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'Stones that speak'

A Mumbai-born artist's
fresh take on the
Western Wall, drawing
both the eye and heart



Keeping his eyes on the wall

Artworks that speak: Binyamin Basteker's exhibition delivers a visual and emotional portrayal of the Jewish world's most iconic site

• By BARRY DAVIS

When it comes to exhibition monikers, "Stones that Speak" hits the nail right on the head – and then some. Artist Binyamin Basteker and Uri Rosenbach, owner of Rosenbach Contemporary Gallery on King David Street, could have added "Volumes" at the end, and the title would have been just as apt, if not more so.

The theme of the show, which opened on September 14 and will run until November 1, is the Western Wall. A pretty standard subject, one might think, that is until you get a glimpse of the oil paintings that fill the gallery with zest, vim, vigor and splashes of color that draw the eye and the heart to an equal degree.

Basteker is a 63-year-old painter who hails from then Bombay – now Mumbai – India. He made aliya with his family at the age of 16, principally to get out of being conscripted into the Indian military. His Zionist parents far preferred their son to serve in the IDF and promptly made the move here.

Basteker comes from good creative stock.

"I come from a family of artists," he states. "My

grandfather was a theater director. My father played violin, and he was also a painter. Yes, it's in the genes," he adds with a chuckle. So the youngster's career path was, presumably, laid out for him from the word go. He never considered becoming a lawyer? I venture in jest.

"Actually, my father would have been happy if I'd gone for that," he laughs. "He said he wanted me to have an easier life than he did, that I should be financially secure – but it didn't work out that way."

Basteker Sr. didn't stick to his paternal guns too long, and the lad was soon the beneficiary of professional tuition.

"My father sent me to a private art teacher when I was 12," says the artist. "That's how it all began."

Four years later, the budding painter relocated to the Middle East and began to become acquainted with a different street-level color scheme that, naturally, informed his subsequent development. Mind you, some years down the line he received some singular advice – to include his roots in his evolving creative equation.

Basteker duly joined the IDF and, fortunately, his artistic background was taken into consideration by the military authorities.

"I served in the Parachute Nahal Brigade," he recalls. "In the middle of my service I started doing artistic stuff." That brought him into contact with one of the country's leading rock acts of the day. "I did props for Kaveret and for other groups," he says. "That was fun."

He also managed to further his formal education, completing a four-year degree in fine arts at the Kalisher College of Art. It was there that he encountered and learned from some of the pillars of the country's art community, including Yechiel Shemi, Michael Argov, John Byle and Avigdor Stematsky. The latter gave him a piece of advice that has stood him in good stead to this day, and which comes across loud, clear and dazzlingly bright in "Stones that Speak."

"Stematsky told me that I am an artist, and that I should express my own character in my work," Basteker recalls. "He said I should express being an Indian and the colors I knew in India. He said I wasn't Polish and I shouldn't try painting like something else."

The inference was that the young student should feed off the sensibilities and, in particular, the colors of his country of birth and get them out there, in full view, in his work.



Digging deep: Artist Binyamin Basteker (right) with Rosenbach Contemporary Gallery owner Uri Rosenbach. (Marc Israel Sellem)



I wanted to express the power of the place, and myself too, as a Jew. I wanted to bring out all the colors, the red and yellow and the blue. I wanted to express the joy, the music and the power. All those things are in there





'There is so much joy in the Kotel.'

(Photos: Rosenbach Contemporary Gallery)

Judging by the paintings currently on display at the Rosenbach Contemporary Gallery the student evidently took that tip fully on board.

The polychromatic spectrum that runs through the 17 exhibits is simply alluring. It is difficult to know where to look first. From the center of the display space you can stand in front of a picture in which, after taking a few moments to calibrate your vision and mind-set, you can distinguish the large stones that make up the Kotel, and even discern the figures of people in the esplanade who, presumably, have come to pray. Adjusting your line of vision around 45 degrees to the left you espy a very different portrayal of the sacred site, possibly the most abstract work of the lot. The hues are very different, the textures and layering of the two paintings are worlds apart, yet both are compelling.

For Basteker, it is a matter of digging deep—both into his own psyche and cultural roots, and into the subtext of what he observes as part of the preliminaries for his next painting project. That certainly applies to the theme of the current exhibition. Basteker visited the Western Wall site on numerous occasions at different times of the day and in different seasons. That allowed him to get a different handle on the famous boundary marker of the western perimeter of the Temple Mount,

in terms of the shades exuded and the human dynamics at play across wide temporal and religious stretches.

That also produced an intriguing spread of shades and textures, as Basteker perceived more and more details that he'd missed on previous working forays to the Old City. In one painting, for example, abstract approach notwithstanding, one can make out some verdant items.

"That's the vegetation that grows out of the Wall," he artist explains. But it's not just the physical strata that interest him.

"I wanted to express the power of the place, and myself too, as a Jew. That's what I am. I wanted to bring out all the colors, the red and yellow and the blue. I wanted to express the joy, the music and the power. All those things are in there."

