

Bent, Praying, Still Standing
Zvi Lachman's Twelve Figures

She eases up and forward—if it *is* a she, tall-seeming, willowy, arms and hands merged in a gently out curving body that merges down into its own bronze base. This earliest of Zvi Lachman's twelve standing figures is dated 1985-90. How was it changed? And perhaps "Isaac I," 1990-98, arose from the artist's revisiting that first piece in 1990. Now Isaac's deeply downcast head above a legless torso stands as if bound to a sort of pedestal or prayer-stall. And why "Isaac I"? Maybe a second figure, unbound, is yet to come.

The most moving of these stationary figures may be the most austere, reduced. "Teller," 1991-92, stands slender and erect, arms held close in to the body but leaning just slightly forward, looking humble, attentive. The body's surface feels eroded, wasted, with crumbled bits of bronze at its feet. Yet its head cranes back, gazing upward. The teller may also be listening.

Lachman's sculptural gathering leaves several questions open yet embodies possible insights. How much does gender matter here? All the figures appear simply, essentially human. Still, the first and last are female, along with "Eve," 2000, whose heavy belly and armless torso suggest archaic fertility icons. She brings to mind Edna St. Vincent Millay's Maine coast sonnet, "Hearing your words":

With slapping skirts the island women stand
In gardens stripped and scattered, peering north,"
and we feel "The wind of their endurance."

Whether female or male, these figures can seem at once weighed down and enduring. "Nude (Man)," 1992-93, has arms bent (or bound?) behind his back, and yet strongly squared shoulders. "David," 1993, armless like Isaac and others, is anything but the harpist and sweet singer. Massive and crudely modeled, his legs stand firm.

The tallest of these sculptures, "Adam," 2003, is life-size, 184 centimeters. His legs are fused to a horizontal block, and all this balances precariously on a small square base. Against his bent neck and head he is carrying some weight.

For the first time in Lachman's sequence, the torso looks strangely scraped—or more likely, unfinished, exposing an inner framework. Even the base reveals its hollow latticed framework. Through the artist's rough handwork emerges a kind of struggle. Possibly, in this rust-brown or earth-brown Adam, we see a golem in the making.

The same exposed, not-yet-finished process occurs in a simply titled work from 2005, “Standing”—but only if we approach it from behind. The stance of this figure, its bending head and knee, could well be a sign of prayer, especially the Amidah prayer, where we stand in the divine presence. Or rising for the Aleinu, for a few moments “we bow the head and bend the knee.” Thus the overall title of Lachman’s series, “Standing,” centers on this stirring figure. Like several others, its rust-brown surface feels at once rough and burnished, as if for a long time it has been in and of the earth.

Where else, besides in Jewish liturgy, have we seen such sculptural force? In 1888, Auguste Rodin created *Les Bourgeois de Calais*, six citizens standing before the gates of their besieged medieval city. These burghers, in roughhewn bronze, lend their pained, staunch dignity to Zvi Lachman’s standing figures.

The last piece he made for this series, “To Separate,” 2006, partly resembles earlier figures: arms held behind the back, a bent knee. Surprisingly, two rigid steel rebar rods rise up behind and above her. Instead of immobilizing her, however, they set off her feminine grace. Her head looks slightly upward, her body is relaxed, almost at peace.

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Amidah, Standing. In 1969 the German-speaking Jewish poet, Paul Celan, journeyed for the first time from Parisian exile to Israel. The Shoah had left him with absolutely nothing but his mother tongue, turned overnight into his mother’s murderer’s tongue. From this fraught language he carved Europe’s most challenging postwar poems. But his psychic wounds, touching the genius of his poetry, never healed.

Israel for Celan, especially after the Six-Day War, stood for an almost impossible redemption. In Jerusalem, he felt elated by an old-new promise, the land now green and children chattering Hebrew. Yet his anguish still held onto him. In March of 2000, to a dear friend back in Israel, he sent a postcard of the tower where Germany’s brilliant demented poet Hölderlin spent his last years. On it Celan wrote one steadfast word: *Stehend*, “Standing.” Nonetheless, in April he took his life in the Seine River.

Zvi Lachman knows very well the poet’s voice and this signature word, *Stehend*. What’s more, he has drawn striking portraits of Paul Celan. Surely some current of energy runs between the poet, persisting within a fateful language, and the sculptor shaping twelve stark bronze figures—some bent, some praying, all still standing.