

Talking heads

By Ariel Hirschfeld

Zvi Lachman's sculpted heads relentlessly pose contemporary questions.

Zvi Lachman creates busts. He's been doing it for years. Sometimes he sculpts entire figures, but even then the head is always the main thing.

Several new works of his are currently on display at the Alon Segev Gallery on Chelouche Street in the Neve Tzedek area of Tel Aviv.

You might think: What could be more predictable than a sculpted head? Busts are the origin and basis of all sculpture. This is the "likeness," the very image of the face and character of a god or a king, of a human being. And from the birth of art until recent generations, every sculpture has been put to the head test. For the head is where the real image is to be found, as well as the great mystery of the face. Advertisement

Lachman does not live in some ancient time bubble. His creations are utterly contemporary; only their medium - bronze - is ancient. His sculptures do not cease to ask: What is the face of a human being today and what is a sculpture that is made today? Is the "human being" the same as it was understood to be 100 or 1,000 years ago? Can his outward appearance truly represent and give expression to his inner essence? Do we have any real interest in the form of a sculpted face and head? Doesn't photography render all the hassle of capturing an image superfluous? And on top of that: Is the modern human being truly desirous or even capable of ascribing to himself the valuable and unique attributes that would justify his being cast in bronze? Wouldn't he be better off with a representation that was a little less durable, made of paper or Styrofoam?

Lachman first sculpts in wax and then casts the sculpture in a mold created from the initial sculpture, just as his predecessors did in antiquity. But the sculptures do not copy human textures; instead they preserve the soft and liquid properties of the wax. More than anything, what you see in the busts is a process of building - an accumulation of materials - and the fluidity of the

material that has been melted by fire. Even when they are hard and heavy and huge from all the metal, they retain an air of continual movement; the metal is not metal-like per se, but rather resembles a soft formation of stalagmites and stalactites. This quality, in which the head is always unfinished and attests to something that hasn't fully come into being, is the paramount statement of these works. The person within them is unfinished, yet he is forever seen by the world as something final and understood. But he is in a continual state of emergence. And this process of self-formation consists equally of progress forward and steps backward.

When looking at one of Lachman's works, it is fascinating to walk around it, to make surprising discoveries while seeing all the emerging shapes that go into building the head. At times it seems like some massive geological structure; the next moment it appears slim and brittle and on the verge of breaking. And all these forms give meaning to the head. You suddenly realize how much nature, how much rocky antiquity there is in the human head. The famous enigmatic landscape that surrounds the head of the Mona Lisa, comprised of hazy cliffs and a bluish chaos, is connected here to the head itself, not as an association but as a primal substance.

In Lachman's heads there are always smooth, unfinished holes that constitute breaches in the structure, through which one can peek into the tangled darkness inside. These holes are most interesting. On the one hand, they expose the hidden depths, the unknown depths, of the bust; a murmuring darkness. And on the other hand, they make a very fundamental statement about the head being "open" to whatever comes from the outside. Lachman's heads get their power and meaning not just through the eyes or understanding, but through more direct ways that connect them to the heavens and the universe. Their eyes do not see well, if at all; it's clear that vision is something that depends on the material, and that it can hide just as much as it reveals.

The key word to describe what a Lachman bust is all about, I think, is *hitrakmut* (literally, "formation," using the same Hebrew root as "tissue" and "embroidery"): the formation of tissues, which connotes the delicacy of the act of embroidery as well as a movement that occurs on its own, by virtue of its being a living thing. In every sculpture you become aware of the very long

period during which it was created; it is full of layers, bits that have caved in, additions and combinations. The idea that emanates from these sculptures is closer to hitrakmut than to quarrying or chiseling. The sculpture's life and its infinitely searching movements are slow and cyclical - more like long-term natural processes than conscious acts executed in a studio.

The works now on show in the modest and lovely gallery space look like a collection of figures that have come a very long way to get here; they silently and reverently tell themselves and others about the weight of their experience. It's true: The person described by these sculptures is deep, full of value, complexity and agonies. His image has not been erased. This reminder of the existence of such a person is vital. Indeed, such a person can only be represented via use of the tools of traditional art. And when it is not corrupted, it says very moving things.