

Chain of Maps: About Esther Cohen's Works

Raz Samira

Esther Cohen's work explores the relationship between nature and man by means of rituals, narratives and cultural heritage. Her paintings portray a deep rooted contemporary debate on cultural legacy and tradition. Her pictorial motifs are at once symbolic and poetic, drawing from personal as well as collective memories. Whether oil on canvas or ink on paper, her work, via the act of mapping, deals with defining physical and symbolic boundaries while investigating the disciplining domestication of the wild.

Cohen works in series. Each of her series stands alone, but also relates to, and in a way continues its predecessors, forming a thematic continuity between series, exhibitions, moments in time and places.

The rituals and ceremonies motif, for example, also appears in her early series **"Lentils and Rice"** (Haifa Museum of Art, solo exhibition 1999, curator: Yehudit Matzkel) where she depicts the domestic ritual of "sorting through" rice or lentils, in a meticulously realistic manner.

Sorting through rice or lentils, a painstaking chore the artist partook in with her mother in her childhood home, is articulated by the equally painstaking painting of each and every grain of rice or lentil, documenting each stage of the slow ritual, contrasting the fast pace and instant gratification of today. The series recreates the repetitive, restricted circular "sorting through" motion of manually transferring rice from one side of the plate to the other, in to order dispose of pebbles and other inedible elements. The motion of the paintbrush over the canvas maps the motion of the hand sorting through lentils or rice, developing into broader cultural aspects as the painted images on the plate morph from decorative flowers to thorns and insects, threatening the hard gained order, and referencing 17th century Flemish Vanitas painting.



Lentil Plate · Oil on canvas, Ø 27 cm. 1999

Mapping, rebellious wildflowers and references to Vanitas paintings also appear in Cohen's later body of work **"Flowers in Blue and Black"** (The Artist House Tel-Aviv, solo exhibition 2015, curator: Arie Berkowitz). The realistically rendered blue and black indigenous wildflowers - daffodils, cyclamens, anemones, poppies, lupines, are drawn with a ballpoint pen on old maps of Israel or on circular paper formats. Cohen's choice to use ballpoint pens, an available household item, and the readymade map formats dictate the blue and black linear characteristic of the drawings (emphasizing the wildflowers' rich texture). "The decision to draw with an ordinary ballpoint pen speaks to the dissonance between high and low, between wild nature and familiar serene domesticity" Esther explains. The motif is strengthened by the decision to draw "ordinary" flowers that grow in the wild without human interference. The artist strips the flowers of their natural colors and transforms them into unified blue and black specimens. These detailed drawings of flowers bring to mind early 20th century botany handbooks on one hand, and on the other, still life

painting tradition, specifically 17th century Flemish floral paintings. By drawing and portraying the process of growth and decay in the wild, Cohen is in essence conducting a contemporary dialog with the 17th century Vanitas tradition.

lines and outside the lines. The act of painting redefines the map, creating a new code to decipher, one that traces the fields of blossoming wildflowers stubbornly surviving, season after season, demanding their ability to reappear.



Rice Plates · Oil on canvas, Ø 27 cm. each, 1999

The flower, throughout the history of art, has symbolized evanescent beauty, the transient fleetingness of life on earth (Memento Mori). The flower is the embodiment of temptation and beauty as well as of pain and death. Transience, as a motif, manifests itself in the choice of flowers, and the decision to draw them on old geographical maps of Israel. Looking at these maps provides a window into the past, to places and borders that no longer exist, to the wide-open fields which have over time become urban or industrialized zones, and to the altered names and functions of sites. The works it seems, do more than merely confront us with our mortality; they emphasize the evolving process of perception and points of view.

The linear manner in which the flowers are rendered is patterned after the way flowers grow naturally, contrary to topographical lines and charted boundaries on maps. The way the drawing trespasses over the mapped borders, representing loss of control, creates an explicit and a subliminal conflict between order and chaos by drawing within

The artist's work touches on mapping, the defining of real and symbolic boundaries. The drawing distorts the map's scale, as the flowers are life-size, and therefore suggest a new method of representing reality, allegorical of Jorge Luis Borges's map, the flowers cover the map, creating an absurd dynamic between the signified and the signifier.

Drawing on maps of Israel enables the artist and the viewer to trace and contemplate the territorial entanglements of the land we inhabit, and the ways in which the borders have rapidly changed over the years. By painting and drawing on maps, Cohen erases and overrides the map's original function, transforming it from a structured consensus of symbols, to a personal narrative.

Cohen invites us to meander along the trails in the maps, to observe markings and the flowers that germinated as a result of her creative process, to consider questions of identity and affiliation, the natural world and the manmade, nature and culture. "This series of work reflects a family ritual.

My family and I go on hiking trips during the seasonal blossoming of wildflowers, to see the flowers at their peak, imagining the inevitable process of their decay. In my work I examine my own personal rituals alongside the narratives and cultural heritage of being Israeli, taking into consideration questions regarding the resonance of cultural traditions passed down through the generations and their contemporary manifestation”, Esther remarks.

