

June 9, 1985

Everson sculpture rooted in Africa

By Sherry Chayat

Those who strolled through the Community Plaza outside the Everson Museum of Art during the last two weeks of May were intrigued by a small tent surrounded by plastic tarpaulins. Closer inspection revealed a large ceramic sculpture in the process of being formed by Israeli artist Rina Peleg.

After more than 20 years as a functional potter, Peleg began making woven clay sculpture. In 1982, she was invited to create installations at Artpark, near Buffalo, and at the Tel Hai Sculpture Conference in Israel.

John Perreault, until recently the Everson's curator of contemporary art, was at Tel Hai as a visiting critic. Fascinated by Peleg's mammoth piece, he invited her to create an outdoor sculpture for the Everson, and to show her recent work in the museum's White Gallery.

"I was impressed by the work itself and by Peleg's ability to deal with the public — or audience — that gathered around her site every day, eager to follow the action," Perreault wrote in his essay for the catalog that accompanies the exhibition.

Taught school

Peleg, who taught high school for 10 years on her native kibbutz, Sha'ar Ha'amakim, and who is on a one-month leave from a position as ceramics expert in the National Handicraft Project in Ecpathatswana, southern Africa, appears completely at ease creating in public.

"I always wanted to work very big," she said, "and was frustrated by the limitations of the kiln. It's difficult to lift large pieces into it. So at Artpark, I built the kiln around the sculpture, brick by brick. I did the same at Tel Hai. There, I left part of the kiln around the piece at the end, in order to show the process of creating the sculpture, and also as a kind of frame."

The kiln Peleg and her assistant, Syracuse ceramist Lorraine Hoogs, built around her Everson piece was 125 cubic feet. "It took a lot of propane to fire it!"

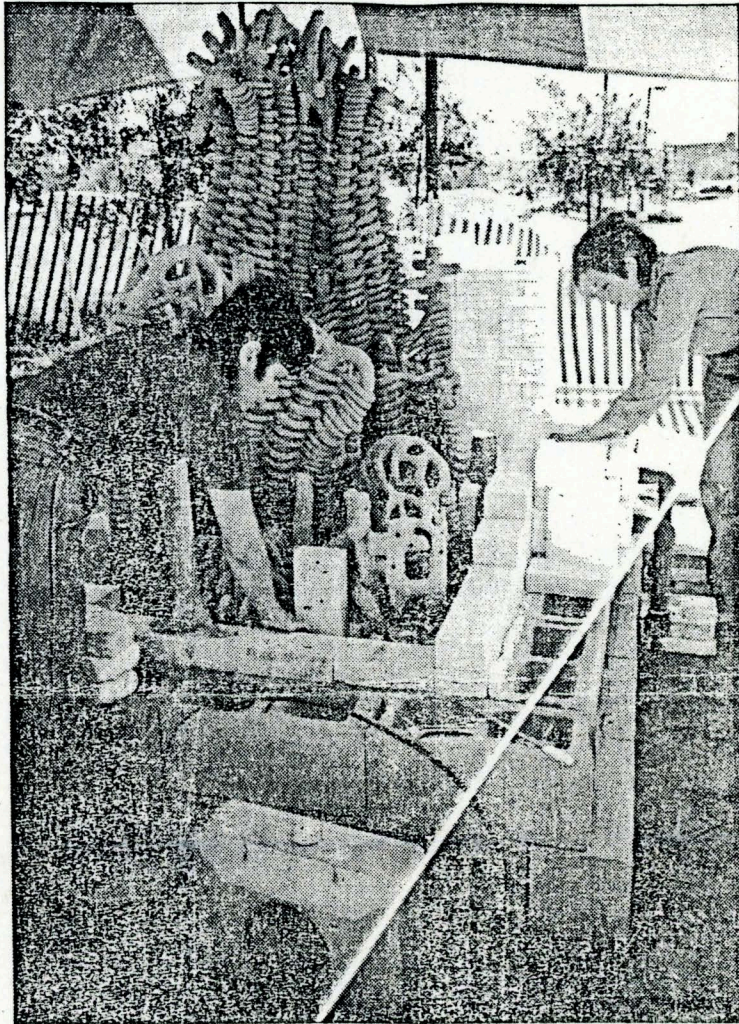
The sculpture at the Everson has many allusions, structurally and metaphorically, to the artist's African experience. The approximately 5-by-5-foot piece is a disjointed figure, its anatomical parts torn asunder as if by some inner explosion.

The interlaced horizontal ropes of clay looped around curving vertical "bones" suggest chains. "All the time I worked on this piece, I was thinking about the African people bound, imprisoned, enslaved. But all human beings suffer from feelings of limitation, a kind of inner imprisonment."

