

RHEA CARMI: CARNAVAL

Rhea Carmi remembers vividly her visit to Rio de Janeiro at Carnival. It was, she says, a delirious, heightened moment of magic, color, sound and laughter. But she remembers other such moments, and has read about and witnessed others. Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Fasching in Basel, the Purims of Carmi's childhood in Israel, and even the relatively tame – or at least tamed – Hallowe'ens that knock on her door every harvest season, all are manifestations of the human need to revel, transform, and put the everyday away in the closet. Non-western societies employ the mask routinely in religious ritual; in our civilization(s), the mask manifests, if anything, an irreligious gesture. But universally, when the mask goes on, the theater of life suddenly becomes the life of theater.

Carmi's "Carnaval" series of paintings reminds us of the power and allure of masking – and the human need to mask. The canvases brim with hot, exquisite color, broken into so many shards; they also brim with grotesque faces, stylized depictions of the false visages that crowd the streets every year in sanctioned ecstasy. They are more than simple impressions of scheduled social fantasy; they are attempts to plunge into that spirit and come out the other side, at once terrified and refreshed. Clearly, these rhythmic renditions of spiky, dopey faces or leaping figures are not expressionist essays in fear; their palette and their exuberant pulse bespeak only pleasure. But there is nothing as frightening as a tidal wave, even – perhaps especially – one of human delight. A mob is a mob, and it might be the Mardi Gras mob rather than the post-game mob or the lynch mob that rolls over you like a juggernaut of joy.

Carmi's usual approach tends to the dour, the brooding, the momentous and the memorial. She muses constantly on the fate, and the many missteps, of humanity, and does so in relatively austere formal terms, right down to a sere palette of blacks, browns, and fiery reds. Blue, green, turquoise, and even warm orange normally occur in Carmi's paintings as highlights, cool spices in a heated landscape of anguish, alarm, and highly tentative hope. Carmi rarely lets herself party like this. But after several years furiously arguing with God, man, and fate – an argument that still continues in ongoing series like "Les Voix du Silence" – the artist has allowed herself a little dessert, a touch of artistic R&R. Her visit last spring to her grandchildren back in Israel gave her license to return to her skills as a colorist, skills she has suppressed for practically her whole career in California. Returning to such sensuousness in the "Carnaval" paintings, Carmi has finally found the other side of her diamond – the side that doesn't cut as deeply, but that flashes brilliantly.

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