

## The San Diego Union-Tribune.

### VISUAL ARTS

Face time

By Robert L. Pincus

ART CRITIC

April 6, 2006

### Art lesson

Abstract painting is a tough medium for social commentary. Titles can hint at meaning, as they do in Rhea Carmi's exhibition at the Gotthelf Gallery. But they generally leave the viewer space for the imagination and for open-ended interpretation.

With titles such as "Humanity Struggles XXI (Imprisoned)," she clearly has a view to impart. In this work, the predominance of vertical lines – thick red and lean yellow ones – suggests a locale behind bars. There are echoes of the pre-minimalist Frank Stella and of Sean Scully, but she wants to coax us to see every shape as symbolic in her art.

Nothing wrong with that. But the gallery doesn't leave well enough alone; it supplied wall labels for each of 30-plus pictures in "Selected Works of Rhea Carmi" that are insistently didactic.

This turns out to a big drawback to the first local solo exhibition for the artist, who was born in Jerusalem and trained in Tel Aviv before coming to California in 1981.

Take the handsome "Humanity Struggles I (Shattered Red Cross)." The companion text declares: "The Red Cross is a symbol of healing. During wartime it is shattered by death and destruction."

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### DATEBOOK

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#### **"Selected Works of Rhea Carmi"**

*Through May 11; Gotthelf Gallery, Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center, 4126 Executive Drive, La Jolla; Free; (858) 457-3030 or [www.lfjcc.org](http://www.lfjcc.org)*

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There is truth to these observations, but isn't this also a case of stating the obvious? And doesn't this text suggest that the gallery isn't trusting a viewer to come up with his or her own interpretation? The paintings start to seem like illustrations of the words, deadening their potential effect and deflecting attention from their visual virtues.

My advice: Look first and read the explanatory labels later, if at all. They are likely to make your encounter with Carmi's paintings two-dimensional. Without them, her art has a fuller life.