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VOICES

Anat Ronen: *Self-Made Street Artist*

BY MICHAEL C. DUKE I JHV

Anat Ronen is painting the town red – and blue, and yellow, and every color in between.

The Israeli-born artist has achieved what many can only dream. That is, to make a living creating art.

Over the past several years, her work has brought life to the sides of buildings, street corners, highways, homes, schools and hospitals across Greater Houston. As a large-scale muralist, she specializes in portraiture, capturing the genius, or essence, of her subject matter.

"My greatest love is street art, because it offers the biggest gallery on earth," Ronen told the JHV in May 2016. "It has no limitations, no requirements.

"Everything can be a canvas, and anything can carry a message," she said.

For Ronen, art has been a gateway to self-determination. At the same time, it's provided her with a means of giving back to the community that she now calls home.

"I'm doing what I love, and I love what I'm doing," she said. "I'm reaching new places in both my life and in my art that I never, ever thought I'd get to."

She added, "Houston is a huge city with a lot of opportunity. If you're good enough, and you're quick enough, and you're willing to pick up the phone and get out there, there's great potential, here, to make a name for yourself."

It's taken Ronen a combination of chutzpah and hard work to achieve her reputation as one of Houston's preeminent street artists.

Whereas many of her colleagues went to art school, she is entirely self-taught. The 45-year-old is driven toward success, in part, because she had a late start in her vocation, but even more so because the life that she and her family have in Houston has largely hinged upon her ability to make it as a working artist.

"We've been here on a O-1 visa, which is given to people with special talents, like actors, athletes, musicians and artists," Ronen said. "We got that visa at the end of 2008, and that meant from that point on, I needed to start making a living from art.

"It was a great thing to have that visa, but it didn't mean I'd automatically get paid," she said. "I've had to work for it."

JHV: MICHAEL C. DUKE

Anat Ronen has spent the past year transforming streetlight and electrical boxes across Greater Houston into original works of art. One of the largest, painted in May, is located at the Bellaire Transit Center at 5100 Bellaire Blvd.

Coming to America

Ronen and her husband, Ori, both grew up in northern Israel. Ori, especially, felt constrained by the kibbutz life he was born into. Ronen's family, on the other hand, moved around when she was young and, therefore, she never had time to develop a connection to any particular place, she noted.

After a short visit to the U.S., the couple fell in love with the size of America. A year later, Ronen, Ori and Ronen's son, Orr, packed what they could and decided to start a new life in the States.

"We came here without any plans," recalled Ronen, who now has been in the U.S. for 10 years. "We said the only rule is to come here kosher, meaning legally."

Ronen initially arrived in the U.S. on a business visa. Prior to the move, she was working for a real estate investor in Israel, who allowed her to transfer to the company's Miami branch to help run the back office. After a few months, Ori, whose talents lay in agriculture and construction, was offered a job building greenhouses in Michigan, so the family decided to relocate there. Unfortunately, they were cheated in the arrangement, leaving them to question: "What do we do now? Do we go back to Israel?"

Ronen and Ori agreed to try one more city in the U.S. before giving up. They chose Houston because of its size, warm climate and affordability. Once again, they packed up and moved. That was Pesach 2007, and they've been here ever since.

"Up till then, we were still doing mostly what we did before, work-wise, so it wasn't a radical change, other than having a new address," Ronen said. "But, we didn't like being here on a business visa.

"It's like being a prostitute," she explained. "The sponsor basically becomes your pimp and has the power to determine if you stay or go home. That drove me crazy, so I started looking for another solution."

Ronen learned about the O-1 visa for artists. She applied, despite having no formal training or work experience as an artist. To her great surprise, she was approved.

Muralist emerges

The visa required Ronen to make her living through art. She began to advertise on Craig's List, offering a variety of skills, including illustration, graphic design, Web design and mural painting.

"I picked up a few projects here and there, and quickly realized that illustration, graphic design and Web design can be done from anywhere, so the market is supersaturated," she said. "Murals, on the other hand, are done on-site. Once I figured that out, I began to narrow my focus."

JHV: MICHAEL C. DUKE

Portraiture is Anat Ronen's speciality. Her skill was shown during the Madness on Main Street Music Festival through a portrait mural she created of a local band, "The Suffers."

Ronen's first mural project came in late 2008. A Jewish family in Houston's neighbor, Missouri City, wanted a tropical landscape painted alongside its backyard pool.

"They told me they waited seven years to get the mural of their dreams – so, no pressure," the fledgling artist recalled. "It took me three days to complete it. Thankfully, they loved it, and that was the first sign to continue in that direction."

JHV: MICHAEL C. DUKE

In recent years, Anat Ronen has strived to create iconic images, imbued with political messages and deeper meaning. Her portrait of Malala Yousafzai, portrayed in the style of Rosie the Riveter, went viral on social media.

A few weeks later, Ronen received a response from her Craig's List ad from a company that paints streets and highways across the state of Texas. Besides the roadways, themselves, some of the jobs included smaller art projects. Ronen was intrigued and successfully interviewed for the job.

Her first project was along the Galveston Causeway in 2009.

