



## **“We are not art collectors, but peace collectors” (Dr. Eli Fischer)**

Batia Donner

The gaze never rests on one thing. It is always peripheral, always inclusive, always uniting an integration of several factors, of knowledge and practice, of collecting and values. This is the path that Eli Fischer outlined for his close environment—his family and the employees of the Dr. Fischer Corporation—and it is the concept that guided the creation, circulation and exhibition of the Peace Art collection.

The purchase of the Israel Postal Service’s first-day-of-issue collection of envelopes marking the signing of the peace agreement with Egypt and painted by Israel’s best artists as a gift to the Israel Security Fund (*Libi*), was the first step in a project of global reach. This was the core that launched a long-term and wide-ranging venture: presentation of the peace collection worldwide; expansion of the collection after the signing of the peace agreement with Jordan; an invitation to children of the world to draw their versions of the theme of peace; contactions with artists at various junctures such as the signing of the Abraham Accords with the UAE, and cooperation with artists in India to show artworks focused on the themes of coexistence, mutual respect and peace. As the collection grew, gaining dimensions and depth, it also included autonomous works of art on the subjects of peace and coexistence. Its exposure to the public arouses discussion about social values and stimulates the mechanisms of philanthropy and social engagement. Wherever exhibited, it becomes a focal point for discourse on a variety of activities and connections with the local community, artists, public figures and institutions.

Notwithstanding the use of the mail envelope as a platform, the “peace envelopes,” which were the starting point for building and circulating the art collection, are not “mail art.” Nor do they fit mail art’s typical mechanism or subject matter. Postal art focuses on communication as an art form and mail as a medium to promote an egalitarian creative outlet that circumvents the accepted modes of art’s dissemination and value systems (museums, galleries and the art market). The peace envelope collection seeks the reverse: to present art as the beginning of communication and to set into motion broader circles of action. The peace envelopes do not represent an alternative way of creating a distribution network, but they are rather a means to

bring about a profound change, both in individual people's patterns of thinking and groups' institutional and organizational action. While in mail art, communication takes place within the field of art and its borders, the works of art painted on the peace envelopes offer a nucleus of discourse that spills over from the art realm to the real world. The purpose of presenting the envelopes is not to show a means of communication and action detached from institutional mechanisms, as does mail art, but rather communal action in the framework of the establishment and with its assistance.

The format of the standard mail envelope, measuring 17.4x10 cm, as a platform for the works drawn on first day issue envelopes following the signing of the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, merges two elements: One is the institutional promotion of an official state nature with a wide distribution, which intensifies issues of national importance and anchors it within an historical continuum, supported by verses from the Jewish prayer book. The other is the standard template of the postal envelope. The combination of the celebratory and the mundane, of the unique and the routine as a way of embedding historical events in our daily lives, offered the artists an opportunity to leave personal traces and signs of belonging both to the historical event and of their individual creative sequence within the context of the historical process.

Observing the way the artistic statement, sometimes intuitive, confronts the institutional format reveals fundamental differences between the peace envelopes drawn in the wake of the peace treaty with Egypt (1979) and those created after the peace treaty with Jordan (1994). While both display similar graphic elements on the surface of the printed envelopes—a stamp and postmark at the top right and text from the Hebrew prayer book—the design of the printed verse on the envelope changed. On the earlier envelopes, the verse appears along the bottom edge as a line of text printed in gold with the English translation below it. In the later envelopes, the verse forms the shape of a rounded arch, measuring about a third of the width of the envelope and about two-thirds its height, with the text printed in the three official languages in Israel—Hebrew, English and Arabic. These patterns, which of course reflect differences in institutional approach, did eventually set limits of the artists' creative freedom.

In the first series of envelopes, one can see that for the most part, the artists took pains to work within the boundaries of the allotted space without infringing on the official representations. They sought to express something of the astonishment and feeling of euphoria that accompanied

President Sadat's landing in Israel and the signing of the peace agreement with Egypt. Due to the particular nature of the historical event and the accompanying sense of changing world orders, the work of the artists who responded to the challenge carries universal meaning and does not usually touch on current issues or use socially or politically charged iconography. Their response appeared intuitive, emotional and spontaneous, rather than rational. Therefore, the feelings that the illustrations project range from transcendence, hope and joy to circumspection.

Many of the artists chose to draw on familiar, universal symbols of peace like the dove and an olive branch or the rainbow, and present them as linguistic components useful for communicating an immediate and clear a message. Nevertheless, even after selecting a familiar symbol and converting the common image into a quote, artists such as Michael Eisman, Arie Navon, Alima and others sought to translate the image into their personal visual language and present their own version anchored in their work.

