Art On The Move

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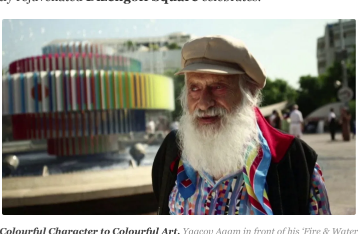
The man and his art constantly 'on the move'

An interview with Israel's celebrated sculptor and experimental artist – *Yaacov Agam* – widely considered the father of Kinetic Art.

His message: "Words divide us; sight unites us"

By David. E. Kaplan

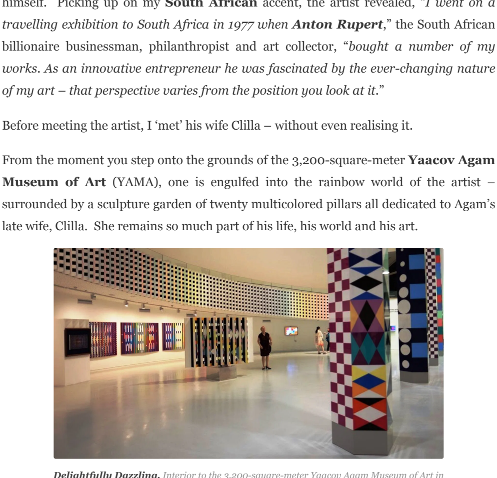
The finest description I ever heard of Tel Aviv is "*A city that wakes* up each morning wondering what it's going to be." Like its city – *change*, *vibrancy*, *uncertainty* and *promise* – are all characteristics that Yaacov Agam's 'Fire and Water Fountain" in Tel Aviv's recently rejuvenated **Dizengoff Square** celebrates.



Colourful Character to Colourful Art. *Yaacov Agam in front of his 'Fire & Water Fountain' in Dizengoff Square, Tel Aviv.*

After decades of public outcry, the iconic site frequently referred to as the "Times Square of Tel Aviv" – finally returned in 2018 to its original glory. Originally constructed in 1986, the kinetic fountain celebrates life, as well as unity-in-diversity, an important feature of Tel Aviv's ethos, considered one of the most free and tolerant cities in the world.

To learn more of this evolving urban landscape and the man and his art, *Lay Of The Land* sat down for an exclusive interview with the 90-year-old artist at the new **Yaacov Agam Museum of Art** in the city of his birth – Rishon LeZion. In the words of the artist, "*it is the only museum in the world that is dedicated to art in motion.*"

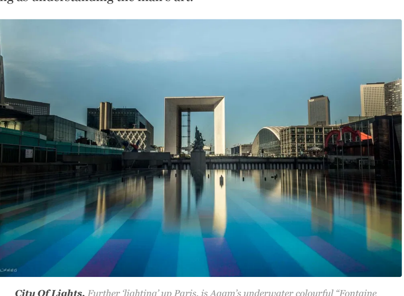


"We Have A Lift Off". *From above, the Yaacov Agam Museum of Art appears in the process of about to take off. The art has literally "taken off" with the public who are flocking to view in record numbers.*

Apart from motion within the artist's work, there is plenty of *motion* in the artist himself. Picking up on my **South African** accent, the artist revealed, "*I went on a travelling exhibition to South Africa in 1977 when* ***Anton Rupert***," the South African billionaire businessman, philanthropist and art collector, "*bought a number of my works. As an innovative entrepreneur he was fascinated by the ever-changing nature of my art – that perspective varies from the position you look at it.*"

Before meeting the artist, I 'met' his wife Clilla – without even realising it.

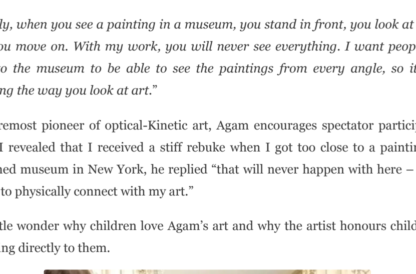
From the moment you step onto the grounds of the 3,200-square-meter **Yaacov Agam Museum of Art** (YAMA), one is engulfed into the rainbow world of the artist – surrounded by a sculpture garden of twenty multicolored pillars all dedicated to Agam's late wife, Clilla. She remains so much part of his life, his world and his art.



