

# Art

## The art of the matter

Having spent nearly a year preparing for "Light and Space in the Garden of Reason", Yale art critic **Steven Henry Madoff** knows Vaclav Cigler's work inside out. *Karin Meytahl* met with the curator, who shared his views on the Czech glass artist and the intricate art of curating

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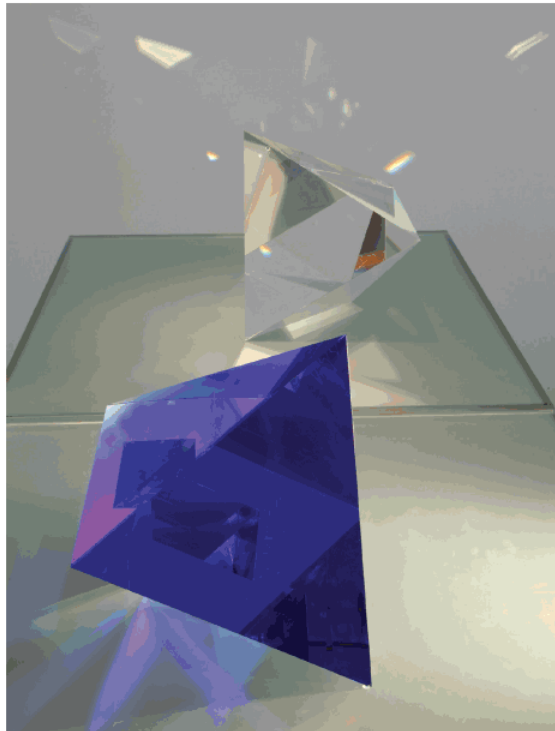
**You have a strong academic background in English literature. Do you find it a challenge that artworks do not have as explicit a narrative as works of fiction do?**

"I don't see it that way at all – I think there are different narratives to a work of art. There are three different narratives: one is the artist's narrative. The second is the art critic/historian's narrative, and the third is the curator's narrative, which is created with the audience of the show in mind. For Cigler's show, I read as much as I could about the artist to create the narrative that I came up with for the exhibit: Cigler is interested in including viewers in the work, so that the individual and the collective both become part of the work through seeing themselves reflected in the pieces. This is really interesting, considering that he first formulated his ideas as a citizen of Communist Czechoslovakia. It was his way of asserting his expression of individual liberty under an anti-democratic regime. In my opening remarks for the exhibit's opening, I said that 'the curator's job is to find the soul of the artist, and in doing so to find, in some small way, the soul of the world.'"

**Can you clarify the meaning of the term "The Garden of Reason"?**

"Vaclav Cigler's uses geometric forms to present the rational, logical aspect of mankind. Geometrical, rational presentation – this is the 'reason'. 'Garden' alludes to the collection of different works put together, forming a 'garden' of sorts."

**Tell me a little bit about the proc-**



**Glass act:** Cigler's *Blue and Clear Pyramids* (above), Steven Henry Madoff (left)

**ess of curating the show.**

"I first saw Vaclav Cigler's works when I began consulting with [gallery owner] Muly Litvak, preparing for the

to curate a show for, and I said that while many of them were interesting, I was especially impressed by Cigler's work. It turned out that Muly himself

**Cigler had to figure out a way to say what he wanted without being censored, or worse – being punished in Communist Czechoslovakia**

opening exhibition at Litvak Gallery [the exhibit featured a large collection of works by various contemporary glass artists]. Muly asked me which of the artists I found the most interesting

was interested in presenting a solo exhibition by Cigler, so I set to work. I then read everything I could about Cigler, and met with him in person in Prague, along with his collaborator,

Michal Motycka. I found that Cigler was an extremely philosophical, complex artist. The entire exhibition was planned especially for the Litvak Gallery, and several of the 50 different pieces presented here were commissioned especially for the show. I was constantly taking notes throughout the process, all the while looking for the story I wanted to tell. It was a year-long collaboration that required endless adjustments that were performed to the very last minute."

**To what extent is your selection based on personal, educated taste rather than personal, informed judgment?**

"Of course, my personal predilection definitely influences the choices I make when curating a show. But the story you want to tell comes directly from the pieces, and of course, you want all the works to be strong works of art. Because Cigler has been working so long, I had a broad range to choose from, so there was a great deal of strong pieces to select from."