Of particular interest is Yehezkel Streichman's use and integration of the motif of the dove. At first glance, the viewer must look carefully to find it among the shapes that fill the painting's space. This work touches on a theme that preoccupied Streichman in the 1970s and 1980s—the window. His window is a window to the soul and beyond the bars and within them he embeds fixed elements—a fig tree and traces of blue sky—which the poet Mordechai Goldman called “emotion stains.”<sup>1</sup>

[Yehezkel Streichman]

Within the space of the envelope's surface, Streichman transformed the image of one of the fig leaves, one of these “emotion stains,” into a dove with an olive branch in its beak. In doing so, he effectively appropriated the image of peace into his artistic oeuvre.

As opposed to Streichman's “natural” integration of the image of the dove, Alima adopted a different strategy. Deviating from the abstraction that characterized her work, she presented a figurative image of a dove imbued with symbolic context. By using her strong, clear and concise drawing line, the artist succeeded in presenting a stance of excitement surrounding the newly

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<sup>1</sup> Mordechai Goldman, “Halon mesorag,” in Ellen Ginton, *Yehezkel Streichman – Tsivei mayim* (exh. cat), Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1989.

hatched dove and at the same time presented it as an image of something fragile and in need of protection.

[Alima]

Other artists, such as the painter and graphic designer Jean David for example, bestowed an ambiguous and more blatant meaning of the symbol of the dove. Choosing to present one dove in flight and another spiraling downward, David still referred to the dove as a symbol of peace, but also introduced another signifier with an opposite meaning, perhaps as a warning or a sign of apprehension.

[Jean David]

Another group of artists avoided using common peace symbols replacing them with personal ones drawn from their own visual language. Thus, Siona Shimshi placed her unfinished human figures on an unfolded envelope. The rows of large, anonymous figures—us, them, everybody—march in opposite directions: some walk across a goal board, others march in the direction of a chessboard. The big game, in Shimshi's terms, the game of life, is the cause, motive and goal. The mechanical march is the possibility, and peace, in this context, is subject to the rules of the game on the board.

[Siona Shimshi]

Menashe Kadishman also drew from his personal image bank to formulate a statement on the theme of peace. Kadishman posed his rams and sheep as symbolic opposites (the ram horns destined for combat, opposite the serenity of the sheep) in a state of coexistence, as a possibility that does not necessarily require a vision of prophetic future.

Moshe Kupferman did not reject the figurative and symbolic possibilities offered by the subject matter. He chose to substitute the basic forms he regularly used as anchoring points in his painting with symbols and typography printed over the envelope and use them as territory definers and holding points on which he based the painting's structure. Kupferman did not reject the symbols related to the subject of peace (the envelope flap is folded into a shape that alludes to the Star of David, the Peace Stamp as a symbol, the olive branches, the word "peace" and the prayer verse), but harnessed them to the creative process.

[Moshe Kupferman]

Osias Hofstetter deviated from certain features of his art so that he could return to them in the construction of the painting. As a religious artist in the existential sense, Hofstetter transformed the mythical into a possibility and the temporal into timeless. The sculptural perception characterizing his paintings is reflected in the spatial organization and construction of the viewing process by the guiding the movement of the eye from the heavy limbed woman, as a symbol of fertility, to the Egyptian figures and to the ancient tree in the background and back. He presented here a symbol in the process of becoming, a symbol undergoing transformation. The painting does not deal with a historical event, but with a synchronous experience, which exposes man within the historical process, and with the ethical-religious meaning that derives from it.

[Osias Hofstetter]

Aviva Uri's painting also integrated an element from her oeuvre, namely her ball series created in the 1970s as "an expressive rendering of the earth, something between a flower and a bomb."<sup>2</sup> While in other drawings where the ball is enclosed by a frame as a mechanical and cold element, here, the rainbow peeking out from behind it, like the dove in the story of the flood, is a symbol of optimism.

[Aviva Uri]

The transition from micro to macro, between cosmic descriptions to representing personal feeling, runs like a common thread among the works - by adopting universal symbols or recruiting a historical perspective to create a personal statement, by presenting abstract and intuitive works, like those of Lea Nickel and Ori Reisman, or by incorporating the artist's image in historical context, as in the works by Ivan Schwebel and the caricaturist Zeev.

[Lea Nickel]

The sacred reverence that marked the works of art painted on the envelopes commemorating the celebration of the historic peace treaty with Egypt, dissipated slightly with the signing of the peace treaty with Jordan. The appeal to the artists this time was broader and among those who

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Breitberg-Semel, *Aviva Ury, Drawings* (exh. cat.), Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1977.

responded, besides the Israeli artists—Jews and Arabs—were international artists such as Agnes Denes, Ryszard Wasko, Igor Sakharov and Jenny Marketou and Jordanian artists refused to take part. The personal element in the works—both the connection to the sequence of works of each of the artists and the critical aspect—intensified. The envelope’s rectangular shape ceased to be an exclusive dictate for defining the boundaries of the work. Some artists such as Tessie Cohen-Pfeffer and Shlomit Bauman chose to unfold the envelope (as did Siona Shimshi in the previous cycle). Others, such as Miriam Neiger, cut, or folded and reassembled it. Sculptors such as Nahum Tevet, Ido Bar-El and Zvika Kantor, completely ignored its shape and dimensions and incorporated it as an element in a three-dimensional work.