“Poppies Observing the Negev Desert” is a series, created following the 2014-2015 “Tzuk-Eitan” war, in which an introspective gaze is inherent to the drawing. The poppies turn their petals towards the map, “observing” it closely, navigating a winding twisted path.

An introspective painting gaze also occurs in Cohen’s diptych **“The Queen of Sheba Gazing at the Israeli Moriah Plant”**. In this piece a convergence takes place between the ready-made photograph of the prima ballerina (Margalit Oved) in traditional Yemenite costume, from the “Inbal” dance ensemble’s 1960’s production “The Queen of Sheba”, and the drawing of the Moriah (Salvia) plant, which according to botanists inspired the design of the original Temple Menorah, and became the

symbol of the modern state of Israel. In the drawing the Moriah plant sprouts current Israeli coins upon which ancient plant motifs have been stamped, resembling coins and jewelry that traditionally adorn Yemenite bridal costumes, consisting of seed beads and plant imagery as fertility talismans. In this triptych the bride/queen symbolizes past biblical glory, and ancient eastern culture and traditions. Gazing at the growing motifs of today, the queen embodies a resonating and nobly feminine, contemplative gaze.

In another early series of oil paintings, Esther Cohen focused on simple little features we associate with festivities and ceremonies.

The painting **“Happy Sha-Sha”**, for example, portrays a meticulously rendered popcorn chain (shasha: popcorn in Arabic slang), reminiscent of home decorations families prepared for celebrations (Petach-Tikva Museum, exhibited as a part of a large scale installation 2008, curator: Anat Gatenio). The exacting brushstrokes illustrate the sensuous crispness of puffed corn, creating a mimetic “white on white” painting. The series portrays the artist’s continuing interest in every-day occurrences that evolve with time into ceremonial rituals, and are elated by her paintings from their lowly status to the sublime.



Happy Sha-Sha (Popcorn) · Oil on canvas, 105x45 2005

A different bead threading technique, conceptually equidistant in essence to previous use of this motif, is resumed in Cohen's new and unique body of work, **"Filigree and Various Spices"** (Dwek Gallery, Jerusalem, solo exhibition 2016, curator: Raz Samira). The works are all drawn in ballpoint pen on assorted paper medium, such as geographical and geological maps of Israel from various time periods or circular formats.

In these works Cohen focuses on drawing fragrant flowers such as Frankincense, Cassia, and Lavender as well as regional wildflowers, weaving them into detailed drawings of traditional filigree jewelry. Filigree, an ancient Turkish and Mesopotamian craft dating back to 3000 BCE, derived from Latin words *Filum* (wire) and *Granum* (grain of wheat), uses thin threads of different widths and orbs made of precious metals, gold or silver, woven into an intricate and dense mesh of tapestry. A piece of jewelry is thus created from a thread. In Cohen's drawing technique, fine lines drawn with a ballpoint pen mimic the laborious filigree process. From a line or a wire, a creation is painstakingly formed. This Jewelry was once served as ornaments, as status symbols and a means by which to accumulate wealth. It also often served as talismans for protection, fertility and blessings. The design of the jewelry is based largely on floral motifs, drawing from nature as a source of inspiration and reflection, and part of a deep understanding of life cycles and the blossoming and decaying process.

The Filigree jewelry tradition was widespread in Yemen and India and is deeply rooted in the culture of these countries to this day, it was also favored in 17th century Europe. Cohen's choice of filigree ornaments as a motif derives from a biographic 19th and 20th century Yemeni connection. She draws jewelry with incredible detail on circular formats, so that the entire series, when hung, resembles beads strung on a winding chain, light and floating, yet rooted to the Land and its pathways. The earth motif as a life source yielding both wheat and barley, and

aromatic spices - the material and the ethereal, is accentuated by these drawings imposed on maps of the Land of Israel from different periods. Cohen draws aromatic flowers, associated with religious ceremonial incense, alongside rampant wild flowers and biblical motifs on geographical maps, in a way that at times the motifs merge into the lines on the map and at times dispute them. The jewelry, the spices and the wildflowers appear to 'hover' over the pictorial space, defying the laws of gravity, and emphasizing the dissonance between the earthly and the heavenly. The floating sensation creates a rhythmic dance-like movement within each work, and from one work to another, forming a winding linear chain between them.

Cohen creates a delicate yet critiquing synthesis between colors and shapes, between the regional and the historical, personal and collective rituals and between the politic and the poetic. She allows herself, and the viewer, to enter the maps, the fields of her creation. The imagery in her work announces its presence over and over on the paper and on the map, entangling past and present, charted pathways and unrestrained nature.

Cohen explores the domestication of nature, while documenting the process of growth and decay in the wild; she conducts a critiquing contemporary dialectic tribute with the 17th still-life genre as well with early 20th century botanical drawings.

Through her art work, she invites us to observe and contemplate dilemmas regarding affinity and identity, regional and global dialectics, east and west, indoors and outdoors, nature and culture.