Surface Events

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The Crack as a Model of Disruption

The works featured in this exhibition, the series *Stairs* (2001–08) and the work *Crack* (2009), give thematic expression to a recurrent and ongoing configuration in Maya Cohen Levy's work. They bespeak the existence of an underlying duality, which is not reconciled in the course of the works' creation and reading – that is, in the course of the painterly material's ordering into different kinds of patterns borrowed from the natural environment or from ornamental traditions of tile or wall decoration.This series concerns a world of sensations and emotions associated with a liminal realm whose boundaries remain undefined, yet which is nevertheless given expression by means of a fixed and lucid set of insights, feelings and images. The existence of this realm may be surmised by examining the typology of materials and images that Cohen Levy uses to produce effects of excess, ambiguity and even – in extreme cases such as this one – a severe disruption of a seemingly ordered, continuous and stable ornamental and architectural arrangement.

This duality does not amount to a conflict between images of order embodied in simple – yet alluring and deceptive – geometric patterns. There is no clash between the ordering of patterns borrowed from this or that (local or foreign) ornamental tradition and between a state of chaos. Rather, the duality in question is embodied in the apparent coexistence of the surface and of what lies beneath it, beyond it and at its base – of the visible and the invisible. Its recurrent embodiment through the creation of a liminal world endows the art work with extraordinary symbolic clarity and conceptual and aesthetic cohesiveness – which are revealed as an adherence to, or perhaps an entrapment within, a situation anchored in being itself. This state shapes Cohen Levy's sensibilities, determines her thought patterns and delineates the strategies she has engaged in over the years. The nature of these strategies is given expression in her choice of images, forms and art making processes (involving various supports and techniques, painting and drawing, peeling and construction) that constitute an arena or field of action – repeatedly reenacting an event that remains concealed, yet which attempts to expose itself, to emerge, to attest to its own existence; an event that cannot be erased.

The most explicit and striking embodiment of this event – which has remained consistent over time – is the shadow, or silhouette. What are the implications and actions involved in the appearance of this silhouette? To what extent is the shadow "smuggled" into the painting, and to what extent is the painting created for the purpose of presenting the shadow, and

of releasing it to wander freely across its surface? The silhouette may only reveal itself in this manner; its appearance in the arena that seems to have been destined for it is akin to the disruption introduced by the crack, the slit or the sensation of vertigo into what might otherwise have been a cohesive, stable image. Indeed, the large oil paintings, whose size is identical, were designed to be displayed as pendants; this mode of display operates as a didactic demonstration aimed at proving the existence of a natural law (or perhaps a historical dictum) according to which all that is built shall eventually be destroyed, while every ordered, manmade structure shall be disrupted – its entrances blocked, its interior spaces abandoned. This is what the shadow attests to.

The repetitive disruption of the simple, fragile and geometric ornamental pattern signals such intense torment, that the potential irony built into the recurrent display of altered surfaces is completely lost. The use made of variations on similar geometric patterns in the series *Stairs* (which began with the work *Stairs No. 1*, 2001) [p. 77] points to an additional effect – the effect of camouflage. Camouflage – the art of false appearances, of covering and hiding one surface under another, borrowed one – alludes again, in this context, to an experience or insight concerning what is alive beneath the surface. The surface itself is defined by its vulnerability, which is further attested to by the fracturing or disruption of the geometric pattern.

The silhouette that also appears sometimes – in a relatively understated manner – in the series *Stairs*, was possibly imported by Cohen Levy from earlier series – such as *Pools* (from the second half of the 1990s) – in which it appears more frequently and occupies a more prominent place. In retrospect, an examination of the shadow and silhouette's appearance in different series reveals that their stylistic development constitutes a succession of strategic moves. These moves were designed to lead to a more profound examination of the sphere of being, which is represented and symbolized by the shadow, while finding a modus vivendi with the primal event – that is, a means of perpetuating its existence without blocking or arresting the development of the work or of the artist. Moreover, it is this primal, primeval scene that nourishes the work's evolution – ensuring the creation and existential, mental and emotional preservation of meaning. This form of meaning is shaped by necessity: it must exist.

Crack and *Stairs*: The Works

The works in the series *Stairs* are characterized by a uniform appearance and identical size. In addition to the canvases, Maya Cohen Levy has designed a floor piece made of black pigments and charcoal ashes and measuring 220 by 200 cm [p. 92], and a sketch for another floor piece composed of geometrically patterned paper cutouts [p. 89] – a two/three dimensional piece that endows the image of the tiled "stairs" painted on the canvas with a deceptively real quality. The series also includes a video work [p. 75] with a specially composed soundtrack. The oil paintings themselves (2001–08), which measure 200 by 150 cm, were designed as a series of pendant paintings that repeatedly demonstrate the dramatic rupturing of a unified

entity, or the transformation of a potentially infinite patterned surface into a cracked and slit "dead end." In contrast to the relatively stable appearance of the staircase and door – which are the explicit subject of each pair of paintings – the individual paintings themselves reveal a gradual buildup towards a state of chaos and instability, in which various fragments sink and cover each other up in a dizzying manner.