[Tessie Pfeffer-Cohen]

[Miriam Neiger]

[Nahum Tevet]

In some works, such as by Eran Shakine and Farid Abu-Shakra, although layers of paint covered the graphic elements, they remained recognizable and functioned as the work’s infrastructure, like a base color in a painting. In others, when the graphic elements ceased to serve as boundary markers of the painted space, they gained a central place by turning into references and markers of context: Pamela Levy presented the Peace Stamp, along with a road map and a red postage sticker bearing a warning as a way to address both the notion of communication within the genre of mail art and the fear of the fragility of the peace. David Gerstein presented a dream of peace by inserting the verse “Spread over us your tabernacle of peace...” in a visionary landscape that resembles a fictional paradise inhabited by hybrid creatures and songbirds. Dafna Moriya harnessed the graphic elements—the Peace Stamp and the prayer verse—to draw a narrative at the center of which she placed a palm tree as a characteristic of the local landscape. Michail Grobman used a similar strategy, emphasizing the graphic elements as anchors around which he sketched a mythical narrative aided by Jewish symbols and images of hybrid creatures, which incorporated religious and national motifs that characterized his work in those years. Emphasizing the institutional graphic elements was also the way Hanita Ben-Jano chose to formulate a feminist message in her work, while Liliane Klapisch, Simcha Shirman and Smadar Eliasaf erased the prayer motif in their works in order to muffle the religious component and emphasize existential and national motifs instead.

[Eran Shakine]

[Pamela Levy]

[David Gerstein]

[Dafna Morya]

[Michail Grobman]

[Hanita Ben-Jano]

[Simcha Shirman]

[Liliane Klapisch]

While the amount of peace-related slogans and visual clichés diminished in the second cycle of painted envelopes, the peace dove remained present in a number of works, though in some it became an undefined bird and carried a symbolic meaning of freedom and open spaces. Israeli and Jordanian flags and stereotypical urban landscape views appeared as tools for presenting the possibility of coexistence between the countries. For example, Lee Rimon presented a fabric weave uniting the colors of the two countries' flags, and Ruth Zarfati introduced an encounter of stereotypical buildings—on one side houses with Eastern domes, and on the other, red-roofed houses as a nostalgic image of the Worker Settlement buildings—separated by the Jordan River filled with fish symbolizing fertility and the dove of peace hovering above. Women's crafts such as embroidery were incorporated as gender statements and folkloristic elements such as the hamsas and eye images figured as popular talismen against the evil eye.

[Lee Rimon]

[Ruth Zarfati]

[Yael Katz Ben Shalom]

[Shlomit Bauman]

Artists like Yaakov Hefetz, Ruth Katz, Yehoshua Neustein and others chose to present an ideological sketch for joint ventures between the two people. In a proposal for a border project from 1996, Neustein presented a drawing, which he called "Moving Border Statue." He added

the following explanatory statement on the envelope: “A bronze seesaw that will be placed on the border with the board extending across the border so that children from both countries can play without having to cross political borders.” Twenty-three years later, in 2019, this idea eventually became the “Teeter Totter Wall,” a project created by an American architect and a designer along the US-Mexico border. As part of the initiative, the planners installed seesaws on either side of a fence between the two countries to protest the US president’s decision to build a separation wall along the border.

[Yehoshua Neustein]

[Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello, *Teeter Totter Wall*, 2019]

The span of possibilities for visual representation of the desire for peace largely echoed the social and political reality in Israel and was based, on the one hand, on common perceptions and universal and national symbols, and on the other, on each of the artist’s unique metaphors and creative visual language. The results ranged from hope and romantic notions to concern or skepticism of reality.

The project “Children of the World Draw Peace,” in which about 1,500 paintings from 15 countries around the world were gathered, including works by Israeli and Arab children, was launched in 1997 and was unveiled to the public in 2000 at an exhibition at Beit Ariela in Tel Aviv. This project combined a variety of discussions and educational activities focused around the theme of peace as a center of gravity. Following the exhibition, which included a series of meetings and workshops, the works were donated to pediatric wards in Israeli hospitals. Close looking at the children’s drawings reveals fundamental differences between them and the works of the adult artists: the children’s artworks are utopian and usually uncritical, although some asked to present a situation that preceded the peace process in order to intensify its importance. Most of the paintings depict a fairytale world. They are naive, cheerful and filled with minute detail. Some seek to describe the gap between peace and war, such as the work by a girl who drew two figures pointing weapons at each other that fire hearts instead of bullets. In others, men hold guns and women hold bunches of flowers. Part of them attempt to describe universal peace and make frequent use of flags, maps, images of the earth and the dove of peace; others focus on interracial equality and goodwill among citizens of different countries around the world.



