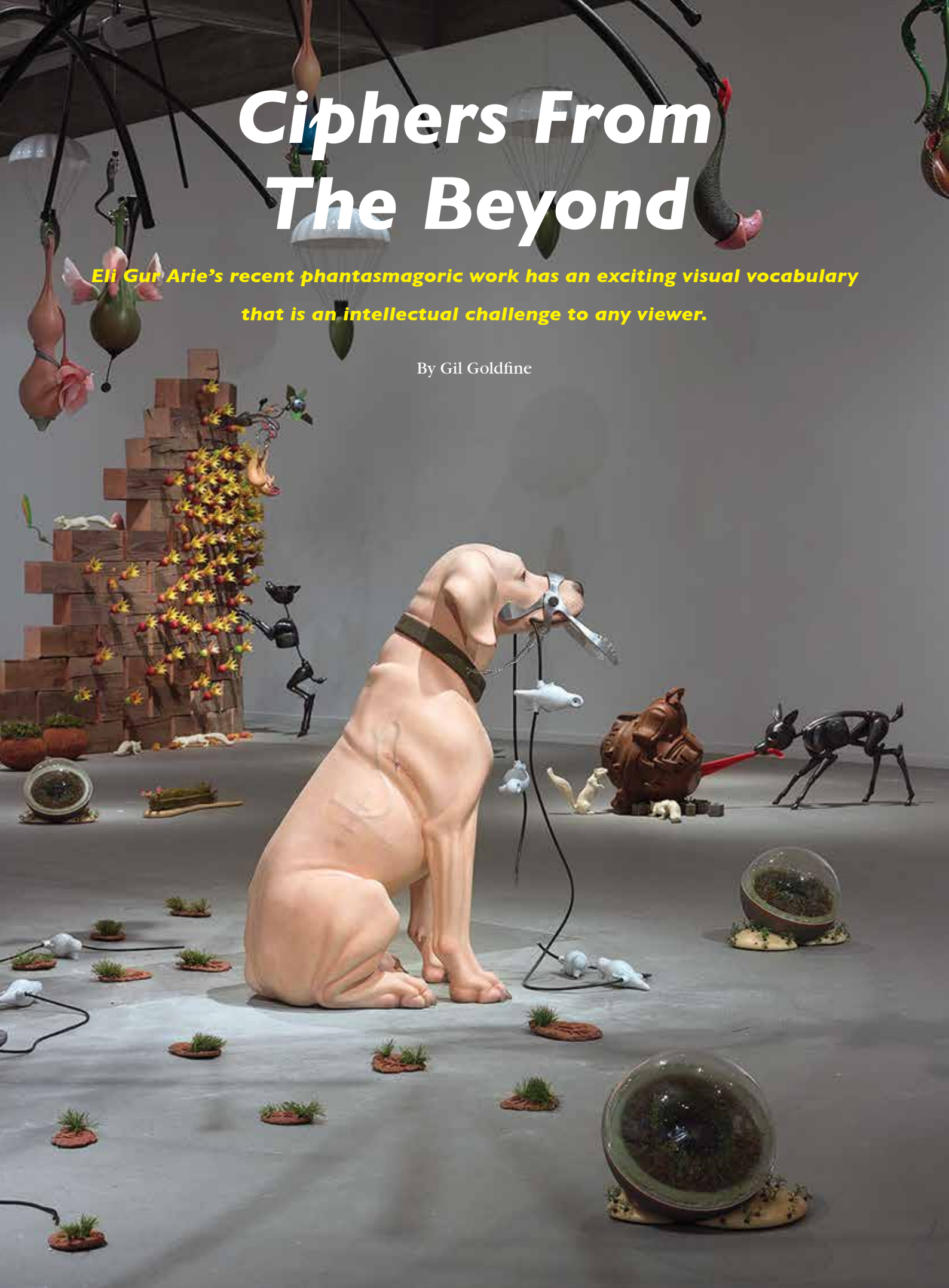


# Ciphers From The Beyond

*Eli Gur Arie's recent phantasmagoric work has an exciting visual vocabulary that is an intellectual challenge to any viewer.*

By Gil Goldfine



**H**airless white squirrels scampering on gray concrete floor, or hidden beneath hi-tech paraphernalia, or balanced on the limbs of a communication pole are among the opening wiles of Eli Gur Arie's in *Growth Engines*, his most recent exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. These sinister rodents, undoubtedly the result of genetic engineering, are a disturbing element among a battery of thought-provoking installations sustained by several freestanding works and scores of reliefs.