**Vaclav Cigler is a famous glass artist, born in Czechoslovakia in 1929 – that is, he came of age in an extremely turbulent era in Czechoslovakia in particular, and East Europe in general. Did the challenging political environment influence the artist's work?**

"The political environment in which Cigler came of age had a huge influence on his work. The consequences of artistic creation in the communist system, where everything you wanted to say was suppressed by the USSR, presented Cigler with a challenge. He had to figure out a way to say what he wanted without being censored, or worse – without being hurt. Being the sophisticated, articulate and well-read artist that he is, Cigler evaded the attention of the authorities by making an art that seemed not to have any content, but that was purely abstract, while in truth the work was full of meaning. When he went to Bratislava, what he was preaching was individual expression, though of course the school did, in fact, create work for public projects. He started the school in Bratislava with the idea that he was making decorative work for industrial purposes, choosing glass by way of

camouflage. He did it perfectly, infusing highly minimalist work with the content that he wanted. It was simple and yet ever-changing: the work offers viewers a sense of themselves, as individuals, as they see themselves reflected in the work, as well as the collective – the group of viewers – who get reflected, which symbolically means to say that we all are part of the work, part of the freedom of expression. That was what was uplifting and subversive when the work was first made under a Communist regime".

Some critics, definitely in Israel,

where glass art is even more of a newly-revealed niche than it is elsewhere in the world, refer to glass art as merely a "craft" rather than "art". They further claim that while glass artworks have a mesmerizing aesthetic effect, they have no real artistic value. How do you react to these ideas in light of Cigler's creation?

"Cigler disproves these notions. Any great artist, no matter how conceptual his/her work is, has complete control over the medium. Yet Cigler's work is highly intellectual at the same time as it is impeccable."

## Through the looking glass

Václav Cigler's extraordinary exhibition "Light and Space in the Garden of Reason" is a tour de force of impeccable craftsmanship steeped in meaning. Yasmin Kaye explores the Litvak Gallery's second exhibit

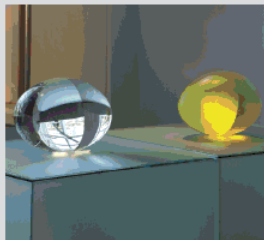
The prestigious Litvak Gallery only opened last year, but it is already playing host to the largest exhibition yet of works by the internationally acclaimed Czech artist, Václav Cigler. Born in 1929 in Czechoslovakia, Cigler headed a department at the Bratislava art academy and has influenced countless students while pioneering the use of optical glass. This expensive material requires careful and precise craftsmanship to create an extraordinarily pure glass that is a perfect carrier of light.

The spacious gallery's 800 meters and sophisticated lighting and sound systems allow the exhibition to function as a space for both quiet meditation and playful interaction with the glass sculptures, as the prisms used throughout Cigler's work invite us to step closer and explore our perception of the pieces and the resulting changes of light. There is also an element of interaction with the outside world, as glimpses of the surrounding buildings, sky and other spectators are reflected back towards us. These qualities of fun and discovery are immediately represented upon entering the room by the "Star of David", constructed entirely from prisms to form the largest work ever made using optical glass.

Cigler sees his work as enabling people to exist in harmony with their surroundings, inspiring contemplation. His pieces have a captivating quality that alters our view of both the works themselves and our surroundings. This transformative experience is enhanced by the purity and shape of his sculptures, from geometric forms producing reflections altered by the slightest movement, to spherical, graceful objects that

resonate with still beauty. "Spheres" is an enclosed installation with an entrance through thick black curtains, which blot out any outside light. Inside, a group of colorful pieces radiates a gentle glow and provides the onlooker with a secretive, reflective atmosphere. These feelings are enhanced by the use of water elsewhere in the exhibition.

Pieces combine water with glass and delicate lighting to create a visually powerful, highly meditative atmosphere of deep tranquility and



mesmerizing stillness.

The exhibition continues on the outside terrace, with "Interrupted Prism", a huge prism that has been interrupted – literally – by nature. A tree has been planted in the middle of it, echoing the sense of harmony between artificial objects and natural forms seen throughout the exhibition. Here the glimpses of sky, buildings and the surrounding cityscape that were reflected indoors are magnified and become ever more powerful in their potency. And the sense that we, the viewers, have experienced both literal and figurative reflections is complete.

Litvak Gallery Museum Tower, 4 Berkowitz St, Tel Aviv (03-6959496), [www.litvak.com](http://www.litvak.com). Exhibit on view throughout Oct 2

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