[Behig Efe Tekin (b. 1988), Turkey]

[Noack Kevin (b. 1991) Germany]

[Cortina Herrera Lea (b. 1983) Peru]

[Gonca Aygun (b. 1984), Turkey]

[Athena Charalambides (b. 1992), Cyprus]

The Fischer family's art collection is an integral part of a wide-ranging venture based on an uncompromising system of values, social engagement and philanthropy. Following the initiative and intense involvement in organizing and exhibiting the collections of peace envelopes and children's drawings, the Fischers embarked on a new path to meet artists and to visit exhibitions and artists' studios. These visits led to a series of dialogues, sometimes also to financial support, alongside the purchase of works of art for the collection—all on the theme of peace and coexistence. Their acquisitions were always accompanied by broadminded looking focused on social involvement and interpersonal communication. For example, in 1995, the Fischer family funded the catalog for the *Co-Existence* events of the International Museum of Artists in Mitzpe Ramon, in which about 100 artists from all over the world took part, including artists from neighboring countries and the Palestinian Authority. Similarly, a collection of prints created after the murder of Emil Grinzweig, which includes works by Arie Azene, Tova Berlinsky, Yair Garbuz, Israel Hadani, Pinchas Cohen-Gan, Avigdor Stematsky, Liliane Klapisch, Danny Karavan, Ruth Schloss and Ivan Schwebel, were purchased to support The Adam Institute for Democracy and Peace in Jerusalem in Memory of Emil Greenzweig.

[Pinhas Cohen Gan]

In 1996, at the opening of the exhibition of peace envelopes at Hebrew Union College in New York, Doron Polak invited the Fischers to visit the studio of Agnes Denes, an American conceptual artist and one of the first environmental artists in the United States. She introduced them to ecological and environmental art and showed them her plan for a *Peace Park for Mind and Soul* in Queens, New York. During that visit to the United States, they met Yigal Ozeri in his studio where they purchased works dealing with the encounter between Israel and Palestine

and the following year they supported the production of the catalog for his exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

[Yigal Ozeri]

Four works by Benni Efrat, related to violence against children, were purchased in 1998 at an exhibition held by the Israel Museum in Neve Tzedek in Tel Aviv. Another video work, *Clock*, was purchased at the ARTIPAD (2015) exhibition, in which artists donated their works in order to fund iPads for teachers in the education system.

[Benni Efrat]

The Fischer family's growing art collection has been displayed alongside the peace envelopes in various exhibitions. Over the years, works by a number of artists such as Alima, Tsibi Geva, Micha Laury, Motti Mizrahi, Yigal Tumarkin and others have been added to the collection, along with works of Palestinian artists such as Ibrahim Nubani and Khaled Hurani and works by members of the Abu Shakra family—Farid, Walid and Said—purchased in the exhibition “Umm al-Fahm in Givatayim | Abu Shakra in the Theater,” held in 1999.

[Motti Mizrahi]

[Tsibi Geva]

[Yigal Tumarkin]

[Ibrahim Nubani]

[Farid Abu Shakra]

Supporting art projects, such as the *Drap Art* group project, a meeting of artists from Spain and Israel who work with recycled materials (1998), and “Art Industry 2005” at the Israel Festival in Jerusalem was added to support offered to individual artists. . . The Fischer family bought works by Tsibi Geva, Alima, Motti Mizrahi (*Peace Rider*), Osnat Rabinovich (*Icarus*) and other artists in a sale that was organized in 1996 in order to raise funds for the artist Meira Shemesh to travel to Belgium for a life-saving surgery. Similarly, when Gideon Gechtman needed funding for an experimental surgery in Germany in 2007, they purchased his work *Qassam Rocket* for the collection, thus enabling his travel for the operation.

[Gideon Gechtman, *Qassam Rocket*, from the project “Rocket Launcher,” 2006–2008]

The traditional definition of collecting includes searching, locating, purchasing, organizing, sorting, displaying, storing, and maintaining items. According to this definition, the Fischer family are not art collectors in the conventional sense. For them, the art is not the goal, but rather the means to spread and instill values in the public’s consciousness. This consistent approach continues to guide them in the series of exhibitions held at the gallery in memory of Deborah Fischer, which has been operating since 2009, and is dedicated to the activities of non-profit organizations. Like in previous initiatives, here too, art is used in a variety of ways to promote values such as solidarity, cooperation, equality and coexistence, or as Dr. Eli Fischer put it: “We are not art collectors, but peace collectors.”