

CALIFORNIA CONTEMPORARY

ART

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Rhea Carmi

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT by Roberta Carasso

Rhea Carmi's art is a profound search to make visual the darkest to the most illumined aspects of life that human beings and nature can experience. Through a succession of piercing abstract narratives -- from grim ashes of suffering, to the emergence of healing, compassion, and the ebullient joy of freedom -- Carmi shares with us what she witnessed first hand. Born Israeli, and married for 49 years to a Holocaust survivor, the subject of suffering is second nature. Carmi has learned through direct experiences that all-consuming darkness can cast an enormous shadow on life, yet, it is also a powerful force that can bring tremendous spiritual transformation.

In reading the essay, *Voices of Silence*, by the noted French writer and art critic, André Malraux, Carmi realized that her art must be about the millions of voices that have been silenced in the never-end-

ing cycles of inhumanity. Consequently, in *Voices of Silence*, the silence that Carmi set out to create becomes deafening; her message of darkness is powerfully presented, yet its conclusions are surprisingly optimistic and hopeful.

In September, 2010, as part of a group exhibition at the Gotthelf Art Gallery in La Jolla, CA, she will show selected works from her *Voices of Silence* series. In a retrospective exhibition, held in 2008 at Soka University in Aliso Viejo, CA, Carmi showed the complete series -- paintings and assemblages, 77 works of art, on two floors, a total of 8,000 square feet. *Voices of Silence* is composed of three groups: *Humanities Struggles*, *Humanities Resilience*, and *Everlasting Spirit*. For the Soka University exhibition, Carmi added her Carnival paintings. They are about a heightened sense of color, magic, sound and people engaged in revelry.

This exhilaration came from a trip to Brazil and the joy of her grandchildren, playing with them and becoming a child once again, not as it was in the early years of war-torn Israel, but in the freedom of the American landscape. With the brightness of each canvas, there is a subtle suggestion of pretense as masked faces, prominent at Carnivals, recur in overlapping patterns.

Carmi's latest series, *Our Fragile Earth*, came about when Carmi observed how the life force within fire-scorched fields are driven to regenerate and soon carpet the landscape with green leaves, shrubs, colorful flowers, and welcoming insects and animals. This body of work concerns an earthquake she lived through and local fires she observed. (*Destruction and Rebirth* is a portion of *Our Fragile Earth*) In a bright red orange painting she includes twigs burned in the Northridge fire; and on the lower left are scorched pistachios shells signifying that the earth continually bestows a bounty of unique fruits for nutrition and beauty. In a luminous green painting, bedecked with local plants, Carmi portrays the once decayed and burned becoming green and renewed.

Many of the pieces in *Our Fragile Earth* are created from backs of stretchers bars, giving a sculptural appearance where viewers look into a scene as if moving through layers of foliage. The art mixes assemblage and sophisticated Abstract Expressionist figurations, a format rarely applied in this manner. As in all Carmi's art, *Destruction and Rebirth* exudes strength and energy that the artist's particular process demands and her personality conveys naturally. *Our Fragile Earth* is made entirely of recycled matter that Carmi gathers in her daily workday as an artist, wife, mother, grandmother, and citizen. These creative "inventions" are assembled from papers,



Rhea Carmi, *H.S. XXIV*, 1996, acrylic and oil canvas, 48" x 60". Courtesy of the artist.

Rhea Carmi

old box springs, string, and assorted materials. In Carmi's hands ordinary "stuff" is transformed into meaningful artistic statements. Through manipulation of common matter, she makes us aware of the need to care for the earth, be mindful of adding trash to trash, and the ensuing dilemma of having to contend with mountains, even oceans of discarded remnants. Carmi tells of our need to consciously consider materials that come into and go out of our life, how to use what is needed, how to be aware of the effects trash has on what we can see directly – in the smaller scope of our personal environment -- and in what is less apparent, but also victims of trash – the immense areas of distant lands, sea, and sky.

Carmi's concern is to create art that awakens viewers to the wonderment of life, whether it is the magnificent and resilient spirit of the human being or nature. And with a touch of practicality and humor, some of Carmi's newer works are of bright plaids as she mixes leftover colors, giving them a recycled life, rather than adding them to the long list of detritus. Amazingly we see that in the hands of an artist, the most common substances can take on brand-new and delightful meanings as fragility is transformed into an everlasting strength.

Fortunately, Carmi's own affable character, like her art, is lively and optimistic. *Voices of Silence* and *Our Fragile Earth* continue the message that the ever-lasting human spirit will always triumph over voices that are silenced. And with a caveat, Carmi shows that nature can triumph as well. In her art, she makes us aware of both sides of each issue; when there is suffering, it can lead to joy; when there is destruction, it can be realized in renewal. But into these equations she adds the need for protection and preservation, guarding our precious life force,



Rhea Carmi: (top) *Untitled*, 2009, wood paper pigment shells on cotton, 60" x 60" x 24".
(bottom) *Barren Earth*, 2009, tar, burlap, dirt, twine, and paint on 9 panels, 30" x 96".

and not allowing it to succumb to harm. Thus Carmi's art continuously comes full circle, returning to possibilities that could silence and destroy, or heal and nurture.

Truly the art of Rhea Carmi stands apart. Its profound messages stir the soul.

Rhea Carmi's Voice of Silence series is on display through Oct 28 at Gotthelf Art Gallery in La Jolla, CA. Our Fragile Earth will soon be exhibited at Frank Picture Gallery. For more information, see rheacarmi.com.