



Nirit Levav-Packer brings her dress-design ethos to the world of sculpture. (Photos: Sali Peul)

The sculptress uses a wide range of materials in her work.

Soft as metal

• By BARRY DAVES

Artists not only spread their wares across a broad range of disciplines, they also employ various kinds of media to portray their creative bent. Some painters stick to oils, others prefer watercolors or gouache (a method of painting with opaque watercolors) or even ink, while sculptors might go for traditional material, such as clay or stone, wood or even wax. Nirit Levav-Packer prefers a very different medium.

That much is clear from the moment you enter the generously proportioned Machsan 2 display space at Jaffa Port and espy the first works in Levav-Packer's "From Within" exhibition, curated by Galit Semel, which runs until October 18.

The 53-year-old mother of four has been at the business of crafting aesthetics for some time. All of her experience from appreciably varying fields comes into play in "From Within."

The artist went the convention route, gaining a degree in fashion design from Parsons School of Design in New York before returning here fully intending to make a name for herself. She did that with plenty to spare, even though the line that brought her fame and fortune was basically a default eventuality.

Twigs capture the essence of womanhood and pregnancy.

"I became a wedding-dress designer," she recalls. "I didn't really mean to go that way. I liked white and I liked delicacy. I didn't go for all the frills and the overblown fancy stuff that people put into wedding dresses back then. Women saw my stuff - they were just regular white dresses, not wedding gowns - and they asked me to make them a wedding dress like that. You know, the dresses were white anyway, so one thing led to another."

The Levav-Packer line was a hit and she churned out dress after dress to great acclaim and financial return, but while the cash register might have been ringing merrily and frequently, the designer was becoming increasingly disillusioned.

"I was dragged into making bridal gowns," she says, "but I had a long career in that." All 15 years of it.

"I enjoyed it for a while, but I stopped enjoying it. There was a creative element to making wedding dresses, but it was only for a short period. I was limited to the type of cloth and the color. I'd had enough." It was time to look elsewhere to requite her creative ambitions.

And look she did, practically everywhere and anywhere and as far away as possible, both in terms of how to physically make her works and the raw materials she incorporates.

"From Within" is predominantly a sculpture exhibition, but with nothing in the way of what one might normally associate with the genre. The common denominator of the items on display is the

industrial and incongruous nature of the substances she uses, and there are a couple of theme-based groups in there, too. The full title of the show is "From Within - Identity, Body, Femininity" and that comes across most clearly in the 20 or so figures of

A supplicatory female figure, composed of motorcycle roller bearing cages.





pregnant women.

Heaven, for example, is a delightful and powerfully evocative piece made of bicycle chains. The 1.85-meter-high figure is of a heavily pregnant woman looking up to the skies, and seems to beseech the Divine One to help her make it safely through the impending delivery. One may not naturally associate bicycle chains with maternity or delivering a baby but, somehow, it works. For starters, as the base material is not as flexible as, say, fabric or clay or even fabric there are numerous gaps between the tangible elements. That gives the observer a sense of being able to see what is going inside the woman's belly, and that there really is a baby in there. The angle of the statue's head makes the entreaty posture obvious, and the artist has taken full advantage of the malleable property of the link-based raw material and allowed some sections of chain to hang down limply from the head, like strands of hair distending from the upturned crown.

Curly is an equally evocative piece. It features a kneeling pregnant woman, with arms raised and placed on her head. This one is

made of motorcycle connecting rods. You have to touch the surface in order to ascertain that the material is, in fact, hard metal. It gives the impression of being skin-like, despite the spaces between and within the rods, and exudes femininity in its most vulnerable and powerful sense. It is hard to imagine the sculptures being made by males – even if they did connect with their feminine side. The artist just has to be a woman who has experienced pregnancy and childbirth. I posited that, had she been a man, Levav-Packer would have made a different feminine shape.

"If I'd been a man I probably wouldn't have made any of these sculptures," she retorted.

Other alluring figures in the main section of the exhibition include *Dotty*, made of motorcycle ball bearings; *Jumpy*, naturally of car engine springs; a fetching outlined figure called *Hollow*, which comprises motorcycle crank pins; and the wonderfully dynamic-looking *Breeze*, for which Levav-Packer used engine valves.

The artist certainly has the "breeding" for the current venture. For starters her dad, Zvi Levav, was one of the country's leading theater set designers. Then, there is that 15-year period during which she earned a good living from making wedding gowns. All the above, and more, comes into play now.

"To understand where I got the idea for all this you need to see where it all started from," she says, and she guides me to a couple of figures made of clothes hangers.

"These are from the hangers I had left from my time as a dressmaker," she explains. There's more.

"This is what I did after I began moving away from making wedding gowns," she says, showing some eye-catching works made of pottery, naturally with various other elements, such as metal forks, screws and teardrop-shaped bits of colored glass.

"I work in all kinds of disciplines, including pottery," she says.

Levav-Packer is clearly blessed with an inquisitive mind.

"I wanted to see what would happen with all kinds of substances, like glass coins, when they are fired at a very high temperature." The results surprised her and fueled

her fertile imagination.

Then there is the "Unchained" section of the exhibition, which is devoted to a motley collection of canine shapes of all sizes and ilks. There is a charming, comical sculpture of an English bulldog made of watches, while the centerpiece – literally – goes to an outsized Afghan hound made of bicycle chains. There is a cute smaller edition of the breed made of the same raw material.

Of course, the former clothes designer could not entirely neglect her former breadwinning line. There are around half a dozen dresses, including one particularly attractive item made of polychromatic watches, and another she put together from netting, gemstones, bicycle chains and gravel – *hatzatz* in Hebrew. The latter is called *Hatzatzit*, a play on *hatzatz* and *chatzait* (skirt).

In Levav-Packer's nimble and experienced hands it seems no material, however apparently intransigent or downright industrial, is safe from her ability to see suppleness and adaptability in the making. The dress part also features a number made from light bulbs, one from house keys and another from twigs.

One wonders what she will turn her mind and hands to next.

For more information (03) 683-2255 and www.niritlevav.co.il fromwithin



The epitome of pregnancy, made of motorcycle connecting rods.



A fashion-conscious 'watch dog.' (Photos: Ran Enda)



Bicycle chains are subtly incorporated in canine creations.