

RHEA CARMİ: HUMANITY'S IMAGE

The human condition is not simply a favored subject of the modern artist, it is a preoccupation. Whether it is the turbulent passage of life, its inevitable (or at least poignant) tragedy, or the triumph that lies beyond – in the survival of the human spirit or the endurance of the species – artists in all disciplines, as spirited members of that species, speak invariably to the condition they share with their fellow homo sapiens.

Across several decades and two continents, Rhea Carmi has spoken directly and consistently to the human condition. Her unabashed address to the passion and anguish her species knows can seem almost embarrassing in the rawness of its symbols and its textures. But Carmi mitigates this rough edge with an often-disarming elegance of means, a formal grace and coloristic charm that reformulate, but finally mirror, the beauty of the world around us. However nasty, brutish, and short our time on earth may be, Carmi reflects, joy and wonder can ease that fearsome ride.

Carmi has focused on the human condition in three ongoing parallel series of paintings. Interestingly, a great deal of stylistic variation maintains within each series – more, perhaps, than even maintains between the three. This is partly a result of the three series enduring in Carmi's practice and engaging her concentration for so long a time; over the decade or more she has "fed" the three strains, she has thought and re-thought, worked and re-worked her approach(es) to the intricate act of inventing and elaborating upon visual metaphors. But we can also justify what might seem inconsistent formal language within each series as an expression of the discontinuity that pertains in the human condition. Thus, the many explorations of passion and upheaval, adversity and triumph, that comprise "Humanity's Struggles," while generally more elaborate and tensile, seem

ultimately no more imposing or conflicted than do the superficially more placid formulations of “Humanity’s Resilience” or “Everlasting Spirit.” The sense of graceful, serene unity we might expect to find predominating the latter series is not foreign to the other two; and the monumentality particular to “Humanity’s Resilience,” as inferred by the series title, can be seen throughout the three groups. It is possible to generalize about characteristics unique to each group, but the generalizations stick poorly if at all. Carmi reserves for herself the right and ability to bespeak all aspects of life, in all phases of her work.

An exhibition of works from one series, then, can display the exciting variety we might expect in a selection made from several series. But, as this exhibition of works from the “Humanity’s Struggles” series demonstrates, the variety is not so great as to belie the consistency of the artist’s sensibility. Throughout, Carmi evinces an emotional sensitivity to color and to gesture, a markedly sensual approach to texture, and the kind of refined expressivity in her line that we associate more with a calligrapher than with a painter. (The appearance of writing, in Hebrew and Latin letters, in certain of her paintings makes obvious this particular gift.) The selection of “Humanity’s Struggles” paintings presented here is designed to bring forth these strengths, but is also configured to exemplify the series’ consistency within its variety – or, no less, the variety within its consistency. The selection does not so much put Carmi’s best foot forward as it typifies her step.

As a colorist, Carmi in effect summarizes her geographic biography. Her palette grounds itself in the earthy tones of her native Israel and her current home in the hills above Los Angeles, and is spiced with rich reds, brilliant yellows, marine blues, and greens both verdant and metallic – reflecting the plant life of the modern oases she

inhabits and also the copper of the ancient Levantine and the lapis of the pre-colonial Southwest. On a (yet) more subjective level, colors for Carmi symbolize, or even embody, emotions and emotional responses. No work exemplifies this more clearly than *Humanity's Struggles X (Twin Collapse)*. As the subtitle indicates, this painting refers to the destruction of New York's World Trade Center. The image, irregular vertical columns spotted with small black vertical lines, crudely evokes tall buildings in a state of dissolution. The fearsome momentousness of the event is conveyed not by the composition itself, which serves simply as a cipher for our orientation, but by the deep red that pervades, even covers, everything. This is the red of fear, anger, and catastrophe, the blood red of war. At the same time, its purity and its dominance invests the red with an irresistible sublimity, a kind of perfection or at least thoroughness that encompasses every aspect of our awareness.

If color thus embodies the impulse of perception for Carmi, line for her embodies the basic coherence of life – not just the structure, but the pulse of life's meaning, its logic (however opaque), its spiritual as well as physical skeleton. Her engagement with language and writing makes self-evident Carmi's dependence on line; but line-based imagery, even free of verbal notation, appears constantly throughout her oeuvre. Streaks, stripes, and the vertical (and horizontal) edges of rectangular forms comprise rhythmic networks whose architectonics are equally capable of fluidity and rigidity. In the latter mode they can prove binding and restrictive, as in *Humanity's Struggles XXI (Imprisoned)*, or somber and mournful, as in *Humanity's Struggles I (Shattered Red Cross)*. In the former mode, as seen in *Humanity's Struggles XXIV*, the whole image fairly dances into visual space. *Humanity's Struggles XXIII (Homage to Lost Astronauts)*

fuses the two modes, posing a gaunt black ideogram upon a brilliant red platform all set against a field of deep aqua. That ideogram at once connotes the astronauts themselves, their spaceship, and their ultimate destiny; inscribed on an endless sea, it is a voice clamoring, mournfully, in the wilderness of the universe.

Such an existential gesture, a positing of the human against the void, suits Rhea Carmi's style, inheriting as it does the beautiful, passionate gesturality of mid-century European *art informel* and its reinterpretation into calligraphically impelled abstraction by Israeli (and other mid-Eastern) artists of that time. Carmi insists that the tragicomedy of life is as elegant and tumultuous now as it was in 1950, that we still live with the constant threat of annihilation, and that the human spirit cannot and will not be stifled by that threat. Simple or complex, agitated or calm, but always poised and luminous, the paintings comprising the "Humanity's Struggles" series argue that, even in the face of death, humanity triumphs.

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