Delightfully Dazzling. *Interior to the 3,200-square-meter Yaacov Agam Museum of Art in Rishon LeZion dedicated to the colorful works of the world-renowned kinetic artist. Photo by Sophie Weinstein/OhSoArty.com*

Looking every inch an artist with long gray hair under a well-worn hat and a full beard, we sat down for over two hours of animated conversation. Abounding in energy – "I'm off to Paris in a few days' time" – I came quickly to understand how this diminutive man was a giant in the art world, transforming *city landscapes* and influencing *people's perspectives*.

It was apparent from the answer to my first question that the interview would be as challenging as understanding the man's art.



City Of Lights. *Further 'lighting' up Paris, is Agam's underwater colourful "Fontaine Monumentale" in the La Defense district, Puteaux, Hauts de Seine.*

Where do you live?

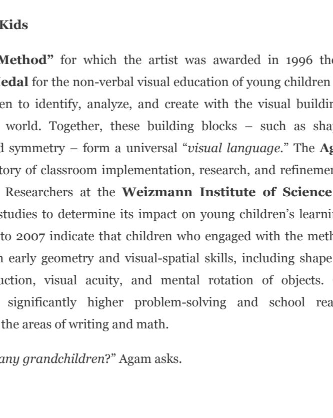
"I live on my shoulders. As you can see, I am here now in Israel. Next week I will be in France. I live wherever I am at the moment."

The answer incapsulated the character of the man, his art and the museum, which had greeted me with twenty multicolored pillars at the entrance, and nine more inside, all changing as you walk by. The artist explains:

"*Usually, when you see a painting in a museum, you stand in front, you look at it, and then you move on. With my work, you will never see everything. I want people who come to the museum to be able to see the paintings from every angle, so it's also changing the way you look at art.*"

The foremost pioneer of optical-Kinetic art, Agam encourages spectator participation. When I revealed that I received a stiff rebuke when I got too close to a painting in a renowned museum in New York, he replied "that will never happen with here – I want people to physically connect with my art."

It is little wonder why children love Agam's art and why the artist honours children by appealing directly to them.



The Art Of Politics. *Israeli artist Yaacov Agam sandwiched between French President Emmanuel Macron (left) and Israeli President Reuven Rivlin at the Élysée Palace 2019.*

Kinetics for Kids

The "**Agam Method"** for which the artist was awarded in 1996 the **Jan Amos Comenius Medal** for the non-verbal visual education of young children by **UNESCO**, teaches children to identify, analyze, and create with the visual building blocks that make up our world. Together, these building blocks – such as shapes, patterns, directions, and symmetry – form a universal "*visual language*." The **Agam Method** has a long history of classroom implementation, research, and refinement dating back to the 1980s. Researchers at the **Weizmann Institute of Science** in Israel led experimental studies to determine its impact on young children's learning. Data from 1990 through to 2007 indicate that children who engaged with the method, improved significantly in early geometry and visual-spatial skills, including shape identification and deconstruction, visual acuity, and mental rotation of objects. Children also demonstrated significantly higher problem-solving and school readiness skills, particularly in the areas of writing and math.

"*Do you have any grandchildren*?" Agam asks.

"*Two*," I reply.

On happily hearing that are both aged in months rather than in years, he asks, "If I gave them a pencil, what do think they will do with it."

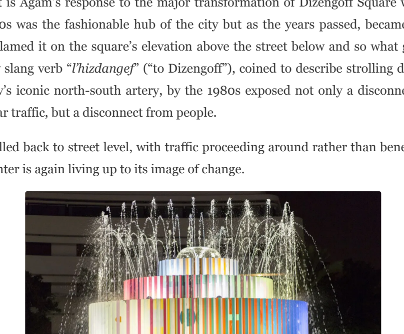
All my answers wrong, Agam demonstrates grabbing a pencil and thrusting up and down making points on the table.

