

MASTER OF ILLUSION

At Sotheby's recent private sale and exhibition of monumental sculptures on the manicured lawns of Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, England, Zadok Ben-David's *Autumn Reflection* stood in good company. Auguste Rodin, Claude Lorraine and Ju Ming were just a few of the names selected by the auction house for its Beyond Limits show.
Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop reports



IN MANY WAYS, *AUTUMN REFLECTION*, A TALL TREE whose branches are made of small human silhouettes, epitomises the current train of thought of an artist who has long been interested in the relationship between man and nature.

There is an undeniable poetry about Zadok Ben-David's works, whose signature flat silhouettes are highly distinctive. But beyond the beautiful aesthetic, there are also ideas about man, nature and the sciences that are explored from different, seemingly opposite angles while remaining interlinked.

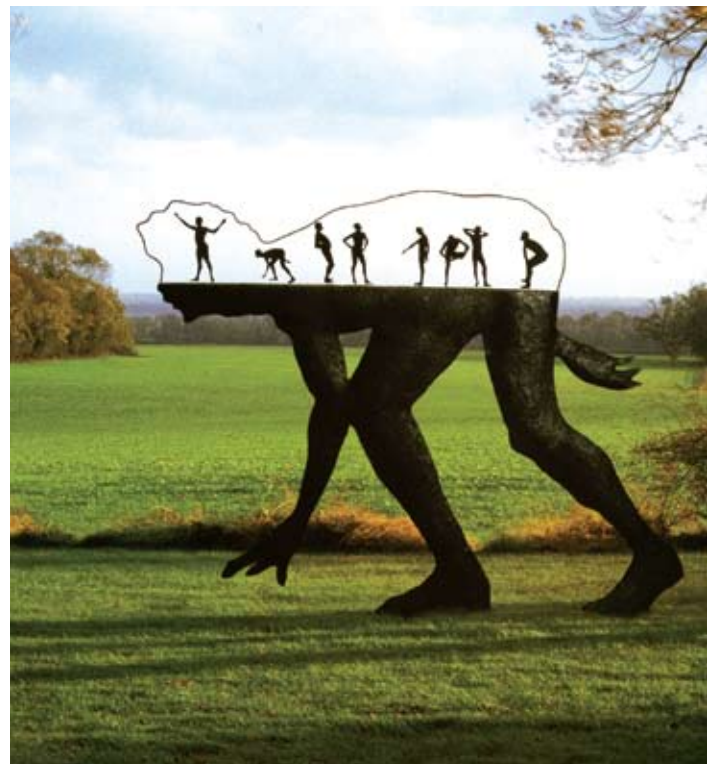
For example, the symbiotic relationship between man and nature may be represented by a tree made of tiny human bodies, but also by a human silhouette forming a keyhole over a tree to give an impression of nature growing within humanity.

"Every artist has his own philosophy, which he expresses in his work. I'm not a scientist; I'm not looking for solutions because I don't think artists can find answers. But I can tackle a subject from different angles, I can ask questions. In my case, I'm always involved with the human being, either through animals, trees, or man-made scientific images," the 58-year-old artist explains.

Born in Yemen and raised in Israel, Ben-David moved to Britain in the 1970s and studied sculpture at St Martin's School of Art under the tutelage of Anthony Caro, William Tucker and Phillip King. His work first came to prominence in the early 1980s as part of the New British Sculpture movement, which was reacting against the minimal and conceptual art of the previous decade and seeking to return to the use of a wider range of fabrication techniques.

After an early abstract period, Ben-David's work turned very colourful and he often used metal structures covered with mesh and cement. Recalling the fables of La Fontaine and Aesop that he had heard as a child, Ben-David started to use animals as a metaphor for human characteristics, and it was with one of these works that he represented Israel at the Venice Biennale in 1988. "At the time, I was quite well established in England already and had started to spread internationally, but the Biennale really gave me a big push," recalls the London-based artist.

After exploring the concept of animals with human attributes,



TOP: *Autumn Reflection*, on the manicured lawns of Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, England

