

Dani Karavan

Drawings of Peace and War

How can one bring Dani Karavan into a gallery—let alone a small, intimate gallery in the old heart of Tel Aviv? Dani Karavan is an artist of public spaces—the Negev Monument (Be’er Sheva), White Square (Wolfson Park), Culture Square (Habima)—and of dozens of sites and public artworks throughout Israel and around the world. Karavan (b. 1930) grew up on the newly built boulevards and dunes of Tel Aviv. His earliest memories, his first works of art, were “the traces of my footprints on the sand.” His large site-specific projects participate or create environments. But, can the same qualities of presence, contemplation, play, innocence and belonging—qualities that are spiritual as much as sensory—also materialize in a simple drawing on paper?

For the present exhibition, five years after Karavan’s death and five years after the founding of Parterre, we chose chamber works: works created by hand, or works that can be cupped like a jewel in the palm of one’s hand. These are works that deal with war and peace, destruction and creation—arguably the central axes of our being here; works that are deeply local yet also universal—and these, too, are axes of our existence.

Karavan created the series *Meditations on Peace* following an invitation from Aryeh (Lova) Eliav, during the agonizing period after the Yom Kippur War. Lova, a thinker and politician of the rare kind who sought not power but hope, found solace in the countless Jewish sources that speak of peace. Karavan was invited to add drawings, and returned with a series of a dozen works in pencil, gold, and blue on paper.

The drawings are extremely basic: a point (“peace” in medieval sources is the simplest or most abstract); a line (separation or compromise); a triangle (the three virtues—justice, truth, and peace); a square (the four Hebrew letters of God’s name and of “peace”); a circle (wholeness); and the repetition of the word “peace” seven times (corresponding to the virtues—peace, well-being, blessing, life, grace, generosity, and compassion). These same geometric forms recur throughout many of Karavan’s sculptural works over the years; they function like a code or DNA from which the symbols of religions and nations are composed.

The war drawings were never exhibited, apart from their use in the military press in 1967. Karavan accompanied the army forces as a sketch artist for six days along their route—from the conquest of Gaza to El-Arish, Bethlehem, and Jenin. The drawings are informative and include brief explanations. Karavan drew in pen on paper while in motion: fighters, landscapes, and residents—captured in a virtuoso mélange that seizes a moment and a feeling which, before our very eyes, turn into myth or history. Through the darkness and sensory intoxication of battle, Karavan’s naive innocence breaks through—the child who sees how footsteps in the sand become destiny.

War drawings on one side, and meditation on peace on the other.

And on the floor—the sand printer by Roy Brand traces Karavan’s basic elements in a serial manner, layer upon layer. Familiar symbols rise from the sand and are quickly erased. The

action repeats itself again and again, as if seeking to establish a place, to create a structure and cast meaning into it—and then to erase and return to a clean slate.

In a text titled “Footprints,” Karavan referred to sand as a primal and final substrate: “Once I wrote in the sand that if I had the strength, I would make only one drawing, and the wind would slowly erase it, all of it, everything, and leave nothing—nothing would remain.”

Point, line, triangle, circle, square—the most basic elements of human geometry. Perhaps sacred or ideal geometry. In nature there are no such forms: there is no perfection, no ideal. We use these forms to build houses, furniture, places, ideas, symbols, ideologies, thoughts, ways of life. We build as though it will never end. And we place them back in nature—on the sand, facing the sea, facing the wind. In our sisyphean struggle to create order out of chaos, we struggle, erase, destroy, and fight.

Karavan’s question is whether it is possible to produce a form—structure—place of peace. Can there be a city of peace? In 1976, Dani Karavan installed a sculptural environment of white concrete at the main entrance of the Venice Art Biennale. The work is called *Jerusalem City of Peace*—a poetic gesture that rhymes in Hebrew. The public was invited to walk on the sculptural environment, and many children removed their shoes and played on it. Once again, the same Karavan DNA of simple geometric forms generates a site that is ritualistic, playful, and historical. The model of that sculptural environment is displayed in the exhibition on a table. It is composed of nine parts. Like building blocks or a set of carefully chosen words, the bronze pieces conjure, as if by magic, a universe of childhood.

Copies of this sculpture were given as gifts to Anwar Sadat; Gerald Ford (by Yitzhak Rabin); François Mitterrand (by Shimon Peres); and Bill Clinton (by Leah Rabin and Shimon Peres).

The sculpture *Twins* presents two stairways made of compacted earth, fiber and straw, using a technique reminiscent of the early cooperative-village houses. Sand and earth sculptures marking an upward path are a significant element in many of Karavan’s works. From the earth we came and to it we shall return, yet at the same time we also possess the ability to transcend beyond ourselves and this specific place.

The sculpture *Partition*, installed in the small chapel-like section of the gallery, combines the feeling of a model with an environment akin to the Negev Monument—Karavan’s first complete masterpiece and one of the most important artworks in Israel. How can an artwork be at once a monument, a landmark, a musical instrument (the tower is perforated like a flute, and the desert wind plays it), and a playful environment? Even for Karavan, the project was exhausting. He refined it from 1963 to 1968, until its order and rhythm were right, and until the weight of the concrete lifted—hovering like a spirit above the desert. The sculptural pieces (*Partition*, *Twins*) as well as the prints (*Ladder*, *Gates of Heaven*, *Spiral*) aspire to a moment of revelation. The horizontal line crosses the vertical line, like Jacob’s ladder, from the earth to the Shekhinah and back again. Linear, historical time and the sensory experience of the everpresent do not merge, but rather morph the one into the other.

And all this time the printer draws in the sand, the most basic material. Lines drawn in sand accumulate into increasingly complex symbols, and then they are erased. Images, ideas return to being just sand. A moment of loss or of relief. And again, over and over.

Roy Brand