They are certainly in the exhibits at the gallery. Wherever you look, you are struck by a palpable sense of vibrancy. In the more abstract works, particularly the one opposite the entrance to the gallery, the paint seems to have been hurled at the canvas at high speed and with gay abandon.

"I visited Binyamin several times over the space of about 18 months," says Rosenbach. "There were all sorts of stages to the works, but when I saw this one, I

said we have an exhibition. This is perfect."

With Rosenbach's guidance, I was also able to distinguish some lines that immediately conveyed the layout of the praying area by the Wall. It gives the painting a physical and spiritual nodal point. It is, as Rosenbach, says, a gem.

It is not hard to get the gallery owner's drift. The pivotal work in question simply grabs you, in the nicest sense of the word, and draws you in. The more you look at it, the more mesmerized you feel. Some of the paintings tend toward a figurative style and you can detect specifics, and then, for example, there is the predominantly reddish-brown two-dimensional effort near the entrance, right opposite the work that won Rosenbach over. It was created in a feverish spurt of inspiration.

"I woke up in the middle of the night and I told my wife I had to do something with a painting," says Basteker. He quickly went over to a canvas, applied reds and brownish tints, with sprinklings of green and other subtle shades and, instinctively, set to the emerging painting with a squeegee. The lower band of the canvas is a very different story, and comprises an antipodal strip of blue.

"The Indians use very strong contrasts," he notes.



'Creating works of art is a spiritual business.'

Basteker (left), then an art student, with Israeli abstract art pioneer and mentor Avigdor Stematsky in 1977: 'He said I should express being an Indian and the colors I knew in India.' (Jaacov Agor)

He had another reason for the compositional augmentation. "I had to limit all the dynamics of the rest of the painting; otherwise it would get lost, it would be infinite. That doesn't work. You have to set a limit to the emotion."

Clearly, while one should allow one's imagination free rein during the creative process, you can't always go the whole hog.

Basteker comes across as a cheerful character. Indeed, he has a propensity for walking the sunny side of the street.

"There is so much joy in the Kotel," he says.

Coming from an observant Jew, that is more than a little unexpected. Surely, the Western Wall – a.k.a. the Wailing Wall – serves as constant reminder of the destruction of the Second Temple, and the ensuing millennia-long mourning. Basteker begs to differ.

"If you look carefully at the Kotel, you can see the happiness there. There is great power; there are impulses. You can also see the joy in the destruction of the Temple." That, it seems, is not a new notion.

"Rabbi Akiva was asked why he laughed at the de-

struction of the Temple, and he said he could see the building of a new Temple in the future. There is always hope. There is great power in prayer and joy."

Observation, says Basteker, is an integral and crucial part of the preparatory phase of his output. He didn't take his easel and paints out to the Old City to capture the moment à la Impressionists.

"I sat in front of the Kotel and just observed it and the things around me," he says.

"I can sit in the same spot for hours and take great pleasure from nothing. There are so many beautiful things in the world that we miss because we're always on the go, we're always so busy and we don't even know why."

"Stones that Speak" is Basteker's first solo showing for 17 years. His first exhibition ran at Artists' House in Tel Aviv almost 40 years ago, followed by his sophomore outing in 1982. There were a couple more solo exhibitions in the 1990s and several contributions to group displays up and down the country since the mid-1970s. Part of the relative lack of visibility, it seems, is a result of the artist's decision to become religious back in the 1980s.

"He couldn't show his works in a gallery that, for instance, is open on Shabbat," Rosenbach explains. "He needs to have the right place for his art."

Basteker says that all the above finds its way into what he does.

"This is the culmination, so far, of 50 years of making art, and 30 years of Torah study and observance."

Interestingly, Basteker does not believe his approach to art has been affected by his change in lifestyle.

"Creating works of art is a spiritual business anyway," he states impassively. "It is a process. You can invest 20 years of observation, of living, and then produce a painting in five minutes. But it is all part and parcel of the process."

He has certainly come a long way with his craft over the years. The exhibition catalogue includes some early works, dating to the 1980s. They are all abstract efforts and you can see how they eventually led to the current showing, but the 17 works in "Stones that Speak" are clearly light years ahead of Basteker's efforts of yesteryear. Today, he is a more mature artist, more

at one with himself and the world about him and better able to make concessions where necessary.

"You have to know when to hold back, when to keep quiet," he observes. "If you shout the whole time, no one will hear you. If there's no silence, a shout is not a shout. You have to know when to shout out and when to hold back. That's a natural balance."

"Stones that Speak" gives the impression of offering a pretty comprehensive conceptual, visual and emotional portrayal of the most sacred site in the Jewish world, but Basteker says he could have packed in plenty more where the 17 paintings came from.

"I did so many, and could do so many more. I have so many ideas. I could have done another exhibition about the Western Wall. Easily."

For more information: 050-751-6091 and rosenbach.co.il