STAR

HOUSTON CHRONICLE | HoustonChronicle.com and chron.com | Sunday, June 9, 2013 | Section G ★★★ Houston Chronicle Life & Entertainment Houston Chronicle

Away from the bustle
»Country living: Follow Leon Hale during the week online at blog.chron.com/leonhale

ART

Melissa Phillip / Houston Chronicle

Artist Anat Ronen created a playful mural called "If Only" of an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian man holding water guns for an exhibit at the Station Museum.

Mural with a message

Street artist Anat Ronen brings her art indoors for exhibit at Station Museum

By Lisa Gray

Anat Ronen felt uneasy even before she went inside the Station Museum of Contemporary Art. Banners on the corrugated-metal building proclaimed the place's worldview. "Occupyhouston.org," said one. Another bore a long quote from Picasso: An artist is "a political entity," and art "is a weapon." For Ronen, the most unnerving was the Palestinian-flag banner. "Support Palestinian statehood," it urged.

"Maybe I won't do this show," she thought. The 42-year-old street artist doesn't consider herself or her murals political, but she had, after all, grown up in Israel and served in its army. Palestinians, she thinks, want to wipe out her home country. She can't back their movement.

She went inside the museum anyway. Her friend Daniel Anguilu, whose murals look like a cross between graffiti and stained glass, had painted two entire walls for a Station show called "Houston Times 8," and the curators had been so pleased that they asked him to help organize a show of the graffiti and mural artists who work around Houston — outsider artists whose work is literally outside, rarely shown with air conditioning, much less in museums.

Ronen liked the way that Anguilu's mural looked inside the museum, complete with a plaque that explained who he is. But she didn't crave the sight of her own work there. After all, she already was earning a living with her art. Some of it — taking up the entire sides of buildings, or freeway overpass supports — is seen by thousands of people a day. She considered painting a wall for a museum show to be unpaid work, a favor for a friend. The banner convinced her that she didn't want to deal with this museum. When Anguilu called to see whether she was in, she considered not calling him back.

Over the next few days, though, something stubborn stirred inside her — maybe the same stubborn thing that makes her brave enough to attempt giant murals so big that she needs scaffolding or a cherry-picker to paint them; and the stubborn thing that allows her, a compact, soft-spoken middle-aged mother who works with brushes, to hang out at places such as the Mullet, a graffiti-art showcase near Almeda Mall, with street-smart spray paint guys with names like the Death Head and Skeez181. She'd do the Station show, she thought, but only if the concept were her own take on Israel and Palestine.

She set up a meeting with Jim Harithas, the Station's director and the main force behind the place. In the 1960s and '70s, Harithas was a white-hot museum curator with a

Gray continues on G3

lab, which is currently devel- | editorial in the New York Times | interest but no deal yet. | to view it. The filmmaker said | — which is all of us.

Gray: 'Desperation' key to success, Ronen says

Gray from page G1

national reputation. He hosted a show of John Lennon and Yoko Ono work at the Everson Museum in upstate New York, and he proudly presided over Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum during the woolly period when cops broke up its wild-party openings. These days, Harithas' hair and moustache are white, but he's retained his big-man swagger and booming voice. His '60s-style radicalism burns as bright as ever.

"Have you been to Palestine?" he asked Anat in his office. *He* had, he told her: He's seen the conditions on the ground. It's terrible, what the Israelis are doing.

His loud voice grew louder. Outside the office, he says, the museum staff began to worry.

Anat turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"You're not interested in my art."

"But we haven't talked about art yet," he said. "We've only talked about politics."

Photos courtesy of Anat Ronen

For HISD's Dodson Montessori, Ronen painted a mural visible from Interstate 45.

Desperation

Sometimes other street artists ask Anat how she gets so many big commissions, how she's able to make a living as an artist. "Desperation," she tells them. "You have to be desperate."