The painterly tool used to enhance this sense of chaos, and the presentation of the crack itself, is the use of a black-and-white geometric pattern that runs from the entrance door across the floor and up the stairs. The function of this geometric pattern, whose arrangement and design change slightly from one work to the next, is thus to serve as a point of departure, a fixed value that embodies the fragility of the entire order. The pattern constitutes a sort of "peel" that covers the stairs and the areas leading upwards – to the threshold of a door or to an unmarked point. The illusory flickering of this superficial layer is due to the contrasts between the different shades of black, white and gray, and to the alternating pattern of broken lines and more uniform surfaces. This optical game has a deceptive power that blurs the viewer's perceptual ability to follow the pattern's intensive fluctuation, while also camouflaging the presence of the accompanying shadow. In the pendant paintings – cracked surfaces whose fragments are oriented in different directions – the shadow seems to have disappeared, unless it is identified with the fragments and cracks to the point that it not longer stands out in contrast to the perfect ordering of the paintings' solid areas.

Can the shadow that alternately appears and disappears as it is assimilated into the patterned surface, and this same surface's elevation and collapse, be related to one another and interpreted in a manner that may add something to the obvious opposition between order and disorder, construction and destruction, transmission and obstruction? Can these contrasts be supplemented by another element related to the meaning of the shadow – the shadow of a man, the shadow of a girl – familiar from Cohen Levy's earlier works? The shadow present in several of these works may reveal that their seemingly opaque surfaces allude to a world that merely believes itself to be stable, protected and impenetrable to all that desires to enter it. The shadow resembles a form of longing, yearning, remembrance – or, by contrast, something concealed and buried that wishes to emerge, to make its presence felt, refusing to be forgotten. Within events revolving around slits, cracking, blending and sinking, Cohen Levy delineates the existence of other horizons, whose sudden appearance exceeds the norms of the ordered, opaque arrangements. It seems that the intense experiences and premonitions of disaster intimated by the abandoned, broken, desolate staircases and gates materialize here with the removal of the outlines delimiting the stairs, walls and various apertures. The different layers of the interrupted pattern are suddenly transformed into geological strata, or come to constitute a topography of destruction that swallows up the constructed, viewed and desired site – assimilating it into an unidentified natural expanse.

The floor piece titled *Crack* [p. 92], which lends its name to the other works in this series, embodies the event depicted in the oil paintings. The viewer observing this floor piece is left

with two contradictory impressions. On the one hand, looking down at the surface transforms it into a sand map of sorts – and thus reduces the impact of the crack, which gradually extends from one side to another; at the same time, the black pigment powder and the charcoal ash scattered upon it, the protrusions and depressions that mark the surface, the unique character of every square – all these transform the deceptive optical experience created by the pattern into a concrete, sensory experience of a material that seems to be simultaneously both smooth and rough. The possibility of observing the work from above while also touching and following in detail the numerous events on its surface endows the abstract, conceptual pattern with a vital, concrete quality. The floor piece thus comes to constitute a kind of earth work, in which the conceptual becomes material and matter acquires a symbolic dimension, attesting to the metaphorical quality of the image's topographical and architectural components. And this testimony is provided precisely by the element that serves to validate the stair imagery, as well as by the logic and coherence of the painted image. The material components of this piece reaffirm and validate the symbolic operations embedded in the recurrent image – its emotional, mental and conceptual effectiveness. The topographical, geological and architectural elements, meanwhile, function as a series of visual and plastic devices borrowed from both art and nature; they constitute the ground, or underground realm, where the shadow is brought to burial and out of which it is recovered.

When asked about the use of charcoal ash – an uncommon material whose procurement involves no small effort – Cohen Levy replied that she had wanted to work with a material that contains both the idea and the effect of being consumed. This statement reveals her ability and tendency to view the material as charged with an essential meaning that is channeled, unmediated, into her world. As far as Cohen Levy is concerned, in art the concrete is the symbolic, and vice versa. The desire to embody or make present an experience that eludes language and representation does not distinguish between the material world and between creative and conceptual materials. Her statement thus gives expression to the constant awareness of death that haunts her imagery, and points to the way in which the materials used by the artist may introduce images of death into the thoughts of the living, into her own thought process.

