take his sculptures and paintings and show them in New York. There, in contrast to Israel at the time, painting was making a fabulous comeback. Gerstein was enchanted and encouraged. He divided his time in New York between gallery visits and working on a series of cutouts of colorful cats, which were received enthusiastically by one New Yorker artists' agent. Requests were coming in and Gerstein, who meanwhile had returned to Israel, started to work on a series of cats – still one of a kind – which paid homage, in their style of coloring, to various modernist artists like Van Gogh and Picasso.

Following the cats' cutouts, the curator Ayala Gordon approached him and offered him a solo-exhibition at the Youth Wing in the Israel Museum that same year. At first he did not know whether to accept the offer, since he did not want to be associated with children's art. But once he agreed, the exhibition, turned into a large show including his latest wood relieves, cardboard and aluminum sculptures. The exhibition was called "From Dudu to 3-D" and in the publicity ads "M Descending the Stairs" in its aluminum version appeared. Gerstein, in his serious-humorous style wrote in the "artist-class" column in Maariv newspaper: "To Mr. Du (two in Hebrew) dimension and Mrs. Tlat (three in Hebrew) dimension a new baby was born in 1982 and his name is "Du-Du Dimension". "Du-Du Dimension" was created as a possible solution to my search for means of translating my painting into sculpture without losing my identity as a painter. Two two-dimensional planes standing vertical one to each other permit the preservation, on the one hand, of the painterly colorfulness and textural quality, and on the other hand, of the spatial depth that endows the object its sculptural qualities..."

The exhibition was very successful and placed Gerstein and his new style at the center of public attention. It presented the evolution of his sculpture cutouts from cardboard planes to aluminum sculptures, from their surfaces painted first with water-colors or colorful pencils and then painted with superlac colors on a rough surface of color mixed with sand, which blurs the colors' clearness, giving the sculptures a monochromatic appearance (later, in the 90's, he would concentrate on smooth and bold acrylics). The subjects of the sculptures were straightforward: mundane objects and images such as vases and cats, in addition to paraphrases of well known works of art: "Dudu Dimension is a wild one who teases the history of art in a consciously mischievous manner. He dresses-up like stylized art cats (Miro, Bottero, Chagall), he runs

down the stairs like the young Marcel Duchamp, or jumps into a pool with Hockney-like white splashes. In spite of his outwardly light nature and the irony that characterizes him, DuDu-Dimension bares a core of serious thought" (Maariv, 13/03/87).

In the series that immediately followed, "Frames", "Totems" and "Eyeballs", he deconstructed different geometric forms as part of a partially serious and partially humorous interplay between the figurative and the abstract. While doing so, he played with the history of Western art and with his own position as an artist. Gerstein pointed the viewers towards the various planes of verisimilitude, originality and self-expression. In the "Frames", exhibited at the Haifa Museum of Art (1989), he took painting frames as his sculptural subject matter, while leaving the painting space itself - a void. In "Totems", exhibited at the Herzelia Museum, he placed seven pillars made of wood painted with acrylic and sand, which hinted at both primitive art and the western art, which made use of primitivism. In the "Eyeballs" of 1993, Gerstein continued to play with the complex stance of the artist, this time from an autobiographical point of view. He had been introduced to an occult way of diagnosing physical ailments through one's eyeballs. The works were made of many layers of plywood, each layer alluding to different styles and different motifs which preoccupied him, thus commentating on the relation between the spectator and the artist,



the gaze of the spectator and the inward perception of the artist himself.

Gerstein shifted slowly from creating wood and cardboard sculptures by hand to steel and laser cut works. It happened by chance, as he was invited, in 1995 to make a souvenir object for an ethnographic exhibition at the Israel Museum. He investigated the possibility of using laser cut and from then onwards he began working with this technology continuously. It was then, in the mid 90's, that he started to produce sculptures in large series, hand-painted and sometimes screen-printed. His monochromatic palette transformed, embracing much more radiant, bold and splashy colors. His themes became universally oriented, depicting human activities in a playful, joyful, sometimes ironic, but always vibrant manner.

