

The Evolution of Michal Rovner

BY FRANCA TOSCANO | JUNE 15, 2018



In the spring of 2011, two large cubic structures appeared in the courtyard of the Louvre Museum in Paris. Positioned near the glass pyramid, they were made up of more than 1,000 stones collected from various spots in Israel and the Palestinian territories — East and West Jerusalem, Haifa, Hebron, Nablus, Ramallah — and constructed using traditional methods by a mix of Israeli Arab, Jewish, Palestinian and Druze masons, who were made to work side by side. The structures looked inviting from afar. Yet as you came closer, you realized that one was all but sealed shut, and the other was unfinished, as if abandoned in mid construction.

Those stone shelters are part of a series of sculptures titled “Makom” by the Israeli artist Michal Rovner, whose art addresses themes of boundaries, displacement and the human condition. Rovner sprang to international fame with a 2002 Whitney Museum mid-career show and an eye-catching exhibition at the 2003 Venice Biennale. She has been represented ever since by the Pace Gallery, and this spring has staged an exhibition for the gallery in Palo Alto and in New York (until June 23). Rovner is also busy producing a work of art for one of the stations on London’s Crossrail transport line, which opens at the end of the year.

“Evolution” (the title of the Pace exhibition) included video works and prints that bear Rovner’s signature motif: rows of horizontal lines that look like ancient scripture, but are in fact miniature representations of human figures. Like ant colonies, these tiny figures move across the surface of the artwork, making circular or crisscrossing shapes.

“Nilus” (2018), one of the works in the Pace show, is the silhouette of a jackal in the night. The creature is shown in profile, spread across two screens that look like the pages of a book. The backdrops to it, once again, are Rovner’s signature rows of miniature figures.

“My work is dealing, all in all, with questions of identity of place and time,” the artist said in an interview. While that identity is universal and not particular to her region of the world, she explained, her birthplace underpins whatever she does: “As much as I’m always looking for a non-specific person in the nonspecific place, which could be anywhere, the reality and undercurrent is always there.”

Rovner's 2003 exhibition at the Venice Biennale arguably did the most to put her on the international art map. The centerpiece, "Time Left" (2002), consisted of a wall-to-wall video representing rows of tiny silhouettes marching silently and purposefully towards an unidentified destination. And on a landing between two floors, Rovner showed "Data Zone" (2003), a set of long tables covered with petri dishes in which, once again, those same ant-like figures were projected.

"Superb" was the word used in Venice by the critic Laura Cummings of *The Observer*. "Rovner works with tiny groups of figures, black against snow white, a human race that forms and reforms itself in columns and wheels and crowds that circle round and round until individuals start to break away," she wrote. "Set to very beautiful music, with a heartbeat of its own, these figures, in their long black clothes, can look like soldiers retreating from Moscow, or Eisenstein crowds, or prisoners in a Polish ghetto. Projected on screens, on Petri dishes or directly on all four walls, these films hauntingly evoke the diaspora. But they also tell an epic tale of mankind creeping onwards, a chain forever renewing itself." Rovner said in the interview that even at the time, she realized she was experiencing an important milestone. "I would say I was discovered at that moment as an artist worldwide," she said. "People stood in line and looked at it — this kind of remote look that brought up questions like: 'Is this the way God sees us?'"

While Rovner already had her mid-career retrospective at the Whitney by that point, she was still not represented by a prominent U.S. gallery. The Venice installation was a game changer. She was approached on the spot by the American dealer Arne Glimcher, founder of the Pace Gallery, who told her his gallery wanted to show her work.

Rovner's immediate response was startling. "Let me think about it," she said she replied, "like a woman playing hard to get." Glimcher was not deterred, and invited her to Harry's Bar that night for a gallery dinner. There, she said he stood up, clinked his glass and said, "Years ago, we were here in Harry's Bar, and we signed up Rauschenberg to work with Pace. I'm so honored at this moment to tell everybody that we are, tonight, signing up Michal Rovner."

Everyone got up and clapped. "I said, 'Arne, if that's the way you do business, I'm joining the gallery!'" she recalled telling the dealer.

Her stone sculptures appeared in the courtyard of the Louvre seven years later. Rovner defines the "Makom" series as another important moment. She described how the structures came about. They were composed of "real stones from real houses" — the demolished houses of Israelis and Palestinians, located in areas near the farm where Rovner lives. She collected the stones either herself or sent trucks to places she couldn't physically reach. Her requirement: that none of the stones be cut or changed, and that they fit together naturally and organically, creating "a mosaic of times and places and unknown biographies, and also testimonies of displacement."

The artist cautioned against attributing political meanings or agendas to any of her works, saying that would be overly simplistic. "I never start the work with an idea of what I'm going to express," she said. "I'm not trying to convey a message: I'm asking questions. The best thing that art can do is to give you another viewpoint on something."

Yet to the Israeli curator Hadas Maor, who has known the artist from the start of her career and wrote a text about her in a 2008 book on Israeli art, "Makom" is a work of conceptual art that "stands above time and above culture" — and is "politically charged."

Even the title has layers of meaning, Maor said. “On an immediate level, it translates into the word ‘place,’ but it is also the term used to describe the entity of God, which according to Jewish belief, is an entity without form, present anywhere and everywhere at all times,” she said. Referring both to a specific place and an abstract place, it demonstrates the “duality between the specific and the fundamental, the concrete and the sublime” that typifies Rovner’s work, the curator added.

“Makom” is considered such an artwork of our time that the historian Simon Schama included it in one of his episodes of the new nine-part BBC documentary on visual culture, “Civilisations.”

“Civilization presupposes a settled city population, but Rovner’s is an art of the human condition of migration, being forever between places,” said Schama in the episode narration. “The Makom” series are “works which speak to contemporary fears of homelessness, but which are also imprinted with memories of ancient habitation. We are, after all, in the place where the earliest civilisations made their dwellings. These are, in every sense, our primal building blocks.” The tiny moving inscriptions in the Pace exhibition can be considered the other primal building blocks in Rovner’s work.