With this exhibition Gur Arie (b.1964) shows himself, once again, to be virtually alone in an art world preoccupied with formalist conventions, electronic media, and visual communications. Even though he wears the label of an

outsider, he has maintained his grip on the basic tenets of sculpture, harnessing and transforming form, line, texture, and hue into spectacular, at times zany, works of art. *Growth Engines* can be viewed as



**Above:** Eli Gur Arie, *Space*, 2016, size variable. **Previous page:** Eli Gur Arie, *Dog*, 2016, 120 x 75 x 60 cm. All works are created from polymer casts and acrylic layers and are the courtesy of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and the Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv.

two distinctive displays. The first comprises a veritable landscape incorporating a dozen or so floor-oriented installations, most of which bond inventive technology with organic configurations to create

of the world, whereas Gur Arie's sculptures and assemblages, from the largest forms to the tinniest details, are too cohesive and beautifully turned out to even be considered that they have been made

states of ambiguity. The second is a phenomenal array of vibrantly colored broad reliefs of an undetermined source; work drifting within suggestion, innovation, and abstraction.

Curator of *Growth Engine* Doreet LeVitte Harten has described Gur Arie as "... a one-man school" and going on to say, "He differs from other Israeli artists in that he harnesses the future to discuss the present, employing the genre of science fiction, and especially the sub-genre of apocalyptic narratives and post-apocalyptic visions."

I would suggest that LeVitte Harten's analysis is overly speculative, dependent on "possibilities" instead of rational considerations. Apocalypse connotes destruction and disaster, a biblical fascination with the end



**Above from left:** Eli Gur Arie, *Untitled 2*, 2014, 60 x 40 x 25 cm. Eli Gur Arie, *Seven Good Years*, 2015, 120 x 140 x 30 cm. Eli Gur Arie, *Untitled 3*, 2015, 60 x 40 x 25 cm.

under the shadows of Judgment Day. Although many of his pieces are menacing and there is an indication of chaos, several works are filled with a romantic optimism, occasionally with a sense of humor, more than any catastrophic sightings of the future. To paraphrase the great Finnish composer, Jean Sibelius, “Art (*music*) begins where words end.”

For the average visitor Gur Arie’s exhibition is an eye opener. Most are astonished at the beauty and finish of the sculptures but are speechless as to their meaning. The question most asked of Gur Arie relates to the production of the pieces and not the theoretical or narrative qualities of the show. Not really knowing what subjects they are meant to take away with them or what the narrative is, viewers tend to want to know more about the physical aspect of the work, the only feature that is rational and answerable. Issues related to “... our treatment of existing ecosystems and the systematic ravaging of biological, ecological, and geographic fabrics by entire societies, to the point of total destruction” are concealed (if at all) deep within the objects that make up Gur Arie’s iconographic mysteries.

*V-Day*, for example, is a self-contained, vertical, winged figure whose gesture and scale parody the *Winged Figure of Samothrace*, the celebrated Second century BC Hellenistic marble sculpture dedicated to the goddess Nike, displayed in the Louvre, Paris. Gur Arie has converted her into an emblem of god-like elegance and speed, her quiescent gossamer wings raised above a techno face in deep violet with extended red tentacles partially wrapped in a shiny blue-green pod. Set on a metal pole the entire unit is jammed into a patch of excavated earth with sheaves of grass and wild wheat. At the base, on a bed of ersatz rock salt is a vague ashen black creature. This rapturous deity-insect has been engineered and immobilized so she cannot fly. She is now a 21st century aesthetic replacement for

an emblem of magnificence from the ancient world. Animals and insects, predators and domesticated, realistically modeled or reduced to flashy symbolic beings are central to Gur Arie’s vision. Human forms are absent, but replaced by objects related to human activity. Weapons, shovels, mortar shells, floral arrangements, and machinery for space travel are now

inserted under the dog’s skin. The question one asks is, after seeking reasons for the inclusion of a domestic animal into his strikingly bizarre “other” world, why this particular dog is uncharacteristically docile and obedient? Fido isn’t restrained by either muzzle or medical procedure; it is borderline catatonic, a result of, if we follow Gur Arie’s thoughts on probability, a manipulation of DNA. A second possibility is that the hairless four-legged animal is replacing humans who observe without seeing, hear without feeling, and are unwilling to speak.

Used as a linear visual thread, very much like his little white squirrels, Gur Arie has scattered amongst his installations additional three-dimensional objects, most notably flattened clumps of red earth sprouting tufts of emerald grass; a score or more of small parachutes descending into the gallery weighted by a flask-like bomb; a handful of modeling mannequins in the image of a Walt Disney Bambi cut and joined in playful positions and, a final nod to Gur Arie’s fantasia, several spherical shapes divided in two, a bottom portion containing earth-covered grass topped by a transparent Plexiglas hemisphere incorporated as a viewing window and protector.