"I had absolutely zero knowledge of how to tackle a project that size," Ronen recalled. "They said just go to the store and pick the paint. … I ended up buying 100-times more than I needed.

"The funny thing is they never said a word," she added. "I'm still using the overstock, now, six years later."

The artist designed a wetlands scene, complete with white egrets. Dressed in a hardhat and high-visibility vest, Ronen went to work, painting four sections of the 90-foot-long concrete barrier, hemming the stretch of highway that connects Galveston Island to the mainland.

"I learned from that experience how quick I can work and that I have a feel for large-scale projects," Ronen said.

Confidence in her overall ability, however, would come later.

"Being a new artist at the time, I had to talk myself into it," Ronen admitted. "If they didn't like it, my mentality was: Worst-case scenario, they won't pay me, and they can paint over it."

Fortunate for Ronen, the project was a success. Soon after, she was hired to paint a series of Texas stars along I-10, between Beltway 8 and Loop 610. She also painted a space-themed mural on the NASA Road 1 column under I-45 South.

As much as the roadway projects helped Ronen build her skills and reputation as a

painter, the pay was low and the work was dangerous.

"When doing the stars [on I-10], we had to drive the scissor lift from one intersection to another in the middle of traffic," Ronen said. "Then, there's the fact that you're breathing in the traffic fumes all day, plus the sun and heat radiating off the concrete.

"It was brutal," she admitted.

Restoring pride

Shortly after Ronen parted ways with the road-painting company, she was contacted by the Houston Independent School District, which was looking to hire artists to paint murals at HISD schools.

In 2012, she completed a mural at Dodson Elementary. Two years later, HISD's board of trustees voted to close down the low-performing school. The move was controversial and drew harsh criticism, especially from families who were transferred to Dodson in the wake of prior school closures.

Many former Dodson students were sent to Blackshear Elementary in Houston's historic Third Ward. Dodson's principal also moved to Blackshear and reached out to Ronen following the move, asking her to paint a new mural at Blackshear that would help bring a sense of pride to families at the school and to the disadvantaged neighborhood.

"The school has a huge wall outside, making it look like a prison," Ronen observed. "Inside, it's a beautiful school, but outside, there are no windows, just a solid brick, ugly thing."

The project had a limited budget, so Ronen proposed a simple floral design. The principal wanted something more personal – a design that would give back to the community that had been deeply hurt by the Dodson closure. Ronen came back with the idea to paint a few portraits of local community leaders.

She attended a meeting with the intent to make reference photographs for the mural. Unable to find enough volunteers to be featured, she opted to open up the project to anyone at the school or from the neighborhood.

Initially, it was just Ronen on the street, asking people if they wanted to be part of the project. Word began to spread, however, and by the second day, people started lining up to be included.

Eventually, Ronen was forced to turn people away because there were so many. After expanding her design multiple times, she managed to include 55 different portraits along the 250-foot-long by 18-foot-tall wall. The job took 45 working days to complete, spread across eight months, due to weather. It was finished in 2015.

'Selfie' mural

Ronen refers to the Blackshear project as the "selfie" mural. With self-reflexive elements, it contains a self-portrait of the artist, along with a woman from the neighborhood, taking a photo of Ronen painting the mural.

While most of the portraits reflect the predominantly black community, one section of the mural features a Palestinian family.

"They were at the original event I went to when I was planning out the mural," the Israeli artist recalled. "I was excited to meet them and felt really strongly about including them in the project."

Of the dozens of public and street-art projects that Ronen has painted across Greater Houston, the Blackshear mural is her favorite, she noted.

"What made it so special were all the people who came by to say how it makes them proud, and how it adds to the community, knowing that this community is struggling," Ronen said. "It was really important to me to give them something that they can take pride in and enjoy every day, despite their challenges."

In personal terms, the project also solidified the artist's confidence in her abilities.

"Three years ago, if you told me this is what I'd be doing, I would have laughed hard in your face," Ronen said. "Portraits – they're the hard-

est subject to paint, because even the slightest inaccuracy screws the whole thing up. If the person doesn't look like the painting, it's not a portrait.

"Here, I was challenged to do 55 portraits, with the actual people walking by every day, looking over my shoulder as I worked," she said. "The experience taught me a lot."

JHV: MICHAEL C. DUKE

Anat Ronen painted a mural on the outer wall of HISD's Blackshear Elementary in 2015, featuring 55 portraits of students, family and residents from the surrounding Third Ward neighborhood. The 250-foot-long mural also includes a self-portrait of the artist.

Precision portraits

Ronen has enjoyed a sharp learning curve in developing both her artistic skills and her artistic voice.

She began testing her hand at portraiture only a few years before executing the Blackshear mural. At the time, she belonged to a Facebook group, called Sticky Note Art, that challenged participants to create works of art within the parameters of a 3-inch-by-3-inch-square canvas.

"I started practicing doing portraits that size, because anything bigger was too scary and intimidating," Ronen said. "Little by little, I became comfortable with the challenge and gained the confidence to go larger."

