

A Matter of Repetition

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Maya Cohen Levy's cycle of works on the subject of ponds displayed in the present exhibition constitutes a summation of a kind of infinite series on the subject. By means of repetition of a recurrent formal and contentual pattern, she arrives at a distillation and enhancement of her central subject. A continuous excitement seethes beneath the seemingly pastoral surface of these works, and finds expression in intensive changes of the principal images and in numerous variations on the subject.

The repetitiveness of the act of painting accords Cohen Levy's creative process, and the process of viewing as well, an almost ritualistic dimension. Her creation is perceived as a practice that oscillates in the tension produced between two poles: the aesthetic and the ontological. On the one hand, her way of seeing her creative work is identified as an extremely charged and singular act, through which she materializes her affinity to the primordial aspect of nature and expresses her love and her enjoyment of both the Creation and painting. On the other hand, she gives expression to her reservations about the mimetic-illusionary modes of representation by means of an ecstatic experiencing of the creative process in its broadest aspects.

The exhibition explores the total range of images that appear in Cohen Levy's *oeuvre*, and also examines the extent of the transformation of each of

the principal images separately — its form, the pattern of its recurrence, and also the plastic solutions chosen by the artist.

Cohen Levy's first works abounded in forms and images possessing a mythical context. We see this several works, such as *Seated*, 1983, in which three demonic figures sit in a ring, in what looks like a kind of ceremony or magical ritual dance, evoking a sense of magic and mystery. The moon, which appears above them, finds an echo in the ring of sitting figures, and is also marked as a dynamic painterly form. These works, despite their Jungian aspects, such as the collective unconscious, function here more as structural forms through which the artist proposes a call for a new order of circular composition. In Cohen Levy's subsequent works, as in the "Dance Structure" series, for example, this kind of composition develops into branchings that stem from an abyss-like center, a motif which the artist also continues to develop in her three-dimensional works from 1990.

In the "Ponds" series, the layers of paint create colorful textures that simultaneously cover and expose the layers beneath them. Layers of dark color mix with light-colored layers to create a textural weave that scintillates before the viewer's eyes to the point that he cannot decide which layer is above and which is beneath. The fiber-like brush-strokes (for

example, in cat. 24, 35, 37) send formal branchings out to the sides, like fishes/leaves/eyes (in cat. 24, for example), the defined ends of which create an ambiguous interplay of negative and positive in the depth of the painting. Through this many-layered weave, a brilliant inner glow is created, a radiation which actualizes the light as a material — as the paint itself. Although there is no intentional blurring of the boundaries of the form, and no dissolving of the colors into one another, the weave produces an interior interplay between the light and its reflections without eliminating the texture of the paint, emphasizing what Dalia Ravikovich has described in her poem "Stains of Light":

And in this material stains of light have been
imprinted
And no sound is heard in them and no rustle
will pass through them
And, like oil of myrrh, they drip and trickle
from the can.¹

Beneath the mother-form of the eye, which is duplicated clearly again and again, and which in recent years has become one of Cohen Levy's icons, we also discern traces of hesitation (as, for example, in cat. 4, 19, 22), which are expressed in erasures that slightly undermine the inner hierarchy of the work.

Nature, Cohen Levy's source of inspiration, is vague and shrouded in mystery, a hidden landscape possessing a powerful if also a most elusive presence. In Derridean terms, her painting is a "sea of broken and isolated signs", with the elusive truth lying somewhere beyond them, while everything remains wide open to interpretative games. In a kind of stratagem of structure, in these works the artist confuses our perception, and directs it to other

regions. Nonetheless, one can observe the lines of logic hidden in her works and discern a certain structure around which the work is organized. In the works on the subject of the ponds, this is the motif of the eye/fish which serves as a distinctive signifier that concentrates our regard upon it.

While creating the series of "Ponds" paintings, Cohen Levy worked in a bent position over the horizontal picture plane. This position is somehow analogous to looking into the water as into a mirror in which the "I" seeks in nature for what eludes her. The scintillations in the water blur the reflections and make it difficult to discover the truth that lies behind the illusion. Cohen Levy paints and erases, builds and peels, exposes and conceals, in a continuous process of quest and of interlocution with the work process and with the regard that looks at her. "The rhythm, the rhythm of the peeling," she says about her work process, "is the process of exposure out of which the new picture is created."

In the "Ponds" series, the artist continues dealing with the subject of views, which she began working on in 1987. Cohen Levy uses an artist's knife to peel away our habitual patterns of consciousness, touching upon the dark and the dangerous, juxtaposing the concealed with the revealed, the darkened with the illuminated. The cutting, the peeling, and the absence they present, reveal the artist's personal set of codes, as well as her defense mechanisms and her sensitive points. Cohen Levy is interested not in narrative as such but in the ambiguity of the subject: on the one hand, the pond as a natural landscape constructed in a composition that recalls abstraction of a panoramic landscape, and on the other hand the pond as a psychic landscape, as an expression of an inner spectacle. At a certain stage the external plane is internalized and assimilated into

the creation of a hypnotic and meditative painting. Concurrently, a picture of an inner world is projected upon the entire consciousness, and gives subjective validity to a recognition of the objective world. As a consequence, new points of view on her paintings are created, and these contain a key to Cohen Levy's work.

