



**Confessions of Three Curators of
Association of Israel's Decorative Arts (AIDA)**

*By Jane Adlin, Dale Anderson and Davira S. Taragin
(as told to Doug Anderson)*

A.

An e-mail arrived today from Sergey Bunkov's wife, Galina. She writes in English, he does not. It began, "Sergey was very happy to get this very warm and friendly e-mail. He is very excited with what might happen in Cleveland. He treasures very much your personal care and the care of the AIDA Family about his professional life. We hope very much that the show at Tom Riley's gallery (Thomas R. Riley Galleries, Cleveland, OH) will be successful. Anyhow, this attitude helps very much to Sergey".

The timing couldn't have been better as we had just spent an hour on the phone, discussing the subject of this essay which was supposed to concern itself with the state of contemporary decorative arts in Israel four years after AIDA's start. Our conversation ranged wide and, in the end, we found ourselves using precisely the same words as Galina and Sergey.

We realized just how much a family AIDA had become when Aviva Ben-Sira, Director of Retail Operations at the Eretz Israel Museum and our Project Manager in Israel, brought us together for a cocktail party in her home with the forty artists we've chosen for SOFA CHICAGO, COLLECT and for various residencies. We were together again for the first awarding of "The Andy" at the Eretz Israel Museum, this time with 40 of our supporters who were in

Israel with us on an art/politics/history trip. We were almost 100 strong. Artists who didn't know each other have become friends. Alliances have been formed.

But it wasn't always that way.

To prepare for our special exhibit at SOFA CHICAGO 2003, Aviva came to SOFA CHICAGO 2002 to see the level of art being shown so she'd know what she was looking for in Israel. She and Rivka Saker, Director of Sotheby's Israel, put out a call for artists to participate. They received hundreds of portfolios, only 60 of which met their criteria. Of the 60, a small handful actually met the standard set by Dale, Davira and Jane and they discussed this with Aviva. Aviva told them that many of the better artists didn't want to consign their treasures to a start-up organization. We had legs in Israel because of Andy and Charles Bronfman's stature and Aviva and Rivka's reputations and connections...but our legs were wobbly.

We asked Aviva to try again, which she did. Another large box of presentations arrived at our home and Jane and Davira flew to Palm Beach for another meeting with Dale. They were joined by Jo Mett, who had agreed to run our booth at SOFA, and Andy Bronfman. Everyone was delighted by what they saw and

selections were quickly made. Andy agreed to make studio visits with Aviva and Rivka when she returned to Israel in May. Indeed, Andy decided that she would collect the work of each AIDA artist, and made it a point to buy something from each artist she visited as a way to give them much needed money to produce new work.

I'd like to say that we knew what we were doing that first year but we really didn't. We worked from the gut and from the heart. Seattle architect, Norm Sandler and his wife, well-known designer Elisabeth Sandler, created our space at SOFA and worked on the installation.

It was important that the artists come to SOFA CHICAGO. We wanted to show a face of Israel that the newspapers don't show – Israelis who make art, not in military uniform defending their country. We wanted the Israelis to see the reaction to their work so they would become energized, and we wanted them to become familiar with their international peers. As we saw it, the artists had been given an award and they needed to be there to receive it.

The artists we brought to SOFA CHICAGO 2003 came without expectations and returned home on a real high. They had given lectures and seen the full span of what was going on in the world



B.



C.

A.
Sergey Bunkov
Untitled #4, 2005
sand-blasted glass
32 x 24

B.
Reddish
Yakuza, 2006
wood
30 x 16 x 16
24 x 16 x 16

C.
Jacaranda Kori
321, 2006
stoneware, glaze
16 x 12

of contemporary decorative arts. They had filled their digital cameras with images to show their students. We learned that most of the artists covered their living expenses by teaching.

We had dinner together each night. Once the show opened, we were at the booth together the whole time. Of course, the work was well received, sold well and we were able to place several of the artists with galleries, which was the outcome we'd hoped for. The artists bonded with each other and with all of us and when they returned home, they told their friends what had happened. In Israel, a country about the size of New Jersey, word travels fast. The artists who had been to SOFA CHICAGO put AIDA on the map.

We learned from our experience and in year two, Davira went to Israel to do studio visits with Andy, Rivka and Aviva, who said that her presence, along with the reports from SOFA CHICAGO 2003 made it easier to get the best artists to work with us. Davira told everyone that she was just the eyes of a three-person curatorial committee, but reported that several artists asked her to critique their work and to suggest what they might do to make their work more attractive to the U.S. marketplace. A partnership was beginning to form. The artists began to understand that something positive could come out of a relationship with our small group. We had no agenda but to help them and they were becoming aware of that.