This death is a kind of living death, a death in search of a voice, a shape, a form in which it can make itself visible – if only dimly visible. Maya Cohen Levy seems to search for screens on which these images may take form. She explores the ways in which they may emerge within a given set of materials, substances, patterns, art making processes, techniques (the peeling process of photographs and paper, for instance) and textures culled from the natural environment, from her urban, architectural surroundings and from (mostly Oriental) ornamental patterns borrowed from textiles, tiles and stucco and waiting, so it seems, for the artist's eye to recognize them. And since death cannot be revealed as a living presence, it surfaces in the artist's imagery in the guise of a form or shadow inhabiting an underworld that exists below the surface. It is not readily perceived as a figure, but rather appears as an

amorphous shape, an accidental mutation or deflection of the painting's surface or structure. The shadow embodied in *Crack* is generated in Maya Cohen Levy's art as a protean, multifaceted presence – a ghost.

I shall now turn to examine the recurrent structure underlying the series featured in this exhibition – a structure whose support is ordered into regular, dense and crowded arrangements that are sometimes characterized by excess, and which were designed to allow for acts of concealment. This support gives rise to the elusive yet constant image I refer to here as a shadow, and which is at once graspable and ungraspable. This is the manner in which the shadow, or voice, exists and is revealed: as a repeatedly buried secret.

The Unraveled Pattern

Maya Cohen Levy's recent works are shaped by the same configuration familiar from her earlier series. They contain a recurrent geometric pattern composed of dense, broken lines that uniformly cover the large canvas, giving life to an image resembling a shadow, a silhouette or a crack located within – and sometimes upon – the surface. When did her works first begin to feature this surface, and the interplay between surface, texture and pattern, as a substitute for a more figurative set of images? And how does this arrangement allow, if indeed it allows, for the continued existence of the image, of the charged and meaningful event revealed in her earlier works? Can one even state with certainty that this event, or situation, is preserved or continues to function in Cohen Levy's more recent, non-objective, seemingly abstract works?

The fusion of geometrically ordered surfaces with a shadow that appears within or upon them is a form of representation designed for undetermined situations and for images that are both optically and formally disrupted – images that have gradually overtaken Cohen Levy's work. The subversion of the order that she herself had imposed is visually represented in terms of the contradiction between the perception of the pattern as a uniform, systematic and controlled visual arrangement and between the appearance of the shadow as a unique, individual form distinguished from the surface. This conflict is rooted in an unresolved dynamic between the desire to make visible and to reveal and the desire to keep concealing, covering and assimilating; in visual terms, this is a conflict between the thrust to create systems based on the essence of the medium – that is, on total visibility[1] – and between the image of the shadow or silhouette; this image creates an effect of something taking place beneath the surface, beyond the realm of what can be seen and perceived – an effect characteristic of modernist painting as it was conceived of in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The schematic reduction of the dialogue between these two states perpetuates and underscores the distinction between the visible as an epistemological category, as the sphere of what can be articulated and seen, and between the unseen, that which escapes perception, knowledge and representation. Cohen Levy operates in the space between these two states, and simultaneously activates both of them. One may argue that by means of an act of disruption, she channels the painting's total

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See: Joseph Masheck, "The Vital Skin: Riegl, the Maori, and Loos," in: Richard Woodfield (ed.), *Framing Formalism: Riegl's Work* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001), pp. 168–171. In contrast to Mascheck's argument, see Jean Clay's remarks concerning the semantics of processing the surface in painting from the early 20th century to Robert Ryman: Jean Clay, "La peinture en charpie," *Macula*, 4 (1978), pp. 167–185. See also an additional article by Clay concerning the surface: Jean Clay, "Pollock, Mondrian, Seurat: la profondeur plate" [1977], *L'Atelier de Jackson Pollock* (Paris: Macula, 1982), pp. 15–28.

visibility – which culminates in the uniform and ordered pattern covering the entire surface – towards the realm of the invisible. The pattern's optical disruption thus functions as a metaphor for visibility as an event that takes place entirely on the surface.

Cohen Levy's preferred state, the one she aims to produce through the use of various motifs, images and techniques, is a state of indeterminacy and ambiguity; she is thus endlessly in need of what stands out in opposition to this state – a proliferation of sharp angles that make up the pattern, unraveling it and disrupting its mechanism. The motive, incentive or impulse for her recurrent engagement with the conditions that allow for this complex dynamic remains unknown. It is difficult to avoid associating it with an emotional mechanism or state of mourning, with the desire to perpetuate the presence and voice of something that is no more, with an experience of loss that has not been fully accepted.[2] In parenthesis, one must also note that the shadow or silhouette are not necessarily human. They may also appear as mutations, depressions or condensations on the surface, as a change in the pattern's coordinates. A quintessential example of the multiple ways in which the shadow makes itself manifest may be seen in the series *Sunflower Heart* (1992). This series is centered upon circular movements – vortexes that transform and sometimes overtake the surface, or exist within the condensed support.

