



ART EXHIBITION: "Humanity's Struggles" is one in a series of 70 abstract, sculpted paintings by Israeli-born Rhea Carmi on exhibit at Soka University in Aliso Viejo through Dec. 31

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Monday, September 29, 2008

Rhea Carmi's artwork is on exhibit at Soka University in Aliso Viejo

Her paintings tell soulful stories of life and death, despair and determination.

By ROBERTA CARASSO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

ALISO VIEJO -Rhea Carmi, the Israeli-born artist, wife for 47 years of a Holocaust survivor, realized her artistic mission when she read the essay, "Voices of Silence" by French writer and art critic, Andre Malraux. Her series of 70 abstract, sculpted painting, exhibited on two floors of the Soka University Art Gallery in Aliso Viejo through Dec. 31, reflect the millions of voices that have been silenced in never-ending cycles of inhumanity.

With unabashed honesty, the work tells soulful stories that deal with life and death, imprisonment, futility, man's inhumanity, despair and concludes with

resolution – overcoming obstacles, determination, loyalty, love, and lastly a joyous Carnival series. Through nonfigurative bold colors, line, structure, shape, patterns, light and dark and powerful compositions, Carmi tells heart wrenching vignettes she personally experienced or directly knows about. Her art is the history of mankind in abstracted form.

In the initial series, reminiscent of the great American 20th Century painter, and Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko, Carmi combines geometrics – straight lines, strong circles, and forceful patterns of dark against dark. One particular untitled painting: two robust vertical strips of red on either side of the canvas represent life. In the center, using copper mesh, a material for trapping animals, Carmi paints the vertical area black. Like a coffin, death is surrounded by life. The closeness of the edge of red and black becomes a conduit for dialogue, an inevitable crossing as the artist portrays how life and death are closely connected, a continuous enfoldment.

Then there is a series that looks like windows, but the windows are blocked by a wall suggesting total imprisonment. Referencing a concentration camp, the greenish patina and black lines of the non-windows are symbolic of the terror of being trapped, with no place to escape. In another aspect of this theme, Carmi references the biblical military strategy, used in the Sixth Day War, of not completely surrounding a people, but allowing an opening for escape in order to reduce violence and loss of life. Carmi recalls how this strategy was used in the Sixth Day War and saved hundreds of lives because of the planned escape route.

Then there are Carmi's more buoyant series where she moves from dehumanization to idealism – her carnival series, the seasons, and natural changes that continually bring renewed beauty. In 2004, a very wet winter, Carmi witnessed the inspiring scene of thousands of Monarch butterflies migrating from Arizona to British Columbia. Her abstractions tell of perseverance, a trait prevalent in humans and natural creatures. Overhead, in massive formation, the Monarchs flew to the point of exhaustion towards their breeding grounds to fertilize their eggs and die. Their two week existence is fueled by a universal drive to successfully produce the next generation despite never seeing their offspring.

With the assistance of her husband, Meir, who builds all the structures, the artist grinds stone into powder and pigment into color. With acrylic and oil paint, Carmi uses only the purest and natural materials: sand, glue, tar, corrugated cardboard, and sawdust, parts of tree bark, wood, seeds, coffee grounds, and burlap. First, she works from the back of the canvas, pushing the structure outward, towards the front, obliterating flatness, sanding, pressing, and molding the canvas covered structure. Carmi listens to the voices of the canvas as lifeless materials become endowed with spirit and are transformed into an organic being. At times she rends the fabric from the front as if it is an open wound, or adds other matter, expanding the already expansive surface. Her extremely high work ethics

endows each piece with a permanency guaranteeing that each painting will last far into the future. That the art will live forever and humanity will continue to thrive is key to Carmi's Talmudic perceptions.

The exhibition is a testament to the sensitivity of an artist who, through visual means, brings to life the idea of humanity's struggles and resilience. The outpouring of her talents and dedication, more importantly, her tireless probing and questioning, blended with challenging personal experiences, is what truly shapes Carmi's unique art.

Contact the writer: CONTACT THE WRITER: roberta.carasso@gmail.com