Ronen currently works out of a studio space that doubles as a gallery on Telephone Road near South Lockwood Drive. An early collection of her sticky note portraits is framed on the back wall. Nearby, a sketchbook rests on a coffee table, containing portrait drawings of the cast of "Downton Abbey" – a project commissioned in 2015 by the local PBS station for a watchparty of the series finale.

In the front of the gallery hangs a series of door panels – some of the first large-scale portraits that Ronen attempted. The one of her grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, is exceptional.

The opposite wall displays Ronen's portrait of Malala Yousafzai – the female education activist who was shot in the face by the Pakistani Taliban and later became the youngest-ever Nobel Prize laureate. Ronen presents Yousafzai in a similar pose to Rosie the Riveter, flexing her bicep. The portrait is similar to one that Ronen painted in 2014 – an image that went viral on social media. She created another version during a live-painting demonstration on the campus of University of Houston in 2015.

A year before painting Malala, Ronen embarked on an evolutionary change in her work. She was invited to contribute to a group exhibition at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art. The image she created for the show depicts an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian fighter, together, armed with water guns. An inscription painted in Arabic, Hebrew and English reads: "If Only."

"Beginning with 'If Only,' I started to paint things with more meaning," Ronen reflected. "The best street art is memorable – images that stick with you and become iconic."

JHV: MICHAEL C. DUKE

Anat Ronen frequently paints in the company of her husband, Ori, who serves as quality-control engineer. Besides his input and helping with project prep, Ori built out a studio space and gallery for his wife.

"If Only" also contains a backstory.

The Station Museum is run by a hardcore pro-Palestinian activist, Ronen noted. The outside of the museum often is papered with slogans, like: "Free Palestine." When Ronen went to interview at the museum for the exhibition, the activist started to yell, accusing her of being responsible for Israeli policy toward the Palestinians.

"I responded by saying: 'Listen, do you want to argue with me, or do you want my art?' " Ronen recalled. "Eventually, he said: 'Ya, I want your art,' and everything ended up going really well."

The Israeli artist added, "With that piece, in particular, I enjoyed the process of squeezing so many emotions into a single image. It was meant to be political.

"My political views are that I want good for everybody," she continued. "I want the truth. I want fairness. I want everybody to be happy. I don't want either side to suffer."

Art school reject

Ronen has proven that college and art school aren't the only paths toward a successful career.

In her youth, Ronen liked to design and illustrate, but never invested any serious time or training in either. Considering career paths after completing her army service in Israel, she decided to apply to an art school near her home in Haifa. Her application was rejected.

"I had a friend who knew somebody at the school, so I leaned on them to find out why I was rejected," Ronen said. "Besides submitting a portfolio, you have an interview when you apply. I ended up having two interviews, for some reason.

"During one of the interviews, I was asked the question: 'What would you do if you're not accepted?' My answer was: 'Well, I'll try somewhere else.'

"Apparently, that was the wrong answer," Ronen said. "They wanted me to say: 'I'll do whatever it takes to go here until the day I die.' I realized, then and there, what art school is really about. After that, I lost interest in going to any art school – and I'm super happy I didn't go.

"Taking the route that I have, I've been able to keep an open mind," she said. "This has allowed me to stay true to myself as an artist."

Power to change

Ronen has an unquiet mind. She's keeps equally busy with physical work.

This past February, her Green Card application to become a permanent U.S. resident was approved. She said her ultimate goal is to earn U.S. citizenship and continue to pursue her art as an adoptive Houstonian.

The week she interviewed with the JHV, Ronen painted three traffic-light boxes – a major, ongoing public art project for which she was recruited. In between, she worked on several mural designs and submitted a few proposals. She also conducted a workshop for patients at Texas Children's Hospital, gave a couple of speeches and hosted a studio visit and street-art walking tour for a group of children.

Despite being an introvert in her private life, Ronen said she enjoys talking art with people – the younger the better – and working in front of an audience.

She also noted that she enjoys the company of her husband while she works, especially outdoors, for safety, and when a job requires scaffolding or other significant prep.

Ori describes his role as "quality-control engineer." When not called upon for help or input, he can be found sitting in a camp chair nearby, reading Hebrew-language books sent by his family from Israel.

Outside of Houston, Ronen participates in street-art festivals and demonstrations around the globe. She also has made a point to pursue projects in Israel, which has allowed her to visit family there.

Three years ago, she painted a mural at her nephew's kindergarten. Then, she had the opportunity to paint murals at her grandfather's nursing home.

"My grandfather passed away a year-and-a-half ago, and that was the last time I saw him," Ronen said. "I was extremely happy to do that project for him and for all the caregivers and everybody else there."

Art has taken her to new places and to meet all sorts of people, Ronen noted. The best compliment she's received, to date, came a few years ago while working on a mural project for a school library in League City, Texas.

"A few days into painting, a teacher came by to tell me that she was against the project, thinking the money could have been used on something more important. But, after seeing what this project was, and realizing what an important role art can play, she changed her mind and said how good it is that I'm doing this for them," Ronen said.

"When you're able to change someone's perspective, that's when art is most powerful," she said. ❋

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