While Peleg's work is clearly experimental, it is rooted in the past. "On the kibbutz where I grew up, almost everywhere one walked, one practically stumbled over pottery shards. My first acquaintance with clay was made through these fragments."

"Loved it immediately"

Peleg, who learned weaving and basketry while in high school, didn't encounter raw clay until her second year at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Crafts in Jerusalem. "I loved it immediately. I spent all my free time working with clay." Recognizing her seriousness and her talent, the kibbutz built Peleg a studio and a gallery. It was not long before her work started selling in galleries outside the kibbutz.



Rina Peleg, left, and Lorraine Hoogs construct kiln around sculpture.

"In 1971, I had a major show at the Maskit Gallery in Tel Aviv, and that was a turning point. The following year, I received an invitation from the American-Israeli Cultural Foundation in New York City to come for a three-month stay, during which my work would be on exhibit and I would do demonstrations.

"I went, of course, and I fell in love with New York — and the opportunity to see what was going on in the art world."

Married at the time to an aspiring architect, Peleg brought his portfolio with her, and showed it to the admissions committee at Pratt Institute. "Places were extremely limited in architecture school in Israel," she said. "I told him, 'If you want to do something, you can do it. Bring the children and I'll support us while you study.'"

Their children were then 3½, 8 and 11. Peleg found an apartment on the Upper East Side through someone she met at the American-Israeli Cultural Foundation. "I didn't realize then that \$100 a month for a nice flat was considered extremely cheap!"

Her family happily ensconced at their various schools, she began working in a basement studio. A lucky break came when she won a place in the prestigious

Rhinebeck Crafts Fair, and she was soon swamped with orders.

"Special feeling"

"We spent five wonderful years in New York City," Peleg said. "One of the most beautiful things was sharing all that time with my children. In Israel, on our kibbutz, children don't sleep in their parents' apartments; they sleep in the children's house. To see them go to sleep at night and get up in the morning was such a special feeling!"

That period ended when her husband finished his B.A. and M.A. degrees at Pratt, and Peleg decided to go to Alfred University — famous for its program in ceramics — for one year as a special student. "Dan took the children back to Israel, and suddenly, after 20 years with him, I was alone. I discovered my individual self, my own distinct being."

No longer the sole support of her family, she was able to break free of the potter's wheel and experiment with sculpture. "I wanted to work with the flow of air through my pieces. I started to play around with coils, leaving them open rather than pinching them. I made many discoveries — it was really a successful year."

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★ PELEG

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But it was time to return to Israel, as she had promised she would. "I had such a strong feeling of being torn between my work and my family. I went back, but my head was in a different place. My husband couldn't understand how I could have felt so good and so happy without him."

Peleg began working again, continuing her experimentation with the flow of air, but after two years, she decided she had to return to the United States. "I wanted to finish my master of fine arts degree at Alfred, I wanted to show my new work in New York; I just felt in my guts I had to do it." She and Dan agreed to separate, and were later divorced.

Returns to New York

Peleg went back to New York. After receiving her degree, she rented a studio in SoHo. Her children make yearly visits; she travels to Israel each summer.

The experience at Alfred was pivotal. Weaving extruded coils of clay into basket forms, she began creating shapes that were strong, yet light and airy. Intrigued by the affinity between clay and basketry, she found herself poring over books on African culture, fascinated particularly by the clay and straw huts that are still built today.

When she was invited to participate in the Israeli-sponsored National Handicraft Project, she was elated. "I was disappointed to find, once I had arrived, that the people of Bophathatswana had no background in their own culture; they knew no crafts, no art, no music.

"They had been under South African rule until gaining independence as a homeland six years ago, and had been subjected to the worst of Western culture — from plastic dishes and fast food chains to alcoholism. There's very little agriculture, and few of the young people stay in the villages.

"So the Israeli government established this project, sending over experts in ceramics,

jewelry, fashion design, carpet making and silkscreen."

The project has met with great enthusiasm. "My students, who are mostly women, had never touched clay before, but I found they had a beautiful feeling for it," Peleg said. "I've been teaching them to do functional pieces, but I've also encouraged them to work on animal figures and masks, in which their own feelings are vividly expressed."

Peleg has traveled throughout the country with mobile ceramics studios, showing slides and demonstrating ceramic techniques. The team of experts has established studios in many of the villages, and has set up a market center in the capital, Mmbatho. Peleg has been asked to stay for a second year. "I feel so good about giving these people something they can use."

Peleg's large sculpture, and the smaller pieces in the White Gallery, will be on view through Aug. 8. The artist will attend a reception June 21, and then it's back to Africa.

