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Rhea Carmi at SOKA University

One of the best kept secrets in Orange County is the lovely campus of SOKA University, a collection of authentic looking, Italianate structures vaguely reminiscent of the historic city of Urbana. What's also unsung is the campus' spacious art gallery where I had the chance to acquaint myself with the art of Rhea Carmi.

Carmi was born in Israel but has been living and working in the Los Angeles area for the last 27 years.

Stylistically versatile to say the least, Carmi takes inspiration from her Jewish heritage including the Holocaust. The later, along with the demoralizing wars bedeviling the Mid-East (including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) have inspired a body of work that carries strong messages but remains didactic without straying into dogma.

By naming the show *Voices of Silence; Voices of Hope*, Carmi leaves no doubt that she is in command of her own emotions and thus, while she grieves for the victims of evil, she never lets us forget that even the darkest dark will have a few glimmers of light.

Life is something one must get on with, one shoulders the burdens, grieves for the lost and embraces the joys, she says.

"Full Cycle," for example, is a small installation that pays tribute to a mother-in-law whom she could never meet because Esther Weingarten, mother of husband Meir, perished during the Holocaust. The work includes two sculptures alluding to the cattle trains that took the victims to the concentration camps and the horrific confinements in which they awaited death. But still, she crowns the arrangement with a Tree of Life

crafted from Sycamore leaves, branches and discarded nylons: the spirits of the dead guide the living.

In tribute to political prisoners and those who perished, she created the series *Les Voix du Silence--Voices of Silence*. By no means uniform, it consists of multi-textured canvasses, some of which evoke heavy prison doors or other means of confinement.

By contrast, she painted the *Carnival* series, a joyful riot of color. But, in the midst of it all, a Jean-Michel Basquiat-looking canvas jars the eye. This is as it's meant to be since Carmi honors her eleven-year-old granddaughter who is suffering from Leukemia.

Throughout, her work speaks of human struggles, but also of resilience and the will to survive. A scientist turned artist (after a hiatus devoted to raising her children) she derives strength and comfort from her own history and that of her husband whom she met while serving in the Israeli army.

Shows such as hers help us examine the past, assess the present and yet make us remember that light will eventually chase off the dark.

Voices... runs through December 31.

POSTED BY DANIELLA WALSH