



A mine of wonder

• By BARRY DAVIS

Surely it doesn't make any sense to have kids as young as six spending almost all of their school time sitting behind a desk in a traditional classroom setting. Children need to get out and about and be physically active, if they are going to retain their concentration levels.

The same concept goes for introducing children to the world of art and culture. That mind-set is front and center behind an artistic venture which goes by the enticing title of the Wonderland Mine (*Michre Plao*) which opened last month at the Djanogly Visual Arts Center for children and youth, on Tuvia Street in the Katamonim neighborhood.

As with many great ideas, the arts mine went through a considered gestation period before materializing into a physical entity. "The concept came about in stages," explains curator Yehudit Shlosberg Yoge. "I was asked by the Djanogly Center manager, Orit Raz, to open up the country's first children's art gallery. I started to research the subject, and to investigate what establishing an art gallery for children entails."

Raz and Shlosberg Yoge employed the inventive services of Itamar Mendes Flohr

to create the labyrinthine structure, which invites visitors to get down and dirty, and walk-crawl their way up and down the meandering course.

All told there are seven works subtly stationed along the "mine shaft," created by artists who normally produce items for adults. "This is the first time the Djanogly Center has had an exhibition designed for children with works by contemporary artists," Raz notes.

The thinking behind putting Wonderland Mine together was also to get the junior visitors – from the age of nine – and their accompanying family members, as involved in the exhibition as possible. "We wanted to feed off the children's physicality," Raz continues. "That led us to think that we didn't want a routine exhibition layout, you know, with works in frames on walls and all that. We wanted to give the kids a constructive experience, in which they use their bodies. We wanted the children to be actively involved in getting to see the works of art, and to pique their curiosity, and draw them in to discover things."

Before they enter the "mine" the visitors get to read a generously proportioned leaflet with a text written by Shlosberg Yoge.

It makes for entertaining reading, and is set in the time of Sir Hans Sloane, a late 17th-century Irish-born British naturalist, doctor and collector who, as we are told, provided the initial impetus for the establishment of the British Museum. The story certainly puts you in the right frame of mind, and is an apt intro for the Wonderland Mine escapade.

Mendes Flohr was certainly up for the youth-oriented art exhibit. "We shaped and sculpted the space so that each work would have the position it needs," he explains. "Works that demanded perspective were given a larger space, others needed height or special lighting. My thinking was along the lines of constructive Ritalin." The exhibition designer refers to the central nervous system stimulant which is all too often used to help attention-challenged schoolchildren focus. "The mine design was tailored to create an experience of discovery and curiosity on a physiological level."

The exhibitor bill includes such leading lights of the local arts community as Tamar Shippony, Shulamit Etzion and Flohr himself. The most engrossing item along the mine route is *A Trip to the Moon*, the feted 1902 French silent film directed by Georges

There are seven works subtly stationed along the 'mine shaft.' (Eitan Dor)



Méliès. It is a delectable work which has retained its charm for over a century. Wonderland Mine visitors get to watch the 12-minute gem in pairs, with headphones, lying down, on a mattress at the top of the exhibition structure.

The horizontal spectator position clearly does the trick. "I tried the movie out on two of my kids," says Shlosberg Yoge. "They are aged six and four. I showed them the film projected on a wall, and they didn't manage to watch the whole thing through to the end. They said it wasn't interesting. I subsequently showed it to them while they lay down on the mattress, with a cushion under their heads, and they watched it right through, twice in succession. My feeling is that when you show something to a child in the right way, they get drawn into it."

The idea was to offer children, youth and even adults the opportunity to get a different handle on works of art. "We are used to observing things frontally," says the curator. "There are rules about how to hang paintings, so that they can be seen comfortably. But I wanted to offer people the chance to take a good look at art."

A well-known advertising ploy is to get the observer to make up the last yard. Rather than give them the whole message, you leave them hanging a mite, thereby making them active collaborators and drawing them in to the partially proffered storyline. That works for Wonderland Mine too. As the kids progress along the trail they spot, for example, a pair of binoculars and, with their natural inquisitiveness, duly peer through the eyepieces at a fascinating cosmic-looking work located a suitable distance away.

The less-cerebral ethos of the exhibition design also comes across in the pan-sensory presentation. In addition to the visual gems on show, visitors hear an ephemeral sound track which sounds a lot like gurgling water. 'We adults have learned to differentiate between a work of art and its surroundings, and to say one is art and the other is the wall,' Shlosberg Yoge notes. "But kids don't take that approach. They look at a wall, and they enjoy that too. That was one of the guidelines for the mine design."

Raz used the epithet "womblike" to describe the undulating, meandering exhibition trail, and there is definitely a warm sense of coziness to it, in addition to the fascinating works of art.

The Djanogly Center manager is also has grander plans for the event, and the facility she oversees. "Showing an exhibition which combines fantasy and contemporary artists in the gallery space of the center, in the heart of the Katamonim neighborhood, is not an incidental matter," she says. "Our dream, as an urban center for children and youth, is to offer them a direct encounter with the experience of contemporary art, in a dynamic, inspiring and compelling way. We, first and foremost, aim our activities at residents of the area and the city, but we aspire to gain a nationwide audience too. Discovering the wonders of art is not just a local or urban matter, it has universal value."

Wonderland Mine closes on January 1, 2017. For more information: (02) 640-4999 and www.artdjanogly.co.il



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(Revital Cohen)