The recurrent appearance of the shadow – which is repeatedly revealed in the recent series in a monumental, flagrant and methodical manner – points to an attempt to cling to meaning as a subliminal event, which takes place on the margins of, or just beyond, our field of vision. It obliges us to find a way of resolving the (apparent or actual) conflict between the minimalist geometric patterns – whose components are light and dark, white and black, with slight changes in the angle and size of the brushstrokes, and whose purpose is to underscore the

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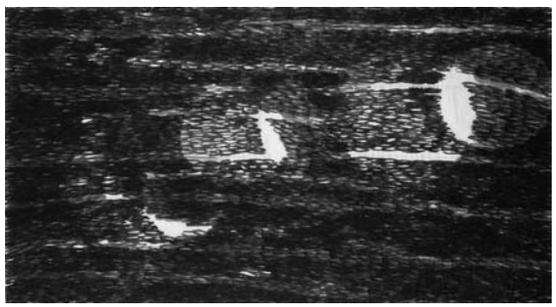
See Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); *L'Écorce et le noyau* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987). See also: Esther Rashkin, "Tools for a New Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism: The Work of Abraham and Torok," *Diacritics* 18:4 (Winter 1988), pp. 21–52.



1
Pond (Moons), 1999, ink and diluted watercolor on rice paper, 96x176
בריכה (ירחים), 1999, דיו וצבע מים מדולל על נייר אורז, 96x176

2
Untitled (Crescent and Sunflower Heart), 2003, pen on paper, 15x21
ללא כותרת (סהר ולב חמנית), 2003,
עט על נייר, 15x21

character of the surface as a totally visible expanse – and between the sudden illusory effects of perspective and depth, which amount to an examination of variations on the relationship between pattern and surface. Is the shadow emerging out of the pattern nothing more than an additional variation on the theme of optical illusions? Or are these illusions, which are clearly visible, nothing but an additional means – not unlike that employed in Edgar Alan Poe's stories – of purloining a letter, of concealing a secret or a dead body? To what extent is the painting's visual dimension not simply an opaque expanse, but rather a secret grove, a crypt?[3]

The answer may perhaps lie in tracing the different (yet analogous) paths along which Cohen Levy developed her interest in the surface as a sensory arena and as an optical support capable of housing the shadow. Its various textures, with their changing density, are optically and perceptually undetermined areas whose physiological conditions are conducive to the emergence – as well as the disappearance – of the shadow and its perception by the viewer. The most obvious examples of this are the "botanical" series, such as *Sunflower Heart* (1992), *Thatch* (1992), *Honeycombs* (1992) and *Roots* (2000), in which Cohen Levy engages in a microscopic detailing of an organic tangle or mass. In this context, one must also mention the series of drawings that allude to the epidermis and to subcutaneous textures – to a subterranean labyrinth of arteries and blood vessels (2003). This series also includes the "cosmic" drawings (2003) [fig. 1] centered upon the celestial sphere – upon a (full or crescent) moon rather than upon the sun. These drawings contain adjoining microscopic, botanical and celestial elements that are sometimes placed one against the other, as in the course of a lunar eclipse: the sun at the heart of the sunflower and the full or pale beam of nocturnal light illuminating the thin crescent [fig. 2].

The celestial motif goes back to the silhouetted sphere that rises to the surface in the 1999 *Pool*. This motif may also be related to the spiral shadow, depression or relief that appears simultaneously both above and beneath the surface in the large-scale, slightly earlier series *Pools* (1998, diluted watercolors and peeling on paper). A similar spiral appears in *Pool* (2000, a tiny peeled photograph) [fig. 3] – an image of bodily tissue out of which life itself grows. These analogous images replace one another in a single metonymical chain whose presence, in this continuum of works, seems to be taken for granted – as if it had simply waited to reveal itself to the artist's attentive gaze.

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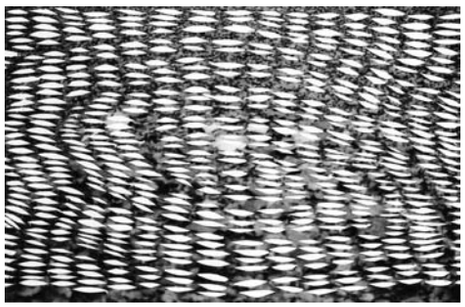
See ibid.