Today, the image is first drawn by Gerstein on paper. It is then translated into the computer which, in turn, becomes the program for the laser cutting of the steel. Although the usage of a technologically advanced procedure, the hardcore of Gerstein's work has remained the drawing process as is his joy of working with pencils, watercolors and charcoal. It is the endless, obsessive drawing that spawns the creative process. The strong presence of the drawing preserves the spontaneity, the automatic element and child-like spirit of the works, even when produced in heavy metal. These bring to mind Elizabeth Murray's playful assemblages of color and shapes. In other instances, like in "Splash"(1998), his handwriting echoes the cold, detached line and color-drenched palette of David Hockney. Hockney, whose work in the 1960's was referred to, by some critics, as illustrative, said in response: "In the mid-60's, many people thought art has nothing whatsoever to do with illustration, and often if you used the word it was as a "put-down". Yet I knew perfectly well that many great things are illustrative. Rembrandt's Bible Illustrations, for example. Hogarth was, of course, a great illustrator. What about Bruegel, Goya and Daumier? I deliberately annoyed many people by insisting that a lot of great art

is illustration." (p.17, Hockney Paints the Stage, Martin Friedman, Walker Art Center Minneapolis Abbeville Press Publishers New York, 1980).

Gerstein's colors and shapes radiate a Popish sense of liberation, euphoria and joie de vivre in search of the nature of the masses, of the collective self, if one exists. In this sense they are reminiscent of large scale cinematic scenes in films of the 70's by Milos Forman and Robert Altman. He looks for the energy of form and matter. His work is not openly critical, but it never lacks irony or humor, which stems from the very use of mass-culture elements, as well as other materials characteristic of Pop Art such as cartoons, comics, and reproducible popular images. The naivety of the figures and the compositions seem at times at odds with the peculiar twisted positions of the bodies, as well as with the sensation of suffocation reflected in the works. Gerstein: "I know that people think I intend to be humorous or funny, but this is not my intention at all. It comes out of the works but it is not a premeditated idea. At the same time, I draw upon the reality around me all the time."



The works depart from the subjective towards a collective self in a subtle manner, especially in pieces from 2002 like "Do Man", "Horizontal Couple", "U-Man", "Birds Man" and "Egg Man, where the line between innocence and experience

changes suddenly, flickering : "Pretty, pretty robin!/ Under leaves so green/ A happy blossom/ Hears you sobbing, sobbing./ Pretty pretty robin!/ Near my bosom. (William Blake, The Blossom, Songs of Innocence).

Impressionism on Steel

When Marcel Duchamp wanted to shock the art world in 1913, he created the ready made "A Bicycle Wheel on a stool", which is an everyday object in a comic and carnivalistic presentation, yet at the end of the day it is a found-object. Gerstein's first cut-out was out of cardboard, the figure of women riding bicycles (4567), echoing one of the first memories of his mother. The early choice of an image of a bicycle points to the overflowing interest in colors and movement in open spaces which would predominant his much later works, among them many are conceived around the image of bicycles and bicycles riders. Thus, bicycles have become an intrinsic part of Gerstein's "imagery bank" to the point that one can discuss "Gersteinian" bicycles alongside the Gersteinian figure. The bicycles and the figure are one – either strung and tuned, or competitive and sportive or relaxed, comfortable and loose.

By using handmade brushes and repetitive vertical hand gestures, Gerstein captures the physical sensation of the eye perceiving the world, the light and the motion around us. He does this in an impressionist style, repeating the same scene time and again. However, instead of oil paint on stretched canvas, he uses epoxy car-paints on hard and cold steel, usually in several layers.

Through intensive drawing which precedes each work he conjures up images of figures, of still-life composition, of urban landscapes, all of which are connected to modern life, especially resonating the rush and pulse/buzz felt in the big city.

