

RHEA CARMI: THE DARK SERIES

By Peter Frank

War catches even the warlike by surprise. The warred-upon sleep with one eye open, and expect such surprises; but even they can be caught off-guard. Last summer, Israel surprised itself, going into Lebanon after Hezbollah. And it surprised itself further, by battling only to a compromise, failing to gain its strategic goals, and providing its enemy the propagandistic upper hand. Was the war mismanaged? Was it ill-advised? For the Israeli populace and the world, these are now political questions; for the Israeli military, they are questions of policy, strategy, tactics. It was, as the saying goes, a learning experience. It was a bleak time for the Jewish state, and the repercussions have not subsided.

Rhea Carmi watched the events of this last Middle East conflict unfold from half a globe away, but she might as well have been right there. Indeed, she had been weeks before, visiting homeland and family. At that point she was in a state of near-bliss, delighting in her family and her art and her life – the state of mind in which those who know Rhea usually find her. She was painting a series based on Mardi Gras – not the Catholic rite, but its near-pagan manifestation in places like Rio de Janeiro and New Orleans, Cologne and Basel, eruptions of giddy, sustained transgression where silly rather than somber, prankish rather than proper, behavior is the order of the day. (It's no accident that Purim, the Jewish version of this festival of assumed identities, nearly coincides in the calendar with the Latin version.) Carmi's series brims with color and image; human visages, distorted into Carnival guises, fill each canvas as never before in her work, even though they eventually dissolve into stuttering masses of vivid brushstrokes.

The grim reality of strife and its unsettled aftermath – the summer's war left all its protagonists in more precarious positions, but Israel most of all – made it impossible for Carmi to continue her festival of masks. The mask of war had been donned, and when it came off, it left a scar. Worse, once Israel pushed its clouds towards its horizon, others gathered at the edges of Carmi's own family, as one of its youngest members battled a grave illness. Her optimism already compromised, Carmi had to marshal what was left to sustain her loved ones' spirits. As usual, she did so in life; and she poured her deepest feelings into her art.

And as usual, Carmi's did not simply pour out her deepest feelings in dramatic or lugubrious expressions. Her palette and her formal vocabulary changed, becoming simpler, more sober, more contemplative, turned inward. Some pieces took on the foreboding gloom the war – all wars, but this one most especially – warranted. Into a few of these Carmi introduced soft, even three-dimensional shapes, as if to insist on the reality of human frailty but also to celebrate somehow the defiant persistence of human sensuality. Some of the warworks Carmi rendered in a quietly luminous copper hue, restricting the imagery to minimalistic devices but building into the panel, so that these visual barriers seemed to have windows built into them. Other minimal works posited white forms – myriad dots or lines, configured into regular patterns – on near-black grounds, manifesting a longing for order and harmony in real life. And still others displayed the rhythmic and coloristic variety of the Mardi

Gras series, but muted and balanced into coherent “maps” of seemingly urban environs.

In fact, all these kinds of images had appeared before in Carmi’s oeuvre, as recently as the previous year and as far back as her emergence as a new talent in Israel in the early 1980s. By mining her own previous artwork, Carmi re-explored the resonance of her past accomplishments, and therein found added potential for profound emotion. In the face of existential threat, Carmi took stock of her extant comprehensions of the world (for that’s what artworks are) and, needing something to reaffirm the world as much to herself as to her audience, she found those earlier comprehensions applicable. Having averred that the world need not be a tragic place, Carmi was now rediscovering how to deal with the fact that it so often is.

Carmi’s responses to a time of war and disillusionment clearly embody feelings of anxiety, pessimism, and confusion. But, again, a persistent glow of hope glimmers around the edges of even the darkest of the Dark Series. Native to a country born in the face of annihilation and existing ever since in the face of dissolution, Carmi does not sustain her hope on naïve faith, but on real experience and persistent vision. She, her people, and all of humanity are still here, and so far are still dying only one by one. Her own family has so far averted tragedy, for which the anxiety of hospitalization and treatment is small price to pay. Those of her passions Carmi heeds must lead to the forging of images and monuments, not to small diaristic exercises in self-pity. She may work in a variety of formulations and a variety of moods, but every shape and sensation, no matter how shadowed or subdued, must aspire to the profound, and, like a good stage play, must ring with a variety of emotion.

Great art, Carmi knows, is great in its embrace of complexity. Complexity, Carmi knows instinctively, requires contradictory sentiments of the same artwork. An artwork’s simplicity, as she demonstrates time and again – and never more than in these recent Dark works – reveals not the rawness of its feeling, but the intricacy of its depth. Those blacks of hers are not mere stains on a panel, but are voids waiting to be populated by stars. Those patterns of hers are not doodle or decoration, but the elaboration of sensation upon surface. The “windows” hewn into fields of metallic green reveal not just the structure of the object, but the conflicting nature of existence, where an opening can be a trap, and a wall can be a passageway.

Emotions are messy things. Fortunately, in her nearly thirty years of artmaking, Rhea Carmi has consistently leapt into her own emotions, but has never succumbed to their chaos. Rather, by channeling her feelings – and by extension ours – into a broad but limited formal vocabulary, she has endowed them with eloquence. At the toughest of times, such eloquence must reflect despair and resilience at once. The Dark Series radiates such contrasting sentiments, well past the events that provoked them. Indeed, the true resonance of the Dark Series may emerge in happier times, when they serve to remind us that good fortune is as fleeting as bad, and that life is briefer than art.

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