3
Pond, 2000, peeled photograph, 10x15
בריכה, 2000, תצלום מקולף, 10x15

Another quintessential strategy of this kind is the covering of the Azrieli Towers with a kind of geometrically patterned epidermis (2004). To this end, Cohen Levy used her well-known and unique peeling technique – the same technique used in *Silhouettes*, two small photographs from 2000. This strategy, which involves rupturing the structure's metallic setting and peeling off its rigid cover, similarly recurs in her treatment of industrial structures such as a bridge and electric poles (the series *Towers*, *Electric Poles* and *Bridge*, 2002–04). All of these paintings function, from an optical point of view, as x-ray images that penetrate into the interior of the material mass. "The removal of the peel" – whether it is the surface layer of the skin or a metal and concrete coating – amounts to fracturing and disrupting the hermetic, opaque, smooth surface – a consistent and obsessive strategy that appears at times as a vortex, an attack of vertigo or an experience of disorientation. I do not directly read the removal of this exterior peel as an intrinsically violent act aimed against the defining characteristics of capitalism or of modernity, but rather as a refusal to endure the aggressive, oppressive and impermeable qualities of a rigid and uniform surface that does not respond to the viewer's gaze, voice or presence. This refusal bespeaks an inability to tolerate a physical world, or environment, which does not succumb to the artist's will and desire to penetrate it and leave an impression upon its surface. This impression is usually imprinted by means of alternate patterns that reorganize and transform the alienating surface into a more intimate and familiar one.[4]

Indeed, the covering of one pattern by means of another pattern – through the use of hatching, scribbling or peeling – creates a form of intimate contact with the surrounding environment; the artist infuses it with her rhythms as if playing a musical instrument – taking pleasure in the very act of penetration, contact, metamorphosis. The image thus acquires an ambivalent texture that is no longer two-dimensional but is not yet three-dimensional; as already stated above, ambivalence is Cohen Levy's preferred material support. The result of this process is a kind of "sprouting area" that may give rise to images of shadows – ghosts that emerge from the material and hover over it.

4
Such as the chain of images in Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*. See: Roland Barthes, "Métaphore de l'œil," *Critique* 195–196 (August–September 1963), pp. 770–777.

The History

Cohen Levy's early works, which date to the mid-1980s, are figurative – or at least reveal, in a clearly visible and explicit manner, the presence of images within a composition that consists of colorful, expressive patches of color. These paintings tell a story, or present the components of a story that unfolds in a mythic and cosmic time and space; in this sense, they are reminiscent of the fragments of symbolist figuration that appeared, during the 1940s, in the works of New York School artists such as Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko.[5] Initially, Cohen Levy attempted to present the elements of a given story in an iconic mode, as an encoded event that takes on an impersonal character – hence the use of general, conventional images such as figures, landscapes and (nocturnal) lighting. Yet even in these early works, one may identify a desire to represent a certain kind of event, encoded through the use of iconic or narrative representational conventions.

In the course of the lengthy process that has led from Cohen Levy's early works to the works featured in this exhibition, she began building compositions characterized by what she describes as a "dramatic" structure; this overall symmetric and hierarchic configuration pointing to a solemn occurrence or sacred event – an epiphany, perhaps – that is kept secret, and in which we have no share. The dramatic quality of these images reveals a clear desire to encode their meaning, to point to its existence without exposing it. Their theatrical character constitutes an early stage in the search for an image that is inherently ambivalent. It is no coincidence that these works also include fantastic, dreamlike images of animals: gazelles, and especially birds.

This crossing over into a fantastic world – or, alternately, the calculated use of this type of imagery – is not, of course, a novelty in Western art: monstrous creatures have long represented human desires, fears and hopes, the anxiety of death and the aspiration to perpetuate one's soul. The demonic elements set the tone, defining the emotional and conceptual register that characterizes this stage in Cohen Levy's work.