"*Points is the most primary act of creation and is born out in the first drawings found in prehistoric caves*."

"*What about the line*?" I ask.

"*Now you are talking evolution – that came much later; could be 1000 years later or even 10,000 years. We do not know. The line is the most significant advancement in the history of evolution*."

Following my rudimentary lesson in the history of art, we jump many millennia forward to **Dizengoff Square** 2018.

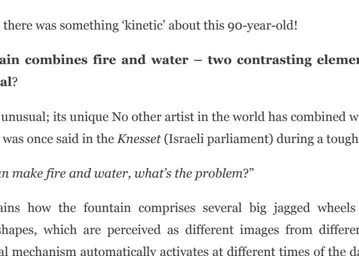


Enriching Encounter. *An animated 90-year-old Agam (centre) welcomes and addresses in the Museum's auditorium in May 2019, a group of former South Africans living in Israel. (Courtesy TELFED)*

Carousal of Color

So what is Agam's response to the major transformation of Dizengoff Square which in the 1930s was the fashionable hub of the city but as the years passed, became seedy? Many blamed it on the square's elevation above the street below and so what gave the Hebrew slang verb "*l'hizdangef*" ("to Dizengoff"), coined to describe strolling down the Tel Aviv's iconic north-south artery, by the 1980s exposed not only a disconnect from vehicular traffic, but a disconnect from people.

Reinstalled back to street level, with traffic proceeding around rather than beneath, Tel Aviv center is again living up to its image of change.



Carousal of Colour. *The famed Artist Yaacov Agam 'Fire & Water Fountain' in Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Square. Photo by Linneah Anders*

What did you aim to express with your fountain at the very epicenter of Tel Aviv?

"Firstly, the buildings surrounding the square are German – designed by architects fleeing the Nazis in the 1930s – and I wanted to brand the square distinctly Israeli with vibrant colours expressing life to contrast with the stark utilitarianism of the Bauhaus architecture. This I achieve with over 1000 colors visible through the water!"

Noting my disbelief, he said: "*Come with me now; I'll show you*!"

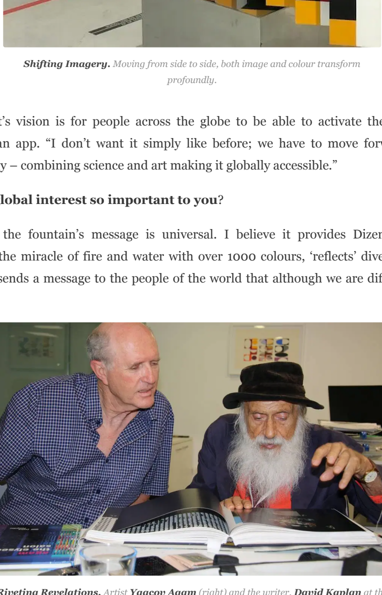
Like his art, there was something 'kinetic' about this 90-year-old!

The fountain combines fire and water – two contrasting elements. Is this not unusual?

"More than unusual; its unique No other artist in the world has combined water and fire together. It was once said in the *Knesset* (Israeli parliament) during a tough debate:

"*If Agam can make fire and water, what's the problem*?"

Agam explains how the fountain comprises several big jagged wheels – coloured geometric shapes, which are perceived as different images from different angles. A technological mechanism automatically activates at different times of the day and night that turns the wheels on their hinges, shooting fire and water upwards accompanied to music.

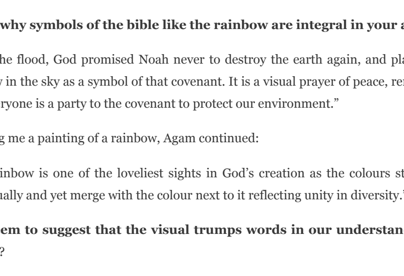


Shifting Imagery. *Moving from side to side, both image and colour transform profoundly.*

The artist's vision is for people across the globe to be able to activate the fountain through an app. "I don't want it simply like before; we have to move forward with technology – combining science and art making it globally accessible."

