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I first met Rivka Saker at a New York coffee shop in early 2007, where she and director Yael Reinharz were discussing the global re-launch of Artis, a nonprofit organization based in New York and Tel Aviv. Saker established Artis in 2004 to "support exceptionally good Israeli artists and to create opportunities for their exposure abroad." Soft-spoken with an easygoing nature, the prominent philanthropist and collector has been promoting the art of her country for years, founding Sotheby's Israel in 1984, and serving as a board member and trustee for several institutions including the Tel Aviv Museum and the Center for Contemporary Art. Her efforts are beginning to pay off, as several contemporary Israeli artists are making big names for themselves abroad, while bringing attention to the thriving local art scene in Tel Aviv.

New York-based Artis director Reinharz, an enthusiastic promoter of Israeli art, stated: "The dominant perception of Israel is defined by media coverage of the conflicts in the region, and thus culture is overshadowed. We want to represent the many sides of Israel, and engage in dialogues that can also be critical." She added "Our mission is to support and expose Israeli art internationally, starting in the US and Europe."

Israeli cultural diplomacy is a major motivator for the organization, and to this end Artis provides financial support for artists abroad at a time when the Israeli government continues to cut art funding. In 2007 the country's total budget for cultural promotion abroad amounted to only \$4.1m. This sum includes salaries for cultural missions overseas and hospitality for professional visitors to the country for art-related events. At that time Israel's cultural attaché in New York, Yoram Morad, told me that his total budget for the year was \$50,000. He added, "Since we don't have a lot of resources, we have to attract private money to help fund Israeli culture." And this is precisely where Saker and her group can help.

One of Artis' most successful programs is the semi-annual research trip organized for international art curators, critics and journalists. These one-week tours of artist's studios, museums, galleries, alternative and nonprofit art spaces, Arab villages and historical sites have yielded press coverage in major publications around the world, and have led to exhibitions in prominent museums providing maximum exposure for young and talented Israeli artists. One such trip resulted in the organization of two exhibitions by New York curator Klaus Biesenbach; a beautiful and haunting installation of new videos and sculpture by Sigalit Landau at the Museum of Modern Art in March 2008, and a video installation of five socially and politically charged works by Yael Bartana at PS1 Contemporary Art Center in October of the same year. Biesenbach, who last visited Israel as a young boy, was intrigued by its changing landscape saying, "the art scene in Tel Aviv has produced some of the most compelling new works of contemporary art in recent years." Artis provided funding and organizational assistance for both New York exhibitions, as well as for a show of digitally manipulated photographs by Barry Frydlander at the MoMA in May 2007. This summer they are supporting exhibitions by Guy Ben-Ner at MASS MoCA and Keren Cytter at X Initiative in New York.

As part of Artis's organizational overhaul, the group has stocked its board with high-profile philanthropists, collectors, and museum directors like art dealer and collector David Mugar, philanthropists Judy Steinhardt and Lynn Schusterman and Israel Museum director James Snyder, allowing it to expand its funding base along with its ambitious agenda. Artis publishes a yearly magazine and has an excellent website where cultural events, exhibitions, recent articles and original content about Israeli art are posted. The nonprofit also provides educational support through its partnership with New York's Columbia University, awarding scholarships to past MFA students like Mika Rottenberg, Guy Ben Ner, Ohad Meromi, Tamy Ben Tor, Gilad Ratman and Rona Yefman along with numerous others.

Among the group's projects in development is an art residency program for international artists and curators, as well as a new focus on commissioning work to encourage artistic experimentation. Currently, Artis is co-commissioning new art by Omer Fast, Guy Ben-Ner, and Anat Pick for Performa 09, a biennial festival of performance art taking place in New York City in November of this year.

By far the most ambitious project for Saker and Yehudit Shapira-Haviv of Artis was the co-founding of ART TLV with art dealers Irit Sommer and Shifra Shalit-Intrator. Launched in September 2008 with the goal of bringing attention to the contemporary art scene, the city-wide project with a 2008 budget of over \$1m, brought together top Israeli and international curators and artists. A more locally focused version of ART TLV, led by curator Edna Moshenson, will take place this fall throughout Tel Aviv and Jaffa to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of Tel Aviv, and thereafter it will be held every two years to coincide with the Istanbul and the Athens Biennials. The organizers hope to capitalize on the willingness of collectors and curators to travel around the globe, making Tel Aviv a regular stop on the biennial and art fair circuit. "I'd like people to see the city at its best and to develop a deeper understanding of it," said Saker. She added, "We are passionate about creating art tourism in Israel."

Image above: Michal Rovner's home, Cfar Shmuel

[Charmaine Picard](#)

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