These paintings (oil or panda on paper and later, in the early 1990s, watercolors on paper and oil on canvas) feature boldly drawn, schematic human and vegetal images, which seem to have been engraved upon the surface and ordered in a frontal, emblematic manner. These iconographic, compositional and formal qualities are aimed at generating meaning through the juxtaposition of separate figurative/symbolic units in a way akin to a written text, as is the case in the 1990 *Untitled*. Alongside these works, which may be described as pictograms, Cohen Levy created oil paintings on canvas and paper that combine human figures and zoological and celestial forms, and which are sometimes reminiscent of Paul Klee's paintings from the 1930s and 1940s. In the paintings from the series *Dance of Ravens* (1985–88) and *Lupa Romana* (1986), she consistently adhered to a somber palette of contrasting colors that create a nocturnal, demonic effect, and serve as a habitat for creatures she refers to as hybrids: humans and ravens combined into visual and conceptual totems, which appear in horror

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As Naomi Aviv notes in her comprehensive essay on Maya Cohen Levy's work, in which she refers, as an example, to Jackson Pollock's *Guardians of the Secret* (1943): See Naomi Aviv, "Painting is a Miracle," *Maya Cohen Levy: Towers*, exh. cat. (Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005) .

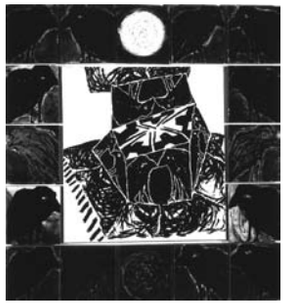
scenes affiliated with Romantic and Expressionist patterns of representation. Yet the two-dimensionality and somewhat awkward schematic design of these elements seem to point to an intermediate stage on the way towards a bold and energetic exploration of a psychic world; an attempt to bring this world to light, and treat it as an event of the surface, was the outcome of the precise art making processes devised by Cohen Levy from the 1990s on – processes devoted to the systematic exploration of the interplay between patterns and surfaces.

Already during this early period, a pattern based on the inversion and doubling of a frontal, symmetrical configuration appears in *Dance Structure* (oil on paper, 1990) – which features a moon, four birds and two pillar fragments whose geometric motif is borrowed from Brancusi's *Endless Column*. In this work, as well as in the 1990 *Sukkah*, one may discern an attempt to chart an image based on a geometric, modular structure, while simultaneously blurring its identity so that it seems to be undergoing a metamorphosis as we view it. This work also makes evident a desire to engage its various elements – the hut's dome and the adjacent row of palm trees – in a powerful spiral vortex that disrupts the perceptual logic of the space and of the images floating within it.

Dance Structure is a title that aptly encompasses Cohen Levy's works from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. These two words frame the pattern into which she sought to cast a range of teeming desires – a dramatic arrangement that simultaneously represents and encodes the mysterious and festive event repeatedly addressed in these works. Here one may already note the development that has taken place since the creation of *Dance of Ravens* (1985) – a large-scale, oil and graphite work on paper (measuring 200 by 400 cm) that marks the initiation of this strategy (it is worth noting the affinity between this work, whose axis is horizontal and whose surface is almost entirely covered in very dark graphite, and between the floor work *Crack*, which is included in the exhibition). *Dance of Ravens* includes the motifs that would repeatedly appear in Cohen Levy's work up until the early 1990s: images of birds and of a moon presented against a somber ground, while their monumental shadows resemble a large stain filling the center of the composition. This silhouetted stain seems to have been placed or buried within a crevice or depression of sorts – like a burial site seen from above.

In contrast to the effect of a depression or hole at the center of this composition, the 1984 *Dance of Ravens* and the group of works titled *Dance Structure* (1998–1990) – which are characterized by similar imagery – feature an arrangement that extends across a single plane. In *Dance of Ravens* (1984), the images are assembled in the composition's foreground; they are flanked by two crudely delineated structures representing gates or guards, whose location circumscribes the background as an area in which an event is taking place. The pattern described here, which is designed in a schematic and even somewhat clumsy manner, is presented as an arrangement simultaneously involving a process of concealment and of exposure – the observation of something that is never revealed, yet which is constantly marked as lurking close beneath the surface.

This arrangement appears in two of the works in the series *Dance of Ravens*: one of



4
Dance Structure, 1988-89, oil on canvas stretched on boxes, 17 units, 250x235x7.5
מבנה ריקוד, 89-1988, שמן על בד מתוח על קופסאות, 17 יחידות, 250x235x7.5

them – the 1984 *Dance of Ravens* (panda on paper) – is a composition centered upon a circular, voluminous structure that may reveal something hidden, while simultaneously blocking access to an additional structure that appears behind it. This central structure is once again flanked by two bare-breasted women with raised arms. According to Cohen Levy, these figures are dancing. The three birds standing upon or before the circular structure appear as the guardians of a treasure or threshold, while a gigantic, inverted lizard is painted atop the structure. The dance alluded to in the work's title refers to an action that completes the meaning of this event – a ritual that creates an encounter between two aspects of the same thing, presenting death from the perspective of eternity. This dance does not unfold in a concrete temporal realm. It is identified with being itself, and the role of both the figures and the birds seems to be to protect and bear witness to the invisible event that is taking place: the secret whose presence is once again staged and performed in this image.

