

PROFILE



CAROL NOVIS

TSHIRTS and IDF uniforms aren't usually considered the raw material of art, but the latest works of Israeli artist Merav Shinn Ben-Alon, titled "Stitches," shows a startlingly evocative use of such prosaic garments.

Utilizing items of clothing as the medium itself, Merav "draws" with them; stretching, angling, positioning, so that a functional shirt, say, becomes a beautiful abstraction, which at the same time has something profound to say about the body that normally lies underneath. The result is impersonal and yet strangely erotic. It is revealing in both a literal and a figurative sense.

Merav created the art work by stretching, cutting and stretching the fabric over wood, then scanning the result to create an print 68 by 80 cm. Only three copies of each image were made.

"Stitches" is featured in the current issue of the arts journal *Helicon*, as part of a series titled *Private Territory* which provides a platform for a single artist to create a series of works specifically for that issue. To be chosen to be featured is quite a coup for a young artist like Merav, who in spite of her success is modest, thoughtful and unassuming.

It came about, she explains, after *Helicon Art* editor Timna Rosenheimer had used her work, much of which had focused on body parts such as breasts and navels, in another issue dealing with the body. Apparently impressed by what Merav had to say, "she gave me an open project. I would be given the space to do whatever I wanted, within the limitations of working in black and white. When I started to think very specifically about the space, I got the idea of using shirts and stretching them over a wooden frame."

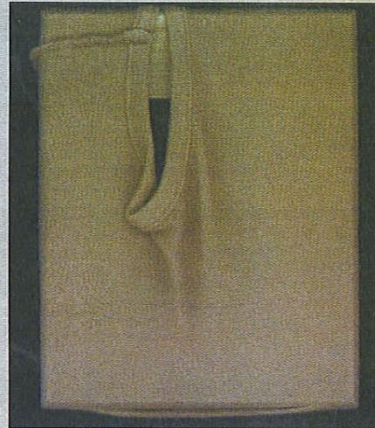
Why shirts? It appears to have something to do with their complexity of meaning: "For me, a shirt is alike in some ways to skin. You can see the inner part, the stitched part, which is the part that touches the body, as well as the outer part, which faces the world. Using shirts also becomes a way of talking about skin as canvas, since it's like a painter stretching canvas over a frame.

"Shirts are something we wear for the outside world, so that people see us in a certain way, but for me, they are also something very private too. There is a tactile element."

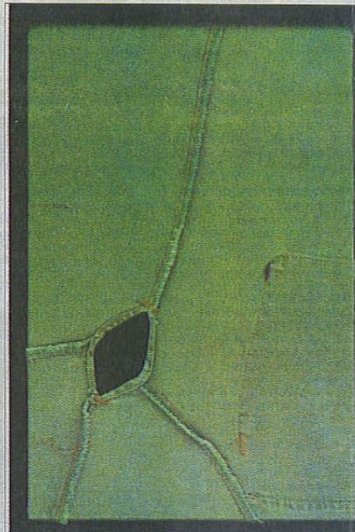
"When I started using my own shirts, I realized that I was trying to create an image that was related to the body, but that was also an abstraction. The image reminds you of the body in a different way. It's not a specific body part or organ, but it is a physical and not just a visual experience.



Israeli artist Merav Shinn Ben-Alon: "I think women have the power to touch things and be connected to themselves... These shirts are really saying that you don't have to go far to look for images or to conquer the world. This is something that is under your nose every day. It's part of you, and all you need to do is look at it in a different way."



DAVID GUTT



DAVID GUTT

An underarm ventilation hole in an army shirt becomes the focal point in this composition from Merav's series "Stitches"

"I was especially interested in the use of holes, as openings for heads and shoulders. The army shirt, for example, has a hole under the arm for ventilation, which looks very feminine, but is part of a very masculine garment. Also, the ink spot on the pocket of the uniform becomes part of the subject. I like that tension."

"STITCHES" the title of the series, has a very evocative meaning in itself. Not only does the word refer to the creative process

of sewing and mending, but it also evolves a world of "healing wounds, of scars."

