

## Was Mr. McGuire wrong?

Beverly Barkat's aquarium exhibition raises questions about plastics



MARC ISRAEL SELLEM

Beverly Barkat and her Earth Poetica exhibition at the Gottesman Family Israel Aquarium in Jerusalem.

### By Mordechai Beck

**IN THE** iconic film, *The Graduate*, Benjamin the young hero is earmarked by one of his parents' friends, a Mr. McGuire, who tells the recent graduate, still looking for a meaningful project to pursue in his life, that "Plastics are the future!" In the fifty or so years since the film, Mr. McGuire's prediction has come true, perhaps

too true. Plastic has become an all-important element in our modern world, so much so that it threatens to overcome our environment with disastrous effects. From helping us cover our foodstuffs, as well as all and sundry parcels, it now threatens to choke us, and not only us but also the physical environment around us, including that of the animal kingdom.

Some three years ago, Beverly Barkat, a multifaceted Israeli artist, saw a documentary film about young children on a beach collecting bits of plastic which they would sell afterwards.

"That image said to me: 'Is this how we are bringing up

our children? Is this what I am teaching my children? Is this our inheritance?'"

The image resonated with her for a number of reasons: "I thought about South Africa where I was born and brought up. In my childhood, before making aliyah, we used to go for our holidays to Cape Town. On the beach I would walk around collecting shells. This now connected to my image of these children collecting plastic. Except that their shores were covered with plastic waste."

From the inner dialogue that burgeoned within herself by this worrisome juxtaposition, Barkat decided that she had to make an art work

about plastic waste.

As it so happened at that time Barkat was hosting in her studio Lisa Silberstein, who helps run the World Trade Center. “She looked around at my work and said: ‘I would love a piece of your art in the lobby of the World Trade Center.’ So when I was next in New York, I went and looked at the building and thought I want something site-specific. Then I thought that if there is going to be a work of art in the World Trade Center it needs to be something with a message. It would be put there to create change. I’m not an activist artist. I don’t go out and shout: ‘You or I must make change!’ The world needs to say what needs to be done. I began to think how I could fill the space I was to put the work in. The image that was percolating in my mind was something large enough that people could see it as something which could not be ignored.

“After having been to the WTC, I returned to Israel and started working with materials in my studio. I collected plastic waste and divided it into transparent and opaque plastics, colorful plastics, and bottles which are harder. That was my pallet, that is what I was ‘painting’ with.”

Working with unusual materials or in large formats was nothing new for Barkat. Indeed her artistic works up to this point showed a considerable flare for innovative techniques as well as subject matter.

Barkat was the daughter of two artists who had the largest school of ceramics in South Africa. In order to see her parents more, she would go to the studio and work with them.

“Though my mother tongue is English, the language that I use is sculpting with my hands. I remember at the age of eight going to see my parents as they were giving lessons in the studio. My mother said to me: ‘See the man trying to throw a bowl on the wheel, go and help him. Just try to center the bowl.’ So my exposure to art started at a very early age.

“We moved to Israel in 1976, when the Bezalel School of Art offered my parents jobs. When we came my father took up a position at Bezalel and my mother opened a studio in the Old City. I grew up constantly with art and with artists. After the army I went and studied jewelry design at Bezalel. That was the first time I thought to myself that I would like to be in the art world. Up to then, I had just witnessed the very hard, impossible life of the artist. It seemed so grueling and difficult and I said to myself: ‘No way, this is not for me.’

“But I guess my genes pushed me into the field of work that I am passionate



MARC ISRAEL SELLEM

Barkat shows her Earth Poetica creation made from recycled fishing nets.

about. I learned metal work, and architectural projects and then traveled to the Czech Republic and blew glass. Back in Israel I studied oil painting and drawing with charcoal and pencil for three years at Israel Hershberg’s Jerusalem Studio School. When I finished all this I had the feeling that I knew enough about myself to take all the methods I had learned in order to become the artist that I was looking to become. Even then I couldn’t say that I was an ‘artist,’ because being an artist was still so big a concept. I was still in the process of looking and learning.

“I rented a studio for three years in Rehov Agrippas, in the middle of Jerusalem. I worked with a model and I would draw and paint him. Simultaneously I would go out and paint horses. Why horses? I was attracted to their muscularity, their masculinity, their constant movement. I wanted to capture that sense in my painting and drawing. That was the way I began to find my own voice.

“I began exhibiting. In Venice I exhibited in the Museum Pilazzo during their 2017 Biennale. The Israeli ambassador for Italy came to Venice and saw my work. He suggested that I produce something for the 70th year’s celebration of Israel’s Independence Day. I went to Rome to look at the embassy. Looking at the space, I decided on a site-specific work. I wanted a work that spoke to the site and took the environment into consideration. What I did was ‘After the Tribes.’ The idea was to show where we, as Israelis, had come from and to ask where we are going in the future. Each tribe is described individually in the Bible. So I went around Israel and collected stones, shells or soil from each area designated by the Bible as a

tribal territory. I brought my finds to the studio, and ground them down, like artists used to do to make their oil paints. I then painted for each tribe a site-specific piece in the framework of the high priest’s breast plate. In its final form it is a two dimensional sculpture whose colored discs can be viewed on both sides. After the exhibit I sold it to a collector who is waiting to put it in a museum in Israel.”

Back in Jerusalem, Barkat began her Earth Poetica project.