Plenty of help

Creating a work the size and complexity of Peleg's outdoor piece is an extremely costly matter. It would have been impossible without the support of a number of organizations and companies. Some funding was received from the state Council on the Arts.

The many Syracuse area firms that provided materials free or at a discount include Miller Ceramics, Crucible Steel, Syracuse China, R.J. Deneton Refractory Co. and Paragon Supply.

Syracuse University professor David MacDonald worked with Lorraine Hoogs on constructing the cement-block base and helped with the extruding of the clay coils. Ceramists from the Syracuse Ceramic Guild and from Hoogs' class at University College worked as assistants. And, of course, the Everson's commission, and the permission of Onondaga County to use the Community Plaza, were essential.

Last dates

EVERSON MUSEUM, 401 Harrison St., noon-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday and Sunday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. Luncheon Gallery, 11:30-2 p.m. Tuesday-Friday. Tea Everson, noon-4 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. Sales Gallery, 11:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday; noon-5 p.m. Sunday. "Order and Enigma: American Art Between the Wars," through June 16. Lewis W. Hine: Works from the National Research Project, and "What I Know About Sam," through June 16. Works by Prudence Hubbard, hand build stoneware figures of animals and people in the Sales Gallery through June.

MUNSON-WILLIAMS-PROCTOR INSTITUTE, Utica, closed Mondays, holidays. Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday; Wednesday 10 a.m.-8 p.m.; Sunday 1 p.m.-5 p.m. Photograph display of New York state gardens of the 1800s. The re-emergence of abstract painting is the focus of this show by 21 established contemporary artists.

CAYUGA MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART, 203 Genesee St., Auburn, 1-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 9 a.m.-noon and 1-5 p.m. Saturday; 2-5 p.m. Sunday.

CORTLAND ARTS COUNCIL GALLERY, 4th floor, McNeil Building, 23 Main St., Cortland, noon-5 p.m. Monday-Friday and by appointment. "Design from Stratford: Drawings, Posters and Graphics," by Scott McKowen.

1890 MUSEUM AND CENTER FOR THE ARTS, Cortland, 1-4 p.m. daily, except Monday. Four-story, 30-room mansion is considered an outstanding example of Victorian Chateausque architecture.

LOWE ART GALLERY, Syracuse University, noon-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. "On the Edge of Pop," from the Syracuse University Art Collection, "Department of Core," "Photographs by Barbara Kasten," and "Music Video from the Art Media Studies Collection," all exhibitions continue through Sept. 15.

ROME ART AND COMMUNITY CENTER, 308 W. Bloomfield St., 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday; 6:30-8:30 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday, Saturday. "Screen Prints by Contemporary Painters," exhibit from the Gallery Association of NYS and Rome Photography Society exhibition.

PICKER ART GALLERY, Colgate University, Hamilton, (Route 12B), 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday; 1-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. "Henry Moore: A New Dimension," an exhibition of eight large tapestries translated into wool from a series of watercolors by the internationally famous English sculptor, through July 1.

HERBERT F. JOHNSON MUSEUM OF ART, Cornell University, Ithaca. Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Selected works from the Prinzhorn Collection, through June 30. The Arts and Crafts Movement in New York State: 1890s-1920s, through June 23.

SCHWEINFURTH ART CENTER, 205 E. Genesee St., Auburn, noon-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday; 1-5 p.m. Sunday. "The Shopping Bag: Portable Graphic Art," through June 30; "Screen Prints by Contemporary Artists," through July 3; "Odyssey: Mirror on the Mediterranean," through Aug. 31.

SENECA FALLS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 55 Cayuga St., Seneca Falls, Monday-Friday 9 a.m.-5 p.m. for tours and research. 1880 Queen Anne-style Victorian mansion, period rooms, local history and genealogical library.

WILSON ART GALLERY, Le Moyne College, 9 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Friday, and noon-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

TYLER ART GALLERY, SUNY Oswego, 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; noon-4:30 p.m. weekends. "New York State Barns," through July 12.

CHAPMAN ART CENTER GALLERY, Cazenovia College, Cazenovia, 1-4 p.m. and 7-9 p.m. Monday-Friday; 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Saturday; and 1-5 p.m. Sunday.

CHAPMAN CULTURAL CENTER, Cazenovia College, Cazenovia, 1-3 p.m. and 7-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 1-3 p.m. Friday; 1-5 p.m. Saturday; and 2-5 p.m. Sunday.

MORRISVILLE COLLEGE Art Gallery Library, 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday; and 1-5 p.m. Friday-Sunday.

ROBERSON CENTER FOR THE ARTS, 30 Front St., Binghamton, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday; noon-5 p.m. Saturday; and noon-6 p.m. Sunday.

MEXICO MUSEUM, South Jefferson Street, Mexico, 2-

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