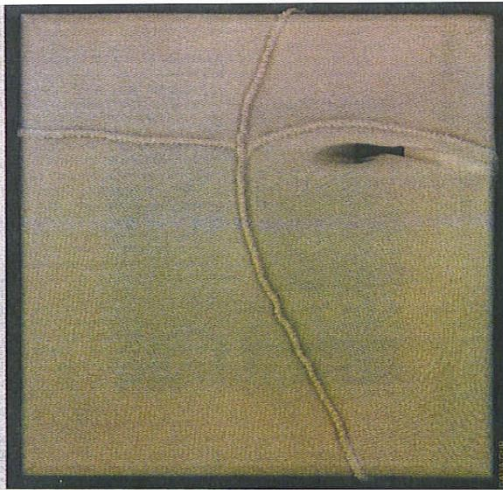
"You can see the stitches in the garments, but when the word is related to the body, it has a different sense. It is something 'reconnected,'" she explains. In addition, the use of two different colors of fabric in some works is significant because they remind Merav of "relationships, with stitches keeping it together."

The fact that she is a woman has played no small part in creating

this series: "I think women have the power to touch things and be connected to themselves. They are more fragile, with less skin and that's what makes them sensitive to things. These shirts are really saying that you don't have to go far to look for images or to conquer the world. This is something that is under your nose every day. It's part of you, and all you need to

do is look at it in a different way. I think that is a feminine way of looking at things, but maybe men will disagree, and that's fine."

BORN in TA, Merav recalls loving painting even as a child, though it was only in high school that she began to feel that she wanted to be an artist. After her IDF service, she attended the



Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, and graduated with honors in 1990, winning prizes along the way such as best student of the year in 1988, first prize winner of the Marie Fisher Foundation in 1990 and the Sharett Prize of the Helena Rubinstein Cultural Foundation in 1989.

"I had a great time at Bezalel. My direction was painting, and that was what I did for the next ten years. It wasn't until last year that I began flirting with photography, technology and writing. I'm opening myself up to new things and it's very exciting, like being a mute who can now speak."

After graduating, Merav went to New York, where she attended the New York Studio School, rented a studio in the West Village and began teaching and painting. "I met wonderful people, but in 1992, I came back because my mother was ill. She died a year later."

Back in TA, Merav began teaching, currently mainly visual thinking, at the TA Center for Design Studies and at Shenkar, something she feels is "part of what I was meant to do" in addition to painting. She has exhibited, among other places, at the Oranim Art Institute Gallery in TA, in the Art in White show at Sotheby's, at Ein Harod Museum of Art, the Ramat Gan Museum, as well as in New York and Copenhagen. In September, she will take part in an exhibition titled "Hands" at the Youth Wing of the Israel Museum.

LIKE a shirt in her art that represents both an outside, public face and an inside, private face, Merav is concerned about the private, as opposed to the public aspects of people's lives. For example, although she is married and has two children, aged seven and three, she chooses not to wear a wedding ring, so that people judge her on her own merits, rather than making initial judgments on the basis of their assumptions about her personal life.

"I sometimes have the feeling that if the first thing people know about me is that I have a family, they see me in a

different way," says Merav. "If you see my personal details on a resume, you might think you know who I am, but you don't."

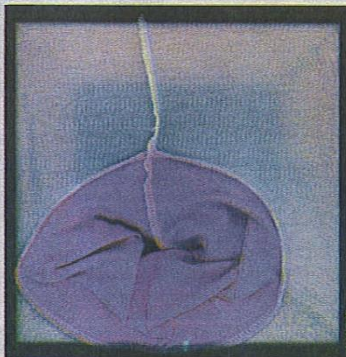
"A normal resume is a masculine way of presenting yourself, which doesn't mention things like having a child, taking a break for a year, putting your energy in another place. We don't allow ourselves to do that and I feel that this separation isn't good. I've written another resume on the walls of my studio which I call *kirot ha'im* (living walls), a pun on the Hebrew word for CV. It's a more whole, three-dimensional way of looking at my life."

"This is an issue I've discussed with my students, and one of the assignments I've given them is preparing a different kind of resume, which shows what they are and how they want to present themselves."

ALTHOUGH Merav loved New York, TA is her home, and she feels herself very much an Israeli, with TA as the center of her world.

She lives with her family in the same apartment in which her grandmother once lived, something she relishes for its history and continuity.

"I like things around me to have a history. I like old things that have been around, that tell me something. In Israel, I feel we don't give this aspect enough importance. I wish there were more respect for our short traditions, whatever they are."



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