Why is global interest so important to you?

"Because the fountain's message is universal. I believe it provides Dizengoff with gravitas; the miracle of fire and water with over 1000 colours, 'reflects' diversity. The fountain sends a message to the people of the world that although we are different, we are one."



Riveting Revelations. *Artist* ***Yaacov Agam*** *(right) and the writer,* ***David Kaplan*** *at the Agam Museum in Rishon Lezion.*

Over the Rainbow

What influence did your father – a rabbi – have on your perspective on life and your art?

"My father was an orthodox rabbi and a Kabbalist; I am a visual rabbi and every work of mine is a visual prayer.

Is this why symbols of the bible like the rainbow are integral in your art?

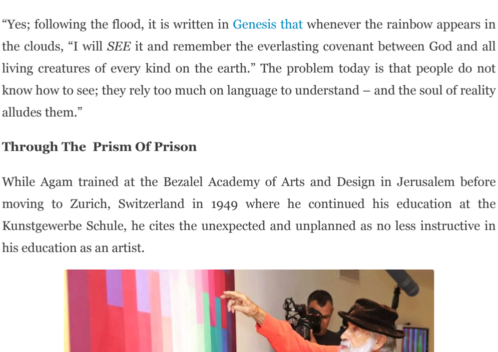
"After the flood, God promised Noah never to destroy the earth again, and placed the rainbow in the sky as a symbol of that covenant. It is a visual prayer of peace, reminding that everyone is a party to the covenant to protect our environment."

Showing me a painting of a rainbow, Agam continued:

"The rainbow is one of the loveliest sights in God's creation as the colours stand out individually and yet merge with the colour next to it reflecting unity in diversity."

You seem to suggest that the visual trumps words in our understanding of reality?

"If the message of the rainbow was only in words, only those who understood the language would understand – some would understand, others would not. *Words divide us, sight unites us*. Children are born into a world of seeing before speaking. When they start to talk, that introduces separation and disunity. Seeing is so important that when God wanted us to understand him, he provided visions and so when the Torah was given on Mount Sinai, it is written that the People of Israel "**SEE"** not only hear the word of God."



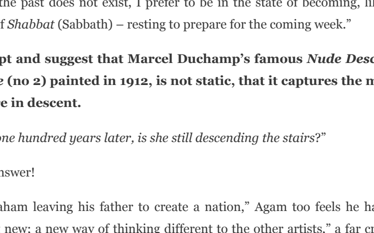
Agam's Wife. *From the moment visitors step onto the grounds of the Agam Museum in Rishon Lezion they are engulfed into the rainbow world of the artist as they are 'greeted' by 'The Pillars of Clilla,' named after his late wife. These columns transport visitors into the mind of Agam and lead you into the museum's central space, which boasts his 'panorAgam' work, originally displayed on the bow at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City in 1981.*

Is it the same with the vision of the rainbow – the need to SEE rather than read of God's communication with man?

"Yes; following the flood, it is written in Genesis that whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, "I will *SEE* it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." The problem today is that people do not know how to see; they rely too much on language to understand – and the soul of reality alludes them."

Through The Prism Of Prison

While Agam trained at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem before moving to Zurich, Switzerland in 1949 where he continued his education at the Kunstgewerbe Schule, he cites the unexpected and unplanned as no less instructive in his education as an artist.



The Artist And His Art. *The artist explaining a work at the museum in Rishon Lezion, the city he was born in 1928.*

Who would have thought that such education included prison?

"Yes, I was imprisoned by the British in Latrun, and who would join me there in 1946 was **Moshe Sharett** who would later become Israel's second Prime Minister. He taught me Hebrew and grammar and he told me over and over that while there is a past and a future, there is no present in Jewish thinking. The present is fleeting; gone forever in a flash. Through our discussions, I formulated a perspective of time that is at the core of my art that is mobile, in a state of constant change; nothing is static. I met all the great artists at the time – Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, Jean Arp – but they were stuck in the past, and the past does not exist, I prefer to be in the state of becoming, like the true meaning of *Shabbat* (Sabbath) – resting to prepare for the coming week."

