

THE ARTS

Tamer of the Elements

The world was too much with him in Israel, so Sassi Harel moved to West Virginia—and became a first-class sculptor

ROBBY BERMAN

WHEN YOUR AVERAGE Israeli gets fed up with his native land, he often emigrates. For Sassi Harel, simple *yeridah*—leaving

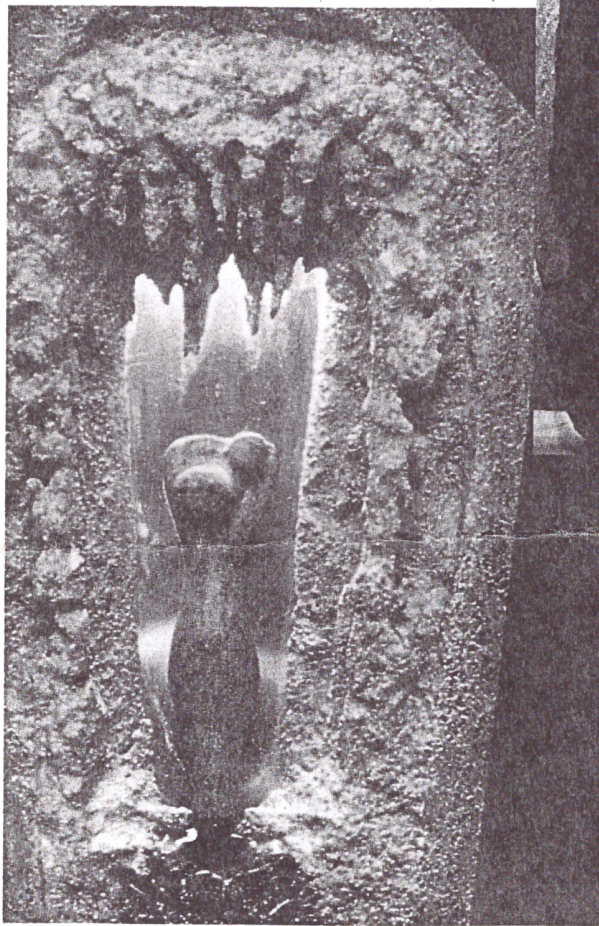
Israel—wasn't enough. He needed a more active form of healing—something to express his yearning for harmony and tranquility. Relocating to the rustic solitude of the West Virginia outback, and without the benefit of any formal training, Harel turned himself into a sculptor. Today, nearly two decades later, he's receiving corporate and public commissions, and exhibiting in group and solo shows to growing critical acclaim.

Born in 1956 to Iraqi immigrants and raised in Ramat Gan, near Tel Aviv, Harel finished his army service as a combat medic in 1979 and left for medical school in Italy. After a year of plodding through lectures and exams, he returned home. While hiking in the Sinai desert, he met the woman who was to become his wife, a non-Jewish Maryland-born tourist named Barri.

Finding Israel constraining and the Levantine manner a little rough, the couple began a soul-searching trek around the globe, eventually reaching California. They started moving eastward, scouring the continent for a place to raise a family; when they hit West Virginia, aware they were rapidly approaching the Atlantic, they decided to stop, settling in the thickly wooded, rolling hills of American history. They fell in love, recalls Sassi today, with "the beauty of the land and the beauty of the people." Renting a wood-

ARTIST AND HIS 'CHILD':
(Right) 'When I tame raw elements,' says Harel, 'it soothes me'

'IN THE GATE OF LIFE':
(Below) Harel's light-and-water sculptures feel like organic extensions of the artist



PHOTOS BY KEN SHERMAN

son, West Virginia, Sassi says, with an involuntary shiver: "Every trip to the out-house during the winter was a powerful reminder that I wasn't in Israel."

A ready supply of wood and time, and a craving to express himself, led Harel, who'd shown no particular prowess for art while growing up, to produce his first non-biological offspring: totem poles. When a cruel sun caused his "children," as he occasionally refers to his works, to crack, the autodidact artist quickly switched mediums, to stone. Any weather-beaten chain-gang member will swear that slamming away at serpentine is punishment; for Harel, it's a privilege. Sculpting with a hammer and chisel, he explains, allows him to "explore my inner cave."

Although Henry Moore was an inspiration, it was Isamu Noguchi's stone and water pieces that had the greatest influence on Harel. Harel's impressionistic creations are composites of nature's elements: fire, water, stone and sound. Their leitmotifs are smooth curves, flowing water and a mysterious primordial light that allows the

heated log cabin, initially sans indoor plumbing, they dug in: Today they have two children, Natan, age 14, and Shara, age 12. With their nearest neighbor not even within eyesight, the solitude of nature gave Sassi and Barri, a special-ed teacher, the inner peace they were seeking.

Not that life was without tribulations. Recalling the couple's early days in Alder-

audience to experience — rather than simply view — his work. "When I tame raw elements, causing them to interact in a peaceful way, it soothes me," he says softly. "Smoothing stones is my catharsis; if only I could do that with Israelis."

HAREL IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY known in North America, though he's yet to be represented by a SoHo gallery. But most of his admirers aren't even aware he's Israeli. A one-man show last year at a Richmond, Virginia synagogue included his first two pieces with Jewish themes. One, a stone Hanukkah menorah, is draped with streams of water gently flowing between the oil-lit flames. Ironically, it's the second piece, an angular, stone-hewed Star of David encompassing a gas-fueled flame, that signals Harel's deviation from his typically non-linear forms. Other works are adorned with low-reliefs of three cherubic figures ascending toward an orb. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; or Father, Son and Holy Ghost? "Whatever . . ." he says indifferently. The Harels have no formal affiliation with any religious denomination, and Sassi declares himself "a human

first and Jew second."

The serenity that emanates from Harel's art seems more like an organic extension of the artist than a discrete, inanimate creation. When one is face-to-face with his angelic smile, Buddha-like calm and gentle warmth, the question more likely to come to mind is not why he left Israel, but

When Harel told his reserves officer he couldn't 'touch guns anymore,' it landed him in prison

how he survived it as long as he did — especially his days in the military. When Harel came back in 1981 for his first visit, he tried explaining to his reserves officer how he "can't touch guns anymore." He was patiently heard out — and quickly ushered into prison. Eventually, it was the Israeli army that surrendered.

Harel still occasionally visits his family in Israel; this winter he plans to return for

a two-week stay with the wife and kids. The turbulence of Israeli life, it would seem, is no longer able to rock his boat of inner tranquility.

With his growing recognition, Harel is receiving commissions: an order for an outdoor water-and-light piece from Lewisburg, West Virginia's newly refurbished Carnegie Hall cultural center; another for the corporate headquarters of Cellular One, a West Virginia cell-phone server.

But the sculptor swears success won't ruin him: "I won't change my simple log-cabin life just because my income grew. I'll still throw wood on the hearth to warm my house." The improvement in their lot, however, has allowed Barri to give up her teaching job to devote her time to being a full-time mom.

Perhaps the Cellular One commission is serendipity's way of bringing Sassi Harel back into closer connection with his native land. After all, if his stone-and-water sculpture succeeds in having a soothing effect on the people who work at this local epicenter of cell-phone activity, the time might be ripe for the cell phone-saturated State of Israel to consider commissioning something from this prodigal son. □

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