

Cities and Valleys: Spring at The Laurie M. Tisch Gallery

***Feathers, Gold and Concrete* | Eliahou Eric Bokobza**

Guest Project: *Maps, Amulets and Wildflowers* | Esther Cohen

Curated by **Dr. Smadar Sheffi**

The exhibit runs through May 31. Free and open to the public.

The JCC presents the exhibition Cities and Valleys: Spring at The Laurie M. Tisch Gallery, which is free and open to the public. Opening on Mar 7, it features Eliahou Eric Bokobza's Feathers, Gold + Concrete and the guest project Maps, Amulets + Wildflowers by Esther Cohen.

The work of Eliahou Eric Bokobza examines Israeli cultural identity through brightly colored paintings, sculptures, and video animations, all through the lens of his North African Jewish roots. Esther Cohen's work, on the other hand, traces a cultural journey through her Jewish Yemenite heritage, focusing on silversmithing, subverting the language of traditionally masculine craftsmanship in the process.

This exhibition explores Israel from two different perspectives, focusing on issues such as racism and patriarchal structures that are still topical today through the lens of historical craftsmanship. In tandem, Bokobza and Cohen's divergent approaches converge to offer a nuanced and multifaceted exploration of Israel, shedding light on the intricate layers of cultural identity and history within the nation's diverse tapestry.

Esther Cohen: Maps, Amulets and Wildflowers

Esther Cohen's drawings trace a journey through her Jewish Yemenite heritage, traversing personal and collective memories from circles of family, community, tradition, religion, and history.

In ballpoint pen and ink, she depicts floral motifs and jewels, amulets, and talismans in hyper realistic detail—a wealth of material culture. Depictions of jewelry for rites of passage and amulets are juxtaposed with plants that inspire decorative forms. These research-based drawings mark points of encounter between the symbolic, the magical, and daily life. Cohen's work reflects traditional Yemenite silversmithing, a trade predominantly practiced by Jewish males. On stark white backgrounds, the objects become powerful stories.

By drawing the plants that are the botanical inspiration for pieces made of beads, compositions of filigree (woven silver thread), and granulation, Cohen deciphers the symbolism of fertility and virility in the jewelry, as in "My Beloved Is Like a Cluster of

Henna in the Vineyards of Ein-Gedi”. She subtly subverts the heritage marked by these objects made by men for women, assuming the maker role, and deconstructing their visual language. Throughout history, jewelry signified a woman’s social and economic status and was usually her sole possession. Although jewelry denoted dependence, as it was frequently bestowed by patriarchs, it secured women some economic independence. Cohen questions hierarchy. She stylizes natural visual inspiration to become a form of tradable currency and captivating beauty.

In works such as “Sea-Squills (Drimia) in the Negev”, wildflowers that imbue patriotic Israeli iconography and ancient Greek, Christian, and Muslim myths are drawn over maps of Israel’s natural habitat areas. The maps indicate the continuous flux of border modifications in the region, and the flora symbolizes the ever-generous presence of nature.

The series Anemone Mashrabiya shows a hybrid depiction of a live plant and an object, combining a popular local red wildflower and a traditional Islamic architectural element, the mashrabiya. The red flower is linked to blood—its mythical inception occurred when Aphrodite sprinkled nectar on the blood of her dead lover Adonis. The mashrabiya, a latticed window, is a passive cooling element that also obstructs women from sight while allowing them a (limited) view of the outside. Weaving the elements together, Cohen turns the voids in the latticework into eyes. She draws flowers growing up and down, their stems forming part of the intricate mashrabiya—a vivacious being celebrating life.

Cohen’s drawings, with their meticulous details, allow us to revisit and appreciate a tradition of craftsmanship while decoding its language, its song to nature, and its protective meaning.

Eliahou Eric Bokobza: Feathers, Gold and Concrete

For more than 20 years, Eliahou Eric Bokobza has engaged in critical observation and depiction of Israeli cultural identity, addressing the multitude of contradictions, nuances, and myths that comprise its distinctive texture. His signature style, accented by geometric patterns, florals, and semi-ethnic designs, celebrates a convergence of Orient and Occident, tradition and modernity. Bokobza’s exuberantly colored paintings, sculptures, and video animations dismantle assumptions about cross-cultural history, arguing both that differences are smaller than perceived and that liberal progress is less advanced than we may have hoped.

Bokobza's intricate oeuvre unfurls, fragmented but constantly interconnected. He mines autobiographical sources: born in Paris to an opera singer and legal scholar who emigrated from Tunis, he grew up in a Francophile environment. The family was proud of its North African Jewish roots, even after they immigrated once more to Israel when Bokobza was six. Tel Aviv (Jaffa), his home, appears repeatedly in his work, depicting its hallmark International-style buildings: Jaffa's Muslim, Ottoman, and European history; the sprawling beach; and its local-global aspirations. Bokobza's protagonists bear identical features, all with wide-open eyes observing the absurdities of life.

Salt & Pepper, an edition of colorful sculptural objects, is a concise portrayal of the dichotomy between East and West. A miniature international-style building with white salt shaker towers looms over a domed Oriental edifice resembling a black pepper shaker. These hand-painted, 3D-printed objects reflect Bokobza's cross-cultural and cross-temporal considerations.

The Eurasian Hoopoe, Israel's national bird, is a recurring motif in Bokobza's works. According to myth, this bird conveyed King Solomon's invitation to the Queen of Sheba, thus symbolizing the bridging of cultures. The Eurasian Hoopoe is featured in small jewel-like paintings on lavish gold (washi paper glued to gold foil) and in paintings of imaginary urban scenes.

Embedded in the works featuring the Eurasian Hoopoe are witty criticisms of racism. In *Tête Choco*, which refers to the popular *tête de nègre* (chocolate-coated marshmallow), a cute child (the artist's alter ego) is dressed in colonial attire, standing by a stereotypical servant-cum-genie. In a video animation of a flâneur in Tel Aviv, the bird signifies cultural hybridity. Beneath the veneer of colorful and wondrous art, Bokobza explores the diverse conceptual concerns of cultural inclusivity and relativity that define our present.

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