In June 2005, when Aviva took Jane, Dale, Andy and Rivka on a week of studio tours, they noticed that the studios had been cleaned up for their visits and work laid out the way it would be in a gallery. Tea was served and serious discussion ensued about each artist's work. As Dale put it, "gratitude had replaced attitude."

This year was bittersweet. Jane, Davira and Dale traveled to Israel to work with Aviva and Rivka. Andy was gone and it was clear that AIDA had suffered a huge loss. But the work they saw was great and the desire to be chosen and made a member of the AIDA family was palpable.

When Andy died, the artists lost a loving friend who lived in their neighborhood three months each year. They lost the joy of her visits and their ability to visit her in Jerusalem. This will never be replaced. What they've gained as AIDA has grown is a strong family in the U.S. who is working with their art dealers on their behalf.

Jane and Davira are professional curators who work for major museums where, often, their duties are administrative. Here they have been doing the work they love. As Davira put it, "it's all about the art and the artists."

You see, AIDA has opened up something for the artists and it's much more than having a dealer in the United States. As we have grown through the generosity of our supporters, we have begun to work with dealers to promote our artists' work. Jane put it best when she said "we're so happy with the results that we want to do more...which makes the artists want to do more and that makes them work on a higher level. It's a circle and it's all very positive." As we've grown, we've begun to develop a system and have tried to find the right balance that let's us help without intruding on the personal relationship an artist and their dealer needs to have. We want our artists to be successful and independent.

The form that it takes to be an AIDA artist is evolving and can assume different postures. It can mean participating in SOFA CHICAGO, COLLECT, the Philadelphia Craft Show or in programs such as those at Watershed or Corning. It can also mean having AIDA be a sponsor of a museum-organized exhibition such as the upcoming exhibition, *Women's Tales: Four Leading Israeli Jewelers*, co-organized by the Israel Museum and the Racine Art Museum (RAM). Now, the four artists featured in that exhibition will be warmly welcomed into the AIDA family when the show opens on September 17, 2006 at RAM.

Over these last four years, Aviva and Rivka, Jane, Davira and Dale have developed a curatorial standard. They see the same picture and they trust each other. Without Aviva's knowledge, hard work and relationships, none of this would have been possible.

Someone described AIDA's management style as opportunistic or, rather, management by putting yourself in the right place at the right time. We have all lived and worked in the not-for-profit world of museums, universities, summer schools and arts support groups for almost three decades and know our way around that world. Through these relationships, and the relationships of our supporters, we manage to pick up like-minded people as we keep our ears open for interesting ideas.



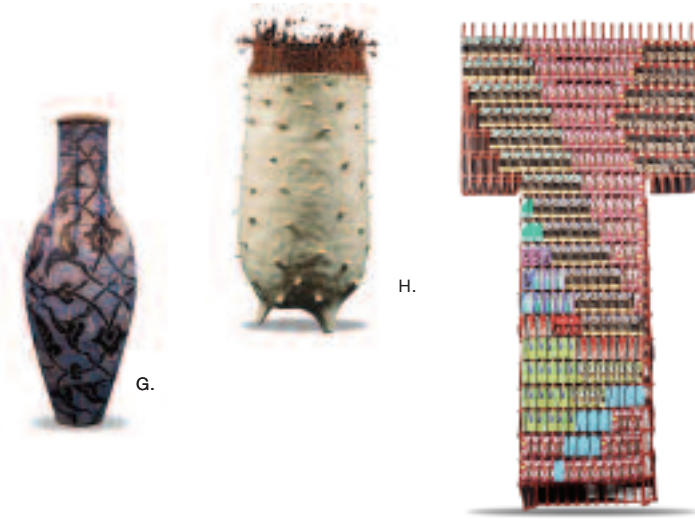
D.



E.



F.



G.

H.

I.

D.
Nirit Dekel
Ruffles, 2006
glass, silver
length: 31.5

E.
Nirit and Avi Berman
Spring Bouquet, 2006
18k gold, tourmaline,
aquamarine, beryl
1.25

F.
Noa Goren-Amir
Waves Bracelet 1, 2005
22k gold
2d

G.
Avner Singer
Untitled, 2006
local clay, terra sigillata,
overglaze
27.5h

H.
Tania Engelstein
Veil, 2006
porcelain, copper wire netting
17.75 x 7.75

I.
Mikhal Gamzou
Foregin Worker, 2006
construction net, public
telephone cards, nylon cable
ties, key markers
80 x 42 x 7

J.
Andrea and Charles Bronfman

AIDA has been the beneficiary of generous support from a wide range of people. Through the generosity of the Andrea & Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, we've been able to afford to hire Erika Vogel as AIDA's Director.