Seven years ago, after she, her husband and son moved from Israel to Florida, she found a job doing a little of everything for a Miami investor: customer support, web design, accounting. She was able to take the job with her when her family moved first to Michigan, and then to Houston. But she hated it.

Four years ago, she applied for an American visa as an artist. She wasn't sure she'd be approved. She hadn't gone to art school, after all, so for the application, she made a portfolio showing everything she'd ever done — her graphic design, things she'd sketched with pens on paper, chalk drawings done on the ground, the mural she'd painted on her son's bedroom wall. She'd never thought her art was very good. But to her surprise, the visa was granted.

It freaked her out: The visa meant that she had to start making a living as an artist. She had no choice: Now she had to do the thing she'd always dreamed of doing.

To her surprise, Craigslist ads brought her prospective clients. Callers asked her to paint on their walls, and doing it, she found that she had a particular talent for murals: Little ones in clients' backyards and houses, big ones on the walls of businesses. She painted an art-nouveau scene outdoors at Nouveau Antique Art Bar in Midtown; adorable kids playing with a bunny and ducks on Dodson Montessori School, visible from Interstate 45 just south of downtown; giant bottles of Big Red and Sun Drop near Minute Maid Park. One day, she got a call from a company that contracts to paint Texas bridges and soon found herself working with them regularly, painting murals on 90-foot sections of the Galveston causeway and NASAParkway.

If only

At the Station, assistant director Kari Steele was impressed by how fast the street artists worked, creating whole-wall works in only a couple of weeks. It made sense, she realized: Most had learned to paint murals all in one go. Otherwise, the police would keep an eye on the half-completed painting, waiting for the perpetrators to return.

But even by street-art standards, Anat is fast — driven not by fear of arrest, but by the professional efficiency of someone who paints to pay the bills. At the Station, she executed her mural in only a couple of days. In it, a smiling Israeli soldier in combat gear stands next to a keffiyeh-wearing, nice-eyed Palestinian, both playful, both holding plastic water guns. "If only," say the words at the top.

Harithas approved the concept, but he grumbled. If he'd painted that scene, the Palestinian would hold a water gun, but the Israeli, a machine gun. "That's the way things really are," he maintains. "But I'm not the artist."

For her part, Anat felt free. The mural was purely her concept — not Harithas', and not a client's. She liked the feeling.

One day, she took a cake to the Station. "A Jewish cake," she called it — a chocolate yeast cake that she'd learned to make in Israel.

The museum staffers, including Harithas, couldn't resist. She watched with satisfaction as they devoured her Jewish cake, as happy as the watergun warriors in her mural.

Peace had broken out. She'd won.

lisa.gray@chron.com

'Call It Street Art, Call It Fine Art, Call It What You Know'

What: A show of Houston street artists, including Lee Washington, the Death Head, Daniel Anguilu, Ack!, Eyesore, Ana Maria and Skeez181
Where: Station Museum of Contemporary Art, 1502 Alabama, stationmuseum.com
When: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesdays-Sundays through Aug. 25
Admission: Free
Anat Ronen: www.anatronen.com

This mural, for Nouveau Antique Art Bar in Midtown, was one of Ronen's first big projects. She was intimidated, she says. "But I realized, hey, it's paint. Worst case is, you have to paint over it. It's not like you're changing the structure of someone's house."

DANGEROUS MESH ALERT!

Have you had surgery to repair a prolapsed uterus, bladder or rectum? The FDA has alerted women to complications arising from such procedures involving the use of transvaginal mesh. Even if you don't have current side effects, you may still be eligible.

The time to act is LIMITED! Call our female lawyers NOW to protect your rights.

CALL US TOLL FREE TODAY WE'RE HERE TO HELP! (888)237-4529 SPENCER-LAW.COM

This advertisement has been approved and disseminated by Bonnie E. Spencer. Principal office is at 4635 Southwest Frwy., Suite 900, Houston, TX 77027