The high speed and movement felt by the multiplicity of lives inhabiting the metropolis is a major modern theme that fascinated artists throughout the 20th century – painters, sculptors, video artists and performance artists alike tried to capture the pulse of hectic activity and an alienated environment. Ferdinand Leger wrote: "The [city] is free "full in its truthness", see the drama of the epos figures who are usually called the inventor, the artist, the poet... Life of fragments: a



red angle, an eye, a mouth, The flexible game of complimentary colors which transform the object into another reality...". One of Gerstein's evident inspirations in regards to modern urban life, is the American artist Red Grooms, who makes constructions made of sculpture and painting. Grooms depict the sensations of pressure and franticness of the individual living in the midst of a constantly-on-the-move alienated mass. In wall sculptures such as "Rush Hour" (2004), "Street Scene" (1996), "Monument for the 20th Century" (2000) or "Metropolis" (2004), he creates a restless mob while continuing to maintain individual innocent characteristics.

Gerstein is a post-modernist in the literal sense of the word: An artist who lives and creates at the beginning of the 21st century, using the most advanced techniques, who constantly looks back, remembers, pays tributes to and is inspired by the modern art of the beginning of the 20's: Matisse's linear fashion of forming a figure

and his use of radiant complementary colors; Giacomo Balla's Futuristic dismantling of the picture-surface into facet-like fragments in order to capture and perceive the rhythm; Raul Hausmann's Dadaist spirit of spontaneity depicted in his

collages of modern life and technology. Gerstein takes all this in and generates a flow of crystal-clear images he hand-paints on steel. Some are extremely simple and deprived, at first glance, of a specific context like a still-life of an open window with a plate with lemons or flowers in a vase, which could be anywhere. Yet, on second consideration, one notices they hold unique modest local Israeli nuances as in "Table with Cactus" (2003) in which a Mediterranean scene is portrayed with a few light captivating lines or rather by a few cuts in hard steel, and then a small twist – instead of a blossoming flower like in a painting by Raul Dufy, the cactus plant appears, which is very Middle Eastern and symbolic of the reality in Israel, or the cypresses that are typical to Jerusalem's landscape. Other compositions play along with the opposite sensation, that of abundant, chaotic, nervous and constantly in movement Post-Modernist mass-culture and way of life. However, this is done in an overt Modernist freedom of perception, color and form. Thus, he both adheres to aesthetic visual elements and relates to the general condition of man.

As a successor of the Modernist spirit and its incarnation in Pop Art, Gerstein is influenced by the search for breaking down the borders between different forms of expression like visual art, music and poetry, while disengaging from the subjective self and subjective interpretation. He repeatedly translates rhythm and music into abstract strokes and forms, deals with the limits of painting and the way we perceive reality.

He elaborates on bridging the gap between the figurative, now already identified with his own characteristics, and the free form/ free line by using pure abstract notions such as music and rhythm. He constantly experiments with the notion of form through the use of duplications and mirroring. Never taking anything for granted, he wishes to break the rigidity of the geometric form of the canvas.

In "No Favorite Color" (2002), a street installation, he confronts the act of painting itself and creates a Dada-like celebration of creativity and of the autonomy of art, using half-human color-tubes, with hands, legs and bodies, and paint in bold colors pouring out, all dancing feverishly to unheard sounds. However, this festive mode reveals an additional aspect, one that is in some ways dark, manic and nightmarish, which gives the installation's presence the clear twist of something outside the conventional order of the events taking place underneath the innocent colorful pageant.

Gerstein tries to bring together the musical rhythm and the moving forms by creating a unique visual correlation, a new meeting place for two or more voices, Seine". This



a polyphony of color and line, as depicted in his series "Tango Sur series of paintings/semi-sculptures was conceived in Paris at an open door arena in the sculpture garden on the bank of the Seine, and later materialized in his Jerusalem studio (2001). The paintings depict the movement and rhythm, as well as the secluded, cut-of-from-the-world sensation of

couples dancing the tango. They are created in a fashion similar to the steel wall sculptures, in brisk multi-colored brush strokes that simultaneously form the representation and break it up. Some of the paintings are combined with monochromatic boldly colored plates of wood and a hectic abstract linear jotted shape which is meant to reverberate and strengthen the notion of movement, as if creating a parallel pictorial handwriting to the music. The result is a constant dialogue between abstract and figurative approaches.