Erika has picked up the ball that started with a successful partnership with Watershed last summer. This year we repeat that experience and have formed new relationships with the Corning Museum of Glass and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts where students will have fellowships. In future years we will continue this program and seek further relationships where we can place teachers from Israel into summer programs with the goal of cultural exchange leading to opportunity for the artists. Through the generosity of several of our supporters, 14 artists from Israel have been given scholarships to Pilchuck Glass School over the last few years. Having Aviva on the ground in Israel and with the advice of well-positioned AIDA artists, we are able to pick the right people for each opportunity.

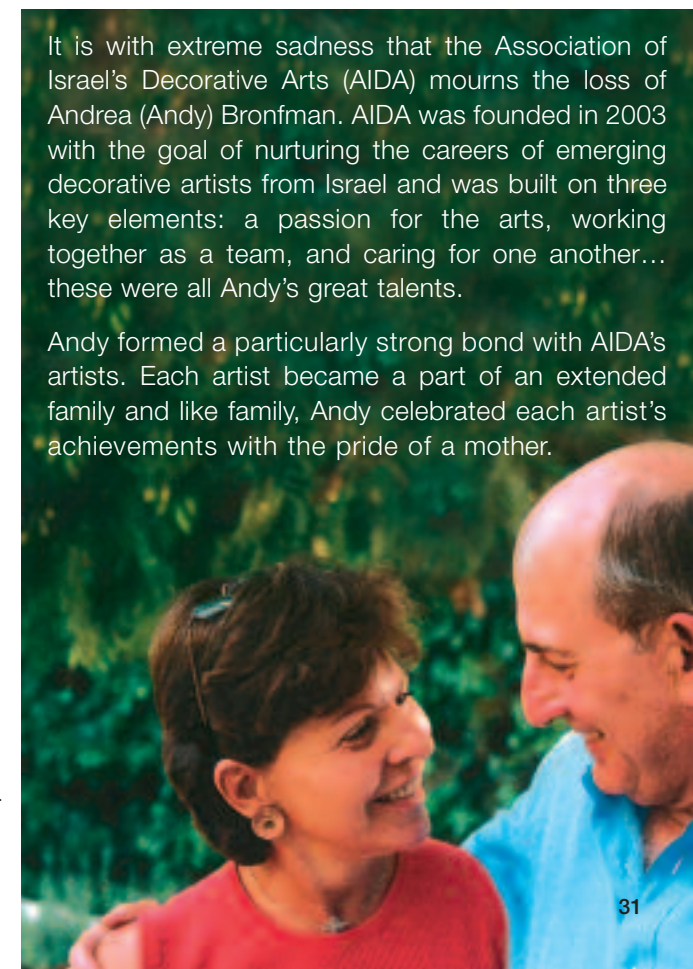
We are always pleasantly surprised by the number of hits our website, www.aidaarts.org, receives each month and where they come from. We are delighted when we hear that a tour organizer has included studio visits to AIDA artists in his trip or has asked Aviva to help make that kind of arrangement. In a word, we've helped put artists working in the decorative arts in Israel on the international map. We've given them optimism, broadened their horizons, arranged for residencies,

fellowships and teaching opportunities, given them professional advice, introduced their work to the collector community in the United States and London, connected them to galleries in the United States and Europe and driven traffic to their door. Together, we've built AIDA and it belongs to all of us.

In the end, it's about the art and the artists. How do you measure the outcome? One thing's for sure, AIDA artists present themselves more confidently than they did four years ago.

Published in conjunction with the SOFA CHICAGO 2006 special exhibit: *Progressions* presented by the Association of Israel's Decorative Arts (AIDA).

J.



It is with extreme sadness that the Association of Israel's Decorative Arts (AIDA) mourns the loss of Andrea (Andy) Bronfman. AIDA was founded in 2003 with the goal of nurturing the careers of emerging decorative artists from Israel and was built on three key elements: a passion for the arts, working together as a team, and caring for one another... these were all Andy's great talents.

Andy formed a particularly strong bond with AIDA's artists. Each artist became a part of an extended family and like family, Andy celebrated each artist's achievements with the pride of a mother.