In the spirit of the *sumi-e* school,² Cohen Levy emphasizes the accidental, which is characteristic of the medium of watercolors, as well as the fact that this medium is difficult to control. In order to overcome the difficulties of the medium she paints with broad body movements while bent over the large paper surface, thus approaching the stance of the American Action Painters, especially the Action Painting and the hand gestures of Jackson Pollock. Unlike landscape painters who paint with their gaze on the landscape, she paints with her back to the landscape. Her studio serves her as an aquarium and a window to inner landscapes, and, like the Zen painters, she accumulates impressions from nature, observes its rich diversity, and then, at the end of a process of learning and contemplative observation, a synthesis which formulates nature anew in a condensed form seems to impose itself upon her.

Deleuze, in his book *Difference and Repetition*,³ claims that the concepts we commonly use when we relate to nature, including the concepts of space and time, lack finiteness, and says that the degree of definition reserved for other concepts does not apply to them. Hence they do not actually exist in nature, only in the realm of "the spirit [...] which contemplates nature and looks at it and imagines it in its own eyes". In nature, repetition — *i.e.*, day and night, the seasons — leaves no trace. Only the spirit or consciousness which look at nature repeating itself are capable of finding "something new" in the

repetition.

In her works, Cohen Levy repeatedly examines a series of dichotomies implicit in the method of illusionary representation, such as surface/background and image/background, and replaces them with a set of structural affinities with components that bear an asymmetrical and non-uniform character. Deleuze sees lack of symmetry ("dissymmetry") as a positive dimension, a dimension of what is, not of what is lacking, for it is the lacking that is the motivating force in nature as in artistic creation.⁴

Every time that Cohen Levy goes back on her tracks and reworks the constant "mother form" in the series, she actually creates something different. Each such repetition constitutes a correction and an updating with the aim of exhausting the expressive power of the composition and of bringing the painting closer to the starting point and to the artist's "spirit". In this practice there is a dialectic of contraries: on the one hand, an affinity to a recurring model and an aspiration to create uniformity and order, and, on the other hand, an expression of the original composition while introducing changes, at times tiny, but always significant. The purpose of repetition is perceived by Cohen Levy as an actualization of a mystical unity between herself and nature and between herself and the painting.⁵ These three components — the artist, nature, and the painting — create a situation of compression in which the forms that reconstruct the original moment, as it was sealed in Cohen Levy's memory, are distilled. All this happens by dint of the painting being a faithful representation of the artist's "spirit" and of her personal identity.

The act of creation in the "Ponds" paintings ranges between drama and poetry, between contrasts

and integrations. This creates a mosaic of images that change and develop both separately and together: the eye as a mother form, the spiral that integrates disquiet with sweeping and stormy drama, and a round, full and radiant entity that looks like a moon. An interplay of screens that is spread out in a calculated and colorful correlation of tones and sub-tones serves the artist as a means of testimony or denial about the presence of additional images beneath the upper layer of water.

The concluding part of the exhibition contains a series of works done by the artist in Munich in 1999. These works are characterized by a gloomy, misty atmosphere and a tone of longing and melancholy. The brushwork is done with short hand-gestures, as though pensively. This manner of expression has a power that is at once dramatic and restrained. This part of the exhibition closes with a triptych of water and sky; chords that become more and more dramatic as the gaze climbs upwards as if playing on a mysterious, majestic, celestial string instrument, are replaced by pale colors that blend together into a complete whole, as in the poem "Sky" by the poet Wisława Szymborska:

I should have begun with this: the sky.
A window minus sill, frame, panes.
An aperture, nothing more,
but wide open.⁶

Notes

1. D. Ravikovich, *All the Poems So Far*, Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, Tel Aviv, 1995, p. 44.
2. *sumi-e* — a Chinese genre of black-and-white painting in ink. Under the influence of Zen, these paintings attained to a high degree of abstraction.
3. G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton, The Athlone Press, London. p. 14.
4. On the meaning of the differences between creation and creation in series, see: D. Levy-Eisenberg, "Henri Matisse: Repetition and Creation", Ph.D. Dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 1995, pp. 22-23.
5. Deleuze, on pp. 23-25 of his book, discusses two types of repetition — static and dynamic. Maya Cohen Levy's works fall into the second category, the dynamic, which "includes difference and includes within itself the alterity of the Idea, in the heterogeneity of an 'a-presentation'". Deleuze calls this category positive, "dissymmetrical", and spiritual, and writes that "it carries the secret of our deaths and our lives, of our enchainments and our liberations, the demonic and the divine". He adds that this category of repetition is "a covered repetition, which forms itself in covering itself, in masking and disguising itself. This kind of repetition, however, is not independent, and is connected to the static kind of irepetition.
6. Wisława Szymborska, from: *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, translated by Stanisław Brańczak and Clare Cavanagh, Faber and Faber, London, 1996.