In a small oil painting (mid-1980s) from the same period, the event is clearly interpreted as an impending funeral, burial, or birth scene. Some of the figures represented here are birds, while others are naked men and women with birds perched on their heads. The organization of the stage, the figures and the props revolves around the absence or presence of this event, or being – which we may call a shadow or, at times, a ghost.

The shadow or silhouette was first revealed to us in *Lupa Romana* (1986). This important work, which was painted in impasto on an unstretched canvas, was destroyed while being moved from one studio to another after it was exhibited abroad. The thickly textured impasto was characterized by the same bold, dark colors that dominate the works which immediately followed upon this series. The central image in *Lupa Romana* is the silhouette of an animal: the ancient Roman she-wolf who nursed the mythical founders of Rome, Remus and Romulus. A closer examination reveals that this red silhouette is flanked by two additional silhouettes, which may constitute the outline of a face or of an animal's body. This work is the first instance in which the surface is organized into a series of conceptual registers – an organization that no longer allows for the narrative pattern that previously existed in Cohen Levy's works.

Indeed, the large series *Dance Structure* is already shaped by another kind of structure, which the artist refers to as a "stupa"[6] – a two-dimensional, centralized construction in which the illusion of depth is substituted for by a surface arrangement and/or by an additional

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A stupa is a Buddhist structure located at burial, prayer and commemoration sites. Its purpose is to bring the four universal elements – fire, water, wind and earth – into contact with the spirits of the dead.

structure that rises up from it. The box-like stupa is represented here from three different angles, and constitutes an addition to the canvas – or vice versa; this three-dimensional form – whose front and sides are covered with images – is not simply an addendum, but rather the composition's central component [fig. 4]. It constitutes an additional, enhanced expression of Cohen Levy's desire to execute, in a carefully calculated manner, an idea centered upon the possibility of burying or hiding something. This burial process acquires a monumental, repetitive architectural form as Cohen Levy transgresses the limits of the two-dimensional painting by affixing this relief-like structure to the canvas; she constrains the painting to exceed the limits of representational conventions, and to contain the actual object. It is precisely here, as in *Crack*, that the urge to hide something is most powerfully revealed when it is given expression by means of the real, of a box that is an actual tomb and not merely an image of a tomb. These works are not metaphors or linguistic and representational games involving a signifier and a signified, but rather – naively – the thing in itself.

Especially prominent within this large cycle, which is related in its entirety to the stupa structure, is a new, two-dimensional hieratic configuration that appears upon the three-dimensional box. Although it was painted in oil on paper or on canvas, the arrayal of the various compositional elements and of the surrounding images of ravens and gazelles – which constitute a variation of sorts on the structure of the three-dimensional box – lends this pattern a distinctly graphic quality. In this relief work, the viewer is required to separately examine the frontal plane bearing the central image – a depiction of a built structure seen from different angles – and the box's sides, which feature images of birds. Nevertheless, it is possible to encompass all of these images with a single gaze, which orders them into a hierarchical arrangement that underscores the textual, iconic character of the event's representation. In two of these compositions, the central plane is surrounded by a series of squares containing duplicated images of a single bird, which constitute mirror-images of one another. These inverted images are created through the structured multiplication of different perspectives, which stem the composition's harmonious flow; they create a rhythm that simultaneously perpetuates and disrupts the dance movement – a disruption whose meaning has yet to be clarified.

The motif of inversion acquires an especially dramatic quality in one of the *Structures* (oil on canvas mounted on boxes), in which the image of a (full and eclipsed) moon appears both above and below the central panel featuring the image of the polygonal stupa structure. Employing a wild and forceful form of syncretism, Cohen Levy creates an analogy between images of ravens and cats, the celestial bodies and the man-made architectural structure. The image's complex form and multiple, clashing perspectives, meanwhile, preclude the perception of the structure as a rational whole. This multiplication of viewpoints and angles is attributed by the artist to a favorite childhood game: watching herself in three-way mirrors that endlessly duplicated her own reflection. The structure of the monolithic box is gradually swallowed into this endless process of multiplication. This work also marks the first appearance

of the ornamental pattern that would later become a central motif in the large series *Islamic Ornaments*, which was painted in the early 2000s.

