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Rhea Carmi, H.S XXIV, acrylic and oil canvas, 48" x 60", 1996

REVIEW

Rhea Carmi

Voice of Silence, Voices of Hope

[Soka University's Founders Hall Art Gallery](#)

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"Art," André Malraux once remarked, "is an anti-destiny." Like Malraux, who inspired her, Rhea Carmi was born in difficult times, in Jerusalem, before Israel became a state. Surviving the birth pangs of a beleaguered nation, "a land that is spiritual and passionate," Carmi immigrated to California as a mature artist and a witness to history. She has devoted her thirty-year career to an art of engagement, confronting agonizing tragedies

with an empowering mixture of despair and hope.

Using mixed media on often-brutalized canvases, Carmi insists we must remember historic traumas as vividly as we recall personal pain. Although some of her works are private memorials, many of her paintings implicitly promise "never again" -- and this is the hope ingrained in her surfaces. Carmi seeks to give a voice to the innocent who cannot be heard, not just because they are dead but also because they go unheard, due to what Jean-François Lyotard called the "differend," the refusal to acknowledge words of the dehumanized.

In what amounts to a retrospective, the ambitious show begins with a series of dark paintings slashed to create openings for "voices" that speak from the back, pressing the canvases outward in their urgency. Carmi constructs paintings of closed doors that conceal crimes against humanity, un-witnessed except by the dead, and paintings of blocked windows that hide atrocities, but she interjects the transcendence of hope with colors of light forcing their way through the darkness. In one painting Carmi touches the viewer with the metaphor of the Monarch butterfly, chronicling its long journey towards a brief but joyful existence. The butterfly -- the psyche, the soul -- is a signifier of faith in an art that heals, in paintings that can speak of hope, in images, as Malraux wrote, "powerful enough to deny our nothingness."

by Jeanne S. M. Willette