Gerstein made this series while staying at the Cite Studios the summer of 2000. It is interesting to compare this series to another one conceived in Paris in the early 90's, "The Car Series". Both sprang from a series of photographs. It is representational and realistic, much more than the tango series, at least at first glance. It traces the reflection of the city's trees and buildings on windowpanes while simultaneously depicting intimate scenes taking place in the interior of cars – all placed in a Parisian setting. The atmosphere is sober and contemplative, dealing with sensations of enclosure and alienation. At the same time, Gerstein is thoroughly engaged with perception in this work. He does this by tracing light, colors and forms as they are reflected in the windows of the car and influenced by its movement. However, in spite of the realistic approach, many of the situations are imaginative and deceiving – are the figures there or not? What are they doing? Is this about the nature of human relationships and about the power of the city and its influence on the people living in it?

Gerstein's most recent paintings bring together an abstract, colorful composition and figurative imagery that emerges out of flat, geometric lines and patches. The result in works like "Outside the City" (2005), "Landscape with Chair" (2005) or "Girl Friends" (2005) is a celebration of painting, both realist and abstract, which does not relinquish Gerstein's affiliation

with the local landscape.

Gerstein's sculptural protagonists are all in motion – walking, running, riding bicycles, driving cars, playing ball, skiing, dancing, – even his first wood sculptures like "M descending" and "The Modular Head". Never at rest, seldom introspective, they are always outwardly orientated, giving rise to a hectic, although unthreatening mode of being.



Gerstein wishes to trace the basic elements of form and the way these change as positive and negative, in depth and in perspective, as they transform in the interplay of two and three dimensional spaces, of light and color and the influence of motion on these ingredients as a whole. "I am not interested in sports in particular, as a personal fascination or a thematic engagement. What I try to study and what fascinates me are pure visual aesthetic motives, as when seeing a group of runners or bicycle

riders. I am immediately drawn to elements of volume and space created inside a group of people engaged in a sports activity. I try to trace and reenact the visual illusions which change constantly, even in a scientific mode."

Breath in, Breath out – Outdoor Sculptures

"I especially like working on outdoor sculptures since they force me to confront technical problems of a different nature. I must consider the location, the environment, the mode of living or working of people there, it's extremely challenging for me and this is very important to my continual evolvement as an artist". In the environmentally oriented sculpture "Things That Come from the Heart" (2000), figurative elements like the birds and the cactus plants are born out of popish cut-outs of human shapes in basic light colors standing in a row. The images are "basic" in their appearance, and this enables Gerstein to play with them in the open space as well as offer the same playfulness to passers-by. This series alludes unconsciously to Pop artist Jim Dine's "Two Big Black Hearts" made of bronze and placed in DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park. While Dine's hearts are intense and textural, Gerstein's are airy and flat.

Gerstein's outdoor sculptures can be found in public places all over Israel and abroad. They present a distinctive appeal: On the one hand, they are not reproducible like the large series of the wall sculptures, on the other hand, they reach the largest audience and so lead to a different perspective on the issue of the complex relations between original and copy in art. Furthermore, they emanate from the same motives that Gerstein uses in his wall-sculptures and small objects, but here these elements are assigned a larger-than-life scale that increases their poetic gesture and magic-like being. One of the most self-referential sculptures, of this kind, is "Ladder of Motives" (1994), placed at the Open Museum Tefen. In it one can find the entire span of images used by Gerstein such as the flower vase, the cactus, the cypresses, the walking figure, the donkey, the bird – all meeting each other in the most harmonious manner, facing one another in the open air – telling the story of his art work, its syntax and its natural growth out of the local landscape. The presence of an object in a public space is extremely vulnerable – it can be imposing and disturbing, or it can be decorative and playful – still it must be engaging.