“As I mentioned before, it felt that I was painting with plastic. I was not just putting plastic inside a shape to create something beautiful. I took each piece of plastic and deconstructed it. If you look closer you can see how I have used the plastic in different ways. Sometimes I slice it thinly, or into squares, sometimes it’s a question of different colors coming together, such as a red and a yellow which when put on top of each other give you orange. All of these are ways that I use the materials to put in to the work itself. This is my palette. If I have white for the north pole and white on the south pole, both are ways of expressing snow, but each have to be read differently, even with the same colors.”

Initially Barkat began collecting her own plastic waste. Then corona broke out and she found that friends and family in Israel started to collect plastic waste and bringing it to her. Then people in the art world or friends of friends, who heard about the project, started sending her boxes of plastic. She had plenty but occasionally found that that she needed a specific type of plastic that she couldn’t lay hands on. Her daughter, for example, went to Barcelona and collected a specific plastic that she needed. She also received from Australia soda water bottles of a beautiful dark green, unavailable in Israel.

The resultant project, called “Earth Poetica,” is currently being exhibited at the Gottesman Family Israel Aquarium in Jerusalem. The colorful plastics are encased in a structure in the shape of a huge globe made by a metal smith, Yuval Telem, who lives and works in the north of the country. Inside this globe are strips of bamboo which hold the plastics in place. The plastics are arranged in such a way as to indicate whether they represent water of the oceans or the dry lands of the continents. In addition some of the globe contains open “windows” allowing the spectator to peer inside. This is very crucial for Barkat who wants to

## Art

show both the outside and inside of the project. “Each continent has a very personal feeling for me. The important thing is both the inside and the outside. You can’t really understand the whole global story without understanding the two together. From the outside I wanted a beautiful piece of jewelry that caresses you and calls you in: ‘Come and see me!’

“From the outside you actually disconnect to what the issue is about. But when you poke your head inside you actually see the truth that it is about garbage. And yes it’s me who’s used the plastic and thrown it away. This is the plastic that is causing great damage to our world. So the two stories of the inner and the outer are really important. It’s the story that enables us to communicate with the art. There is something emotional that happens when we see art – and we actually remember through the emotions; that will have an impact on us. When we next pick up a plastic bag we’ll think twice about it do we really need to use this plastic bag?”

The final art work is large, some four meters in diameter. The metal frame is one unit, 36 pieces, designed in such a way that it could be transported easily.

“I worked with the metal smith and he worked with me step by step solving the problems of how wide or how short each piece had to be. We also had a construction engineer working with me. Together they created the skeleton of the project holding the project together.

The building of the globe took place first at the aquarium. “I had to learn how to build it,” recalls Barkat. “The globe I was building was telling me that I was not doing it the right way. I had to change my thinking. So we went back a few steps and restarted to build it as it is now.”

What exactly does Barkat hope to achieve with this project? “Two things,” she says. “One is to get people to think twice about plastics. The other is to get them to experience art as very fundamental to who we are as people. They shouldn’t feel that because I am ignorant of art, or that they think they know about art and therefore can’t look at art and experience it with a fresh eye.”

The temporary location of the ex-



MARC ISRAEL SELLEM

Barkat explains to visitors how she created a wall made from plastic waste.

hibit in the Jerusalem Aquarium is also very important to Barkat. “Firstly because I’m communicating with the people I love here in Israel. I’m an Israeli. I live here. I’m married to an Israeli. I have Israeli children and I love Israel. This is my way of giving something back to Israel before it goes on permanently display at the World Trade Center. People can interact with it at the Aquarium for at least the next half a year. How long it stays here is also dependent on the Aquarium. They are developing educational programs based around my exhibit and their own explanatory films.

“People who visit the aquarium don’t necessarily visit museums. The museum visitor comes into contact with art and I want to expose as many people as possible to art on the way to connecting to the problem itself and trying to create a solution. It’s the best place to be shown before it is folded up and finds its new home.

“The title ‘Earth Poetica’ comes from the phrase ‘ars poetic’ which means poetry about poetry. Ars Poetica grew into a movement of art about art, although in Israel it is sometimes used to promote contemporary Oriental Jewish poetry.”

In Barkat’s use of the phrase, her work is an image of earth about earth. She is telling a story about what will happen if we don’t change the way we behave. This is where we are going to end up, Mr. McGuire or not.

“We are covering ourselves in plastic,” she says. “I return to the image that

I saw of those shores covered with plastic. We are cov-

ering every area of nature. If we don’t change then this will be our future. If we do change we can be optimistic. We have a chance to change. We need to invest our energy to enable decision making. We need different people to come together and to think differently.”

Beverly Barkat, 56, is married to Nir Barkat, previously mayor of Jerusalem and now a prominent member of the Knesset’s Likud party. I ask her if there was any conflict between the two in terms of schedules. “Oh, no,” she replies quite firmly. “I don’t interfere with his schedule and he doesn’t interfere with mine!”

The exhibition is located in the lobby of the aquarium and visitors are able to view both. It is a very chastening juxtaposition. Plastics are, after all, one of the increasing hazards to marine life. Numerous reports tell of fish being caught up in plastic wastes or, even worse, swallowing plastics and endangering their lives. So it is something of a relief to step into the aquarium after having seen, thanks to Barkat’s ingenious art work, the horrendous impact plastics can have on the planet, and to witness the calm, clean waters supporting the wide variety of fish in their “natural” environment. The aquarium contains a wide variety of marine life, of all shapes and sizes and from many parts of the globe. Their amazing colors and designs are an antidote to the somber message that Barkat’s sculpture has engendered.

Mr. McGuire’s prediction came true. It was the future. But that future turned into a nightmare. Is it possible that we can reverse the trend, forgo plastic and return to the fundamentals of nature before it is too late? Barkat’s art shows the way forward. ■