ABOVE: *Conversation Piece*, in Goodwood Sculpture Park, England

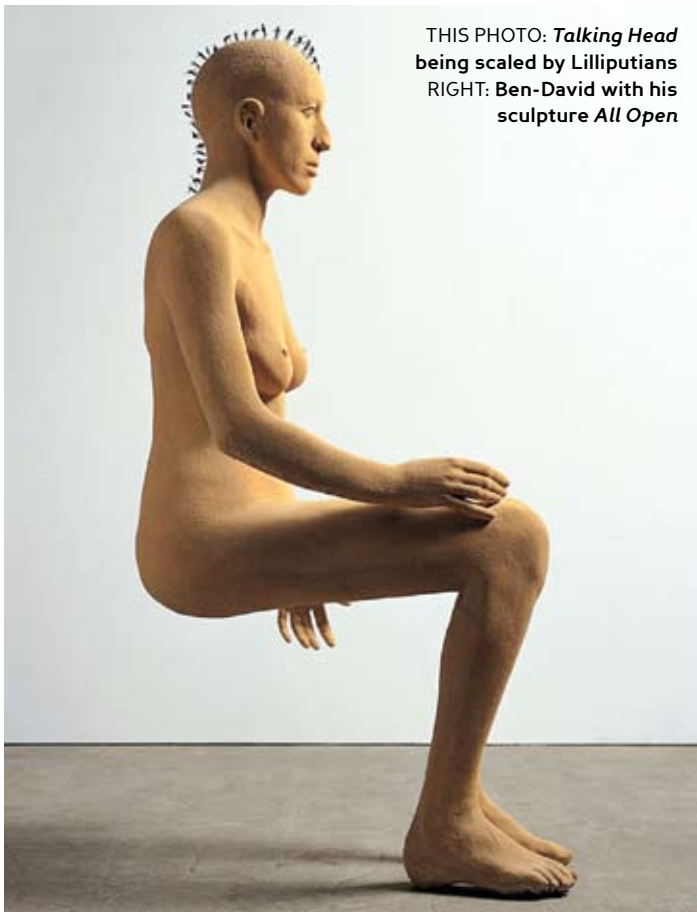
OPPOSITE PAGE: *All Open*, which sits on the wall at the entrance of the Majestic Bar

Ben-David turned it on its head by exploring the idea of the beast within man. "I did my first piece of *Evolution* in the late 1980s, moving gradually from animal to human being. *Evolution* was the breaking point, almost like an evolution in my work," he laughs. "I have never used animals in the same way after that."

His later works can be broadly divided into two categories: three-dimensional human figures whose bodies he uses as a "landscape" for Lilliputian silhouette figures to "explore"; and

THIS PHOTO: The alarming *Birds Don't Like Playing Games*
BELOW: *Evolution and Theory*, at the Museum Beelden aan Zee, Scheveningen, Holland





THIS PHOTO: *Talking Head* being scaled by Lilliputians
RIGHT: Ben-David with his sculpture *All Open*



two-dimensional metal figures, which he calls “innerscapes” and describes as “landscape inside the body.”

“Like shadow-like images, my works have become flatter and flatter in recent years,” the artist points out, admitting a fascination for optical illusion.

One of the artist’s most celebrated works, *Evolution and Theory* (1998) dealt with his life-long interest in the sciences. For this piece, Ben-David created 250 hand-cut pieces of aluminium plate, with some of them appropriating scientific illustrations dating from the 1800s, such as visual accounts of laboratory experiments, while others were life-size figures of apes and Homo sapiens.

“It is a meeting point between past and future, and early theories. It’s about a search for knowledge and understanding the natural forces, a search with a face to the future which led to modern science, at the same time I confronted it with Darwin’s evolution theory which is a search of the past, a search for the human origin,” he explained. “It’s a very nostalgic piece. It was the last time that you could see ‘Science’ with naked eyes, now it’s all hidden in tiny micro chips”.

Earlier this year, Ben-David had another major installation at the Hales Gallery in London. *Black Field* continued to investigate his interest in nature and optical trickery. The visually stunning installation consists of over 3,000 laser-cut, paper-thin miniature sculptures, mostly of flowers, which resemble illustrations from 18th and 19th century herbal and botanical manuals. Each piece has been painted black on one side and is coloured on the other side, playing visual tricks on the viewer as she moves around this ghostly “field of flowers”.

“This project will continue to grow. I’m aiming to reach 5,000 pieces,” he notes. The *Black Field* installation can now be seen at the Janet Oh Gallery in Seoul until the end of January. ■

DISCOVERING ZADOK IN SINGAPORE

SINGAPORE’S SCULPTURE LANDSCAPE WAS ENHANCED recently by the installation of two works from the internationally acclaimed sculptor. *All Open*, a 7.6-metre-high human silhouette with exposed arteries like the branches of a tree, now graces the entrance to the Majestic Bar (above), the hip new watering hole next to the New Majestic Hotel; while *Tree of Life*, a 4-metre-high tree whose branches and leaves are composed of small human silhouettes, has been installed at the Jacob Ballas Children’s Park at the Botanic Gardens.

“Both sculptures are complementary and make for an interesting aesthetic counterpoint of Zadok’s works and his development as an artist. *Tree of Life* is from his earlier series, and *All Open* is a further development of both his aesthetic and conceptual notions,” explains Audrey Phng of Asian Art Options, who curated the art works commissioned for the new bar.

“Both sculptures share his same signature theme which beckons the audience to explore man’s relationship with his environment, touching on vital issues like evolution, regeneration and conservation. An interesting question that comes to mind is whether man defines his environment or whether the environment defines the man,” she adds.

Both sculptures are made of Corten steel, which is strong and produces a thin layer of rust. “I used to use stainless steel, but Corten steel looks more appropriate for natural images with its warm earthy colours evolving to more textured deep shades,” the artist explains.