The mother of all exhibitions

By BARRY DAVIS

In our post-modern society, women are increasingly taking on leading roles in a range of sectors. While admittedly there is a long way to go, the “Art of Motherhood” exhibition should warm the cockles of all hearts, irrespective of gender.

The show opened at Heichal Shlomo on September 30 as part of the Jerusalem Bienale, which runs until November 5. Curator Nurit Sirkis Bank made it clear that, title notwithstanding, the exhibition is not gender-specific. The point is amply conveyed by, for example, Dorit Jordan Dotan’s work “Reflection,” which shows a figure of a woman and another of a man, each holding a small child and each clearly of a haredi persuasion. The figures are cut off at the neck with the full width of the upper section of the work comprising a mirror. The idea is that observers can complete the work by positioning themselves so that their own head sits neatly atop the truncated neck of the figures. “I was open to working with any gender or any origin of artist that are affiliated with Jewish ideas or qualities,” notes Sirkis Banks. “I also put a father in ‘Reflection’ because, in this exhibition, I am not only speaking about motherliness which is something more spiritual and emotional. A man can also be motherly, and I think cats can be motherly, and trees and stones can be motherly. They all come from creation.”

By now it was becoming clear that we are not just talking about art as a purely visual form of expression, but that there are deep connotations. “The name is an aspect of the divine,” says Sirkis Bank. “There is a mystical confluence here. In the holy tree of the divine, one of the aspects is called Ima Iyla’a. When I started with this exhibition I didn’t know it would open on Succot, and the succa is called Ima Iyla’a.”

The curator reveals she “worked on this show for exactly a year. I worked hand in hand with each artist on almost every work you see here, as they were creating them.” The works are spread around four corners of the Heichal Shlomo auditorium, each with its own theme. One focuses on intergenerational relationships and features a large photograph of an elderly woman being transported in one direction in a wheelchair, while a young mother pushes her toddler in a stroller in the opposite direction. “We talk about different generations, and the different roles of mothers and children – you know, like when the parents get older,” she details.

All told, “Art of Motherhood” encompasses about 30 works across a wide range of disciplines and concepts, all with Jewish and/or Israeli themes. The emotive works include Ken Goldman’s self-portrait Tikkan, a play on the Hebrew word for repairing, which also implies the act of setting things to rights on a more spiritual level. Goldman describes the motive for the work, in the exhibition catalogue, thus: “This is the original linen shirt that I tore during the mourning over the death of my mother. I repaired it with my mother’s last words: ‘Take care of your father.’”

Talking of shirts, Sigal Maoor began embroidering an army shirt with portraits of fallen IDF soldiers during the course of Operation Protective Edge in summer 2014. Meanwhile, Maya Zack’s stirring print

The Shabbat Room 4: The Mystical Shabbat forms part of a permanent installation at Vienna’s Jewish Museum. The work revisits the Shabbat Room installation created for the museum by Hungarian-born Jewish genre painter Isidor Kaufmann in 1899; the museum was closed by the Nazis in 1938, and Shabbat Room was destroyed.

There is plenty of variety in the exhibition, in terms of intellectual and creative approach style, discipline and materials. Many items are clearly the result of hard graft, as well as muse nourishment, with A Blessing on Your Head a case in point. The work looks like a carefully constructed pair of piles of hand-shaped pieces of paper. The texts on the top two pieces are taken from the blessings parents traditionally give their children on Friday night after Kiddush. But there is more to the stacks than initially meets the eye. “There are 20,000 pieces of paper here,” says Sirkis Banks, adding that quantitative element signifies the passage of time in the child’s life. “I remember when my kids were small I’d do like this,” says the curator, bending and stretching her arms down towards the floor, before raising her hands a bit higher, “and then I’d do this. There is the idea here, of giving the spiritual blessing.”

Despite the cross-gender motherliness factor noted by Sirkis Bank in Reflection, inequality between the sexes does seem to make an appearance, such as in Michal Vartash’s Endless Pile, which looks like a washing basin topped with a towering quantity of laundry. Traditionally, of course, doing the laundry was considered one of women’s many chores. The exhibition leaflet explains that it is an “endless pile of laundry representing the daily transformations between the dirty and clean, order and chaos, used and renewed. The endless task of laundry involves attention, energy and care. This exhausting Sisyphean effort is hardly ever recognized, despite it being so essential.”

Yehudis Barmatz’s video offering Rachel Dwells also has a marked Sisyphean feel to it. The work is projected into a circle of stone slabs in the center of a side room, within which we follow the full process of how Barmatz builds the very same stone circle, somewhere out in the wild, in a well-simulation exercise. The video shows the sculpture and conceptual artist devoting an impressive amount of elbow grease to preparing the ground, then positioning the stones, before filling the “well” with water. After completing the circular structure, Barmatz proceeds to dismantle it without so much as a whimper. The video loop then begins afresh, generating a sense of infinite exertion and futility. I put it to the artist that there was something definitively Sisyphean about the venture. “There’s something Sisyphean in bringing up children too, isn’t there?” was the somewhat enigmatic response.

The exhibition centerpiece is an egg-like metal bar structure accommodating Alana Ruben Free and David Gerstein’s Presence = Present performance work. Ruben Free opened the exhibition by explaining to the audience the reasoning and mindset that went into creating the work, which delves into the area of self-nurturing and nurturing the people around us. She then inaugurated Presence = Present by performing a two-minute theatrical slot with her son based on mutual expressions of love, trust, respect and appreciation. Ruben Free intends to carry out the intimate performance at least 67 times before the end of the Biennale, as 67 is the gematria (numerical letter equivalent) of the kabbalistic idea of “Ima” – the Super maternal Mother.

For more information: www.jerusalembienale.org/