Nomi Aviv begins her article accompanying the catalogue "David Gerstein: Works in Public Space" with the following significant observation: "Gerstein has changed the spirit of environmental sculpture in Israel. No more the enigmatic object which arouses a feeling of splendor and distance, but an accessible object, fresh and optimistic..."

To take this a little further, one of the most conspicuous qualities of the sculptures is their airiness, their lightness, the way they let the surroundings breathe-in and breathe-out through their metal skeleton. Thus, they find their way to the mind and soul of the passersby very subtly, by holding the simplest form or color and handing it to them, even if for a swift moment. Still, similar to the wall sculptures, Gerstein offers the viewers an ironic, sometimes critical aspect interwoven in the



work itself or in the way it contrasts with the location and stands out.

However, the irony is never imposing, and can be taken into consideration or left out – depending on the viewers' choice, as in the "Flowers Island" (1998) placed on a central avenue in the city of Herzelia, "Cow" (1998) placed in Ra'anana municipal park or the "Digital Cactus" (2002), which was presented in Haifa as part of an outdoor Mediterranean sculpture

project. The sculpture "Soul Bird" (2002), placed at a children's playground in the city of Holon, is about the resonance of the human soul, its vividness and contrasting, changing moods. The work contains both the literal and the symbolic sense of the story, and itself has the feel of a playground facility in the form of a big hollow yellow bird, ideal and serene, whose inside has windows populated by restless Gersteinian figures, dancing, running, searching in and out of their bodies. This tension keeps the viewer attentive and sensitive, allowing the sculpture to be a part of the viewer's daily world and thus part of his private imagery.

A Visual Magic Wand

Gerstein has a tremendous drive to paint. This drive makes him a ceaseless artist who constantly checks his limits and probes his tools. At the same time he wishes his art would fly on its own wings, letting it incarnate in sculptures, cutouts, designed objects, jewelry and on and on until eternity. He uses his visual magic wand of line, color and movement in a sumptuous manner. For this purpose, he vacillates between painting and sculpture and makes a deliberate reduction of figures and images. Indeed, he has never given up painting even in the midst of creating only sculptures but he examines the limits and nature of painting through sculpture by using time and again the same themes in many variations. His familiarity with the range of 20th century art is attested to in numerous examples of his work that incorporate Western Art's most celebrated themes and techniques. Simultaneously, the universal and timeless nature of his art today is nurtured continuously by the history of Israeli painting. It alludes to its imagery, moreover to the human landscapes of Israel through the decades.

Gerstein has always been motivated by a sense of adventure, even mischief. Often he came to conscious artistic

decisions, which brought him to make remarkable shifts and turns in his work. One such major shift was his turn to sculpture.

As a sculptor-painter, he invites the viewer to stroll along in a transparent and penetrable visual world of art, which gives itself over into the hands of the passer by. The secret rhythm, abundant colorfulness and the form in never seizing movement are realized through his individual virtuosic figurative syntax and his endless allusions to the history of Modern art. In his constant, outward repetition of motives, as well as in his serial productions of sculptural artifacts, he relinquishes the uniqueness of the work of art for the sake of spreading it out like seeds in the air. He invites the viewers to follow his steps, to endorse art and enjoy the visual experience once more, thus enjoy and endorse life itself: "Art interests more than reality. Other people are captured by thought on the work of God. I am connected to patches, colors, shapes. This is my obsession." (to add his solitary stance in Israeli art).

Gerstein has charted his own way, while constantly shifting positions and viewpoints – as an artist and a teacher but also as an appraised art-critic and as a successful mass-production designer. His evolving artistic choices and associations enable us to look at the unique path that he has taken in the Israeli art scene over the years, and the various phases and changes his art has witnessed.