

## **My Heart is in the East | Maya Cohen Levy**

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Maya Cohen Levy's work conducts an ongoing, fertile dialogue with the cultures of East Asia. Her fascination with Zen Buddhism led her to study East Asian philosophy at Tel Aviv University. After graduating from the Kalisher School of Art, Tel Aviv, she traveled to India, and later to Japan and China to study calligraphy and ink painting (Sumi-e).

Cohen Levy never tried to adapt her work to art world fads. She began studying art in the mid-1970s, in a period when the "death of painting" was declared. Nevertheless, painting has been a significant means of expression from the very outset of her career, a vehicle with which to explore her own nature and the nature of the world.<sup>1</sup>

The current exhibition brings several series together, enabling a more focused scrutiny of her sources of inspiration originating in the East: on the one hand, the way of Zen and Japanese ink paintings; on the other hand, the Near East—the "sacred geometry" of Islamic art and Sufism. The featured works were taken from two early series painted concurrently: *Islamic Ornaments* and *Roots* (2000-2004), which complement each other in the search for a visual representation of an intrinsic law, oscillating between the geometric and the organic. These are juxtaposed with a new series, *Nocturnal Sights* (2010-2012), which embraces the upper and earthly worlds under the cloak of darkness.

Cohen Levy's search for an underlying geometrical principle in nature began relatively early, following her interest in the Golden Section.<sup>2</sup> In paintings from the series *Sunflowers* (1991-1994) she explored the spiral growth of sunflower seeds, which spawns a ravishing pattern, striking in its perfection.<sup>3</sup> In *Honeycombs* and *Palm Tree Trunks* (1995-1997) she continued to uncover the geometric regularity innate to nature.

The geometric ornamentation in Islamic art represents the infinite wealth of creation and the harmonious relationship between basic forms which are intertwined to create spectacular, intricate geometric patterns. Cohen Levy adopts the dialectic between ideal form and its unique manifestation in the world. In the series *Islamic Ornaments*, she initially sketches a geometric grid whose lines remain exposed on the white canvas, subsequently moving between them with random, singular swift brush strokes, which interrupt the meticulous order, infusing it with life. The result is formal patterns made of repeated units characterized by continuity and duplication as well as shift and variance. She seeks freedom within the fixed pattern by means of multi-layered hatching in contrasting colors which give rise to flickering textures. The painting contains the accumulation of memory from the first to the last line.

Concurrent with *Islamic Ornaments*, Cohen Levy painted the series *Roots: treetops* portrayed as roots. The top-root transforms the painting into a meeting point between the external and internal worlds. While the painting appears as a reflection of trees and moon in the water at first sight, it is, in fact, a web of infinitely interwoven organic forms. Their rhythm continues to echo outside the canvas: expanding rings of ripples, continually

bifurcating branches, the flowing lines extending from the top part of the painting towards us. In one of the paintings the moon is duplicated and depicted in various phases throughout the month. In another, the roots are indeed portrayed in vivid orange, but they dissolve like a fragile tissue onto the two overlapping moons behind them, attesting to their imminent disappearance.

The sights rendered by Cohen Levy are anchored in the landscape; as in Chinese painting, however, they are not an imitation of external scenery, but rather a search for the intrinsic principle embedded in it. The tree, the water, the moon are only ostensibly separate. In effect, their existence is entwined. Everything comes together to form a single, vivid whole.

An old Zen tale recounts the story of the nun Chiyono, who used to carry water from the well in an old bucket bound with bamboo. When the bamboo broke and the bottom of the pail fell out, the nun experienced a moment of awakening and wrote a poem:

In this way and that I tried to save the old pail

Since the bamboo strip was weakening and about to break

Until at last the bottom fell out.

No more water in the pail!

No more moon in the water! 4

In her works, Cohen Levy strives to unite the consciousness and the world, subject and object. The artist's unity with the subject of his work is a key experience in the study of Zen painting. In order to draw a bamboo shoot one must first become a bamboo. When you draw the appearance of bamboo, you are separate from it. You can paint its form and colors, as seen from the outside, but to render its spirit and essence, you must renounce your own ego and sense its quintessence.

A similar experience is described by Persian poet, theologian, jurist, and Sufi mystic Mawlana Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi (Jelaluddin Rumi, 1207–1273): "Go you into that workshop and see Him face to face. / Inasmuch as over that Workman His work spreads a curtain, / You cannot see Him outside His work. / Since His workshop is the abode of the Wise One, / Whoso seeks Him without is ignorant of Him. / Come, then, into His workshop, which is Not-being."<sup>5</sup>

According to the Chinese and Japanese tradition of Sumi-e painting, every brush stroke is made with one breath. It is an exercise intended to unite consciousness and action. In the series *Ponds* (created between 1995 and 2000 and presented at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 2000; curator: Varda Steinlauf), Cohen Levy painted textures in ink which contain movement of recurring images of leaves-eyes-fish in transparent layers, over and over again. This multi-layered praxis would become Cohen Levy's hallmark, as indicates by Steinlauf: "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."<sup>6</sup>

Every application of paint joins the lines beneath, at once covering and accentuating the layers of hues bursting forth. It is not a relationship of image and background as in Western painting. The entire canvas is a vibrating sphere of movement. The large canvases are akin to a dance platform, demanding involvement of the entire body facing them. The act of painting becomes a particularly lively presence in her recent series, *Nocturnal Sights* (2010-2012).

The whirling movement of Sufi dance which Cohen Levy has come to know in recent years creates a powerful inner center, like stars rotating around a single spot. In her world, time stands still, but its cyclicity is nevertheless clearly discernible. Eternity is channeled into a single moment, into the now. "Chui the Artisan's swooping freehand arcs could match the lines made with compasses and T-squares, for his fingers transformed along with the thing he was making, his mind never lingering to check or verify. Hence, his Numinous Platform was unified and unshackled to any one place."<sup>7</sup>

In *Nocturnal Sights* Cohen Levy arrives at a time in which the world unites and external boundaries blur. The trees lose their concreteness, and only the shadow of their tops remains. Lively action takes place in the sky: stray lines intermingle and unravel like an echo of hidden growth which continues to occur in the realms of creation. Maya Cohen Levy stands at the center like the tree trunk, its roots in the depths of her soul, its top in the

painting, and her hands pivot around an array of light hatches in the never-ending cycle of nocturnal skies.

## Notes

1. Later on she also worked in sculpture, photography, and video.
2. The Golden Section, also called Divine Proportion, was presumably discovered by Greek mathematician Euclid, but it was only in the Renaissance that it was given extensive manifestations in art and architecture, following mathematician Luca Pacioli, who described this mathematical ratio in his book *De Divina Proportione*, ascribing it with marvelous virtues. The book's illustrator was Leonardo da Vinci.
3. The Golden Section ratio and spiral growth are discernible in many trees and plants. Every new bud or stem naturally grows into the gap left by its predecessors to obtain maximum light and air, thereby producing a spiral arrangement of the branches and leaves around the stalk or stem. For an elaboration, see: Michael Costa, *The Golden Section, Solomon's Seal, and the Star of David* (Tel Aviv: Hapoalim, 1990) [Hebrew].
4. Nancy Wilson Ross, *The World of Zen: An East-West Anthology* (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 78.

5. Jalal ad-Dîn Muhammad Rumi, *The Masnavi*, book II, trans. E. H. Whinfield (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010), p. 71.

6. Varda Steinlauf, "A Matter of Repetition," in cat. *Maya Cohen Levy: Ponds, 1995-2000*, trans. Richard Flantz (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2000), p. viii.

7. Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009), p. 82.