To create his sculptural fantasies Gur Arie cuts, slices, and polishes his forms in polystyrene, then continues to make several positive and negative molds from which epoxy compounds and polymer forms emerge. The final lap is providing the shapes with several layers of alternating opaque and transparent thinner-based lacquers that

result in slick colorful patinas, both seductive and captivating.

After several visits to *Growth Engines* it became clear to me that below the exterior of those marvelously fabricated and polished surfaces there might be a film of decay beneath the skin. It is not caused by an apocalyptic event referred to by LeVitte Harten, but the parasitic kind that eats its host slowly. I deal only with the hypothetical layers and the putrefaction rooted in Gur Arie’s visual clues



Eli Gur Arie, *V-Day*, 2016, 220 x 90 x 35 cm.

replacement parts for humans.

And then there is a larger-than-life-fleshy dog sitting peacefully under the drooping boughs of a leafless tree, perhaps waiting for its master but unable to bark or bay because its mouth is muzzled by, what looks like, a metallic apparatus from the middle ages. Torturous as it may seem, the hinged muzzle seems to be an exterior minor infliction. A closer look reveals the outline of a meandering medical tube, with an uncertain destination,

that speak to “beauty is only skin deep,” which apply to *Growth Engines*’ conceptual base.

This is especially true with Gur Arie’s singular mounted pieces that do not relate to other elements around them. They seem neither to be concerned with any environmental issues nor do they communicate flashes of imminent destruction, chaos or an imperfect future. They have been conceived, shaped, and colored from his fertile imagination with deep links to the surreal and the Occult. Hanging pouches bursting at their seams filled with unidentifiable potions, illuminated globes, saber teeth, and pods being pulled apart by elastic cords, brooches that melt before one’s eyes, and assorted husks flanged or scored by what might be functional mechanical parts from a large “whatchamacallit.” Beyond the surface of these splendid reliefs is a void, deep space unrelated to what we claim to know.



Eli Gur Arie, *Albatross*, 2016, 400 x 60 x 55 cm.

To grasp the substance of Gur Arie’s reliefs and appreciate their distinctiveness, one should study several, including *The Harvest*, *Seven Good Years*, and a handful listed as *Untitled*. The latter includes the opaque whiteness of an intimidating saber tooth emphasizing the power of the big cats. Somewhat more decorative is *The Harvest*, a display of a symmetrical, lime-colored, Art Nouveau ornament that dissolves before one’s eyes into an untidy heap of lemon-yellow fibers. Has the pink creature attached to this heraldic work of art been the reason for its demise? By the nature of their opulent forms, rounded, wrapped, and full, coupled with spurts of flesh and a suggestive palette Gur Arie occasionally makes erotic abstract images.

The *Albatross* has landed and with it Gur Arie has devised a metaphorical poem, whose essence is charged with images rather than words. It is a work rekindled from *The Albatross* (1861) by Charles Baudelaire. The great wingspan of the languid sea bird is the focus of this sprawling installation comprised of several seemingly unrelated units. Clamped between two elongated flanges (wings), fabricated from nine violet-and-gold-hexagons, is a metallic globe split open to display hundreds of small green and blue pellets (spirit). At the

globe’s base several strands of insulated-black wire meander across the floor, mixing with loosely patterned white cord, suggesting ocean waves. As if belonging to another installation, two isolated hemispheres, designed to be unified by way of a knob and snap clasp, show one half padded with green tufting and its partner drained of all substance. Set on the ground before the half spheres is a burst of white feather shapes spread like

a Sioux war bonnet while also echoing a stack of ersatz violin cases modified into elegant tool bags. Gur Arie’s ubiquitous animals flit here and there. I came away from the *Albatross* with more questions than answers. Gur Arie doesn’t work in a theoretical vacuum. In our last conversation, he indicated there are social, global, and political messages fixed in every work.



Eli Gur Arie, *Untitled 4*, 2015, 60 x 40 x 25 cm

Baudelaire was observing shifts in 19th century French society—“He (the Albatross) recently was so beautiful; now he is laughable and ugly”—and perhaps Gur Arie is following suit by reacting to current affairs. I think a more suitable reference would be the aggressive sailor in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1834) whose hostile act of killing the albatross altered a voyage of destiny into one of peril (Israeli politics?). As one reviews the store of abstract forms, one assumes Gur Arie is codifying a mood in which goodness is transformed into hatred, dreams into disillusionment, and a secure milieu has failed, plunged into a hazardous vortex. Δ

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