

“Half dream...” | Ruth Cohen and Esther Cohen

A duo exhibition at The Bialik House Museum | The Second Floor

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On this tapestry, all of it blue of firmament and green of grass, are now woven the sights of my world in those early days, sights placid and tenuous as wisps of clear curling mist, half riddle-me-ree and half dream; yet there is naught so bright and vivid as they, nothing so real as their reality.

-- Bialik, *Aftergrowth*, Chapter I, p. 42*

Modes of reading and decoding visual and written language are the focus of the exhibition “Half dream...” Esther Cohen has made a series of works referring to Haim Nachman Bialik’s poetic autobiographical novella, *Safiah* (“*Aftergrowth*”) as part of the series of research-based contemporary art exhibitions at the Bialik House Museum - The Second Floor. *Aftergrowth* was published serially in Hebrew from 1908-1934.

Esther Cohen embarks on an artistic journey through her heritage, traversing personal and collective memories from circles of family, community, tradition, religion, and history of Israeli, Yemenite, and European art. She shared the journey is shared with her parents: her mother, Ruth Cohen is exhibiting for the first time. She has been creating her color pattern paintings on an almost daily basis for the past 30 years. Esther’s father, Danny Cohen, participates through his contribution of a lexicon of Aramaic, his mother tongue, as an alphabet book drawn by Esther. Other works by Esther in the exhibition are drawings of jewelry, Yemenite Jewish amulets, plants, and details of nature and of fine metalwork.

Time, as material, state of consciousness, and transitions between generations and places, forms the “tapestry” of the exhibition “Half dream...” The works may be read in constant motion forward and backward, until the enigma becomes, as in Bialik’s words, “*bright and vivid as they, nothing so real as their reality.*”

Time is marked and present in different forms: almost every day, Ruth Cohen creates small rectangular paintings with repetitive, precise, dense, and colorful patterns. On the reverse of each page, she notes a personal or public event of the day, forming a kind of diary that began in the 1990s and continues to the present. The paintings were made on off-cuts of paper from the Yavne Publishing House where she worked for many years. Thus, the layer of the language of patterns was made as a memory of the books, the realm of words concealed within, as each painting becomes the memory of a single day.

The Salem Family arrived in Tel Aviv in 1924. Ruth was born and raised in the neighborhood of Kerem Hateimanim [lit., the “Yemenites’ vineyard”]. Esther remembers childhood visits to friends and relatives there. Ruth’s small works are as dense and intense as Yemenite fabric or traditional bridal dress. It is interesting to think of her works in context of Afia Zecharia, the Yemenite artist who turned her entire Shlomi apartment into a site-specific total art installation (d. 2002). Despite differences between the two, the aesthetic link is evident.

Danny Cohen belongs to the *Nash Didan* [lit., “our people”] the Kurdish Jewish community of Aramaic speakers. At his daughter’s request, he listed the Aramaic words he recalled, in alphabetical order. Esther drew each letter of the alphabet, wrote its name underneath, with

a word in Aramaic and its translation into Hebrew. Her lettering is an homage to the Hebrew alphabet painted by Zeev Raban for children, with rhymes by Levin Kipnis, (Berlin, 1923).**

Raban's letters are clear, colorful images bearing morals (Hebrew *mem* is for menorah; final *mem* is for *moznayim*, Scales of Justice, and so on and so forth). Esther Cohen took inspiration from Raban, but her expressive shapes comprise storms, transitions, uprooting, passion, struggle, and hope. For the Hebrew letter *dalet*, the Aramaic word that Danny Cohen recalled is *dargushTA* (cradle); a *nun* in flames is for *nurA* (light, fire). The cradle is painted empty, densely drawn within its frame, emitting a sense of danger; the flames of the *nurA* look like a memorial candle. Each letter tells a story of transition of ancient Hebrew into forgotten Aramaic, which, in turn, is present in the memory of contemporary Hebrew. The translation creates a dissonance, because the Hebrew equivalent of the Aramaic word does not necessarily begin with the same letter (for example, "cradle" in Hebrew – '*arisah* - begins with an '*ayin*, not a *dalet*). The circle is therefore not complete, the disconnect between sign and content generates a feeling of unrest. Juxtaposed with each letter painting is a piece by Ruth Cohen, forming an additional visual text whose reading does not remain on the surface level of *pshat* but should be read on the level of *remez* - an allegorical reading of the shapes and colors.