I interrupt and suggest that Marcel Duchamp's famous *Nude Descending a Staircase* (no 2) painted in 1912, is not static, that it captures the movement of a figure in descent.

"*So why, one hundred years later, is she still descending the stairs*?"

I had no answer!

"Like Abraham leaving his father to create a nation," Agam too feels he has "created something new; a new way of thinking different to the other artists," a far cry from the early 1950s then with his young wife in Paris "we literally starved and had to go to the Salvation Army for food." In 1953, he had his first one-man show and sold his first panting to the famous surrealist artist **Max Ernst**.

When **Robert Lebel** (1901–1986), the famous French art critic and writer, "saw my work, he said, "We have a new prophet."

He was not wrong.

Victor Vasarely, the Hungarian-French artist, widely accepted as a "grandfather" and leader of the op art movement, "told me you have no right make static work. Young artists, particularly from South America were attracted to my style and started to imitate me."

In time, Agam's art would attract the attention of **President Pompidou** of France. "When he was the Prime Minister, he went to see my show. I later received a call from the Secretary General of Artistic Creation who asked me, "What did you do to our PM. He went back and forward in front of your painting; he could not understand it but was fascinated."

Later, when he became President, "he wanted a sculpture in his office and asked for a presentation of modern sculptures without the names of the artists.

"I will decide," he said.

He chose mine because he could move it." This led to a commission by the President of a moving salon environment at the *Élysée* Palace in 1972, where the environment shifted according to the viewer's position. Enjoying tea with President Pompidou, "He revealed to me that he guided Queen Elizabeth through the salon and that she said she loved it."

Asked to make a work commemorating the peacemaking efforts of the president of Egypt, **Anwar el-Sadat** and Israeli Prime Minister **Menachem Begin**, Agam created

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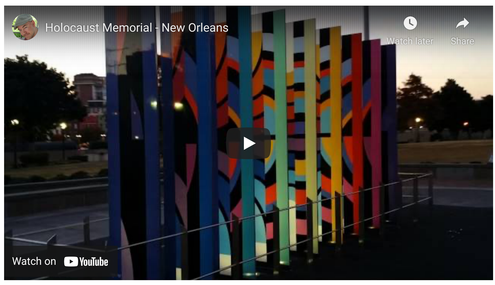
in 1978 a mesmerising Star of Peace. A kinetic sculpture, it appears from one direction to be the five-pointed star of Islam, from another, the six-pointed Star of David, and from a third – a new star formed from their fusion.

Holocaust Memorial – *New Orleans A slow walk-around of Yaacov Agam's Holocaust Memorial in New Orleans, Louisiana, captures in an artistic visual prayer the memory of the Six Million Jews of Europe and those millions of other victims murdered by the Nazis from 1933-1945.The sculpture is composed of nine panels, each with different designs. As you view the sculpture from different angles, the designs on the panels meld to form distinct images. Ten images come into view as you walk around the panels.*

Other public projects include a 1987 memorial at the Western Wall for the victims of the Holocaust, and the world's largest menorah: a 32-foot, 4000-pound structure at Fifth Avenue and 59th Street in Manhattan and based on the original menorah in Jerusalem's Holly Temple, "not the fake version you see on the Arch of Titus in Rome."



Concluding the interview, I ask:

Is there any one of your work you prize most?

"It's impossible. My art is about movement and you can't have all movement in one work of art. It's like prayers in Judaism; there is no one prayer but many."

Fair eneough; is there at least one artist that influenced you the most?

"Yes, the Almighty!"

A Light Unto The People. *An illuminated Agam Museum in Rishon Lezion at night.*

To learn more about the Agam Museum of Art visit:

https://en.yama.co.il/

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Juliet Rostowsky

June 1, 2019 at 10:42 pm

A very exciting article and insight into the life, work and philosophy of Agam!!
Well done David for giving us a a most enlightening and illuminating experience!
Juliet Rostowsky

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