In *Safiah (Aftergrowth)*, his autobiographical story, Bialik describes the memory of learning to read as a child as an encounter between the letter as a consensual sign and the letter as form, the sign as a key to an associative flow.

...the assistant showed me the form of an aleph and asked me:

"Can you see the yoke and pair of pails?"

"That's true, upon my soul, a yoke and a pair of pail!"

"Well, that's an aleph," testified the assistant.

"Well, that's an aleph," I repeated after him.

"What's this?" the assistant asked again.

"A yoke and a pair of pails," I replied, highly delighted that the Holy and Blest One had sent me such fine utensils.

"No. Say aleph!" repeated the assistant, and went on, "Remember: aleph, aleph."

"Aleph, aleph..."

And the minute I went down the aleph flew away and was replaced by Marusya, the gentile girl who drew water. She never budged all day long. I saw her just as she was, with her bare shanks, her thick plaits, and the yoke and pails on her shoulders. And there was the well with the trough at its side, and the ducks in the pool nearby, and the garden of Reb Alter Kuku.

"What's this?" the assistant asked me next day, showing me the aleph.

"Oh, Marusya," quoth I, happy to find her." (Chapter III, p. 62)

The images of jewelry, amulets, and Jewish Yemenite ritual objects in Esther Cohen's works, rendered in ballpoint pen and ink, are characterized by their lightness and openness, descriptive qualities, the opposite of her mother's works. Esther Cohen's research-based drawings mark points of encounter between symbolic, magical, faith, and daily life. Jewelry for rites of passage and amulets are alongside plants that inspired the decorative forms, making present a pendulum-like movement between nature and its representation, hinting at art that embodies its own deconstructive potential.

Ruth Cohen's drawings placed near Esther's words and paintings become a kind of chorus continuing to retell the narrative, marking time in the group of works that constitute "Half dream..." The overall picture challenges the stereotypical perception of Mizrahi aesthetics

and Yemenite tradition in particular. Ruth and Esther together dissipate the East-West dichotomy, the former with her abstract works, and the latter with an oeuvre moving between precise figuration and surrealist hybridizations of objects/vegetation. Their works refer to art from the past and the present, from far apart locations. Their joint exhibition forms an intergenerational bridge, disrupting conventions of rebellion and erasure in favor of a new option that examines a fresh physical and philosophical space.

I also heard say that in the wood there were hazelnuts growing and Kol-Nidre pears. Some people testified that they had also found Palestine apples there. Let him who wishes to believe go on believing. So far I have not had the merit of seeing them with my own eyes. When the right time comes it may be worthwhile to venture forth into the forest and penetrate its recesses. It ought to be examined. Who knows what may be waiting for me there?

Many were the thoughts in my heart regarding this forest. (Chapter XII, p. 108)

Bialik's writing in *Aftergrowth* moves between prose and poetry, memoir and essay. The exhibition integrates artworks in different modes – visual works by the Cohen mother and daughter with words by the father – into a place that is an outgrowth of reality and memory, but remains “Half dream...”

Dr. Smadar Sheffi

* English quotations from Hayyim Nahman Bialik, *Aftergrowth and other Stories*. Translated from the Hebrew by J.M. Lask, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1939).

** Zeev Raban (1890-1970) designed the beautiful ceramic tiles in the living room in Beit Bialik: the pillars, one with the 12 tribes and the second with 12 months of the year, as well as the fireplace. They were executed by the ceramics department of the Bezalel School (headed by Jacob Eisenberg). Raban also illustrated Bialik's retelling of *King Solomon and Ashmedai* and his *Legend of Three and Four*.