The early design of this ornamental pattern acquires a kaleidoscopic quality in this work; it is shaped by the splitting and symmetrical multiplication of a single element, which constitutes an encoded representation of an event unfolding independently of the subject's temporal, ephemeral existence. This pattern would continue to evolve in later images, and in relation to different themes. Its survival power would be proved in the series *Islamic Ornaments* – where it would acquire a majestic, ceremonial quality – with one major difference: in this later series, there are no longer any figurative images forming an explicit (albeit enigmatic) text, as there were in the late-1980s series *Dance Structure*. The ornamental motif that fills the central panel in the 1989 *Dance Structure* is composed of a circle of bare-breasted female figures with raised arms – a scene of transcendence or mourning that disappears or is camouflaged in the later works. Nevertheless, it is significant that the stupa, as both a structure and an event, does not disappear from the works in the *Dance Structure* cycle even when it is covered by fabrics that are stretched or glued to it, and by multiplying and splitting patterns. The box – or stupa – is transformed into a real, camouflaged support, an ur-structure whose symbolic impact continues to exert itself throughout the creative process. This object-image was extremely dear to Cohen Levy; even when the praxis was changed and its existence was downplayed, it did not vanish. The act of disguising as a ceremonial, ritual gesture thus became powerfully present.

In the course of the 1990s, monumental series came to replace the animal and bird images, as well as the ordering of the composition into a form of writing – into compartmentalized panels containing individual images that seem to carry a coded message. These series included works based on natural forms and structures as perceived by the senses (the 1992 series *Sunflower Heart* and the 1995–2000 series *Pools*), as well as series such as *Dvarim* (1994), which is composed of painted letters. The series *Pool*[7] – which includes works in ink, diluted watercolors and peeling on Arches paper and rice paper, as well as oil paintings – marks a turn towards a natural material environment. No longer content with figuration, Cohen Levy searched for new substances: unique textures such as that of the sunflower, whose dense interior is crowded with seeds, or the endlessly shimmering surface of water – and to a lesser degree also depictions of the sky and of clouds replete with splitting sunrays. The fleeting optical effects of scintillating light, such as those that appear in the *Pools* painted in watercolors, ink and oil – are replaced by instances in which the light is split and multiplied, taking over the entire canvas as the surface of the image is peeled. In these cases, the light assimilates into itself silhouettes of masts or built structures – a process that effaces the unique qualities of these objects and transforms them into shadows (such as the two peeled photographed titled *Shadow*, 2000).

The intensive and systematic peeling of the surface annuls the effect of "light" as the translation of an ephemeral impression, an optical illusion captured in the brushstrokes that make up a watercolor, for instance. The peeling process transforms the "light" into an actual

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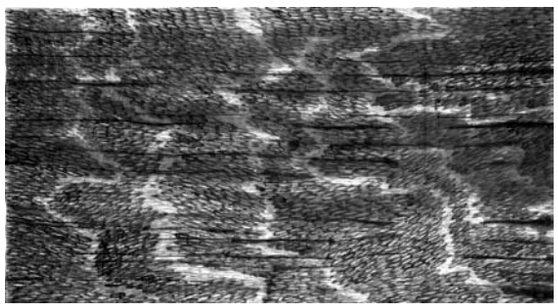
See *Maya Cohen Levy: Pools, 1995–2000*, Varda Steinlauf (ed.), exh. cat. (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2000).

texture – that of the exposed paper. The removal of the top layer of each photograph creates an inversion of sorts: the deceptive effect of light is appropriated and given a concrete, plastic manifestation – creating a pattern within a pattern. Thanks to this process of appropriation, the shadow reappears again intermittently in *Pools* [fig. 5], for instance, as an illusory effect distinguished by subtle textural changes. In one peeled photograph from 2000, it constitutes an even more carefully circumscribed, intensely scintillating entity that has a pronounced visual presence. A comparison of the vortex or spiral in the 1998 *Pool* [fig. 8] and of the peeled photograph in the 2000 *Pool* [fig. 3] attests to this strategic shift and to its effect.

The silhouettes that appear in the *Pools* acquire different identities. Clearly distinguishable among them are silhouettes of human figures, as well as images of a vortex and of celestial bodies – most notably the moon. The continuous and wide-ranging concern with the visual effects of the water's surface, and with the reflections of celestial bodies, naturally calls to mind romantic and symbolist paintings in the style of Claude Monet, and especially his late *Water Lilies*. Yet Cohen Levy's treatment of this theme is distinctly different, for she does not approach the shimmering surface of the water as an object to be observed in its own right. In Monet's work, the surface of the pool reflects the world while creating a perfectly timed dialogue between water, light and objects. In Cohen Levy's work, by contrast, the silhouettes emerge from below, or are perhaps buried beneath the surface. Their somber or scintillating appearance and their patterned, textured surfaces may instead be described as a sort of tissue culture – a support upon which the shadow may develop and emerge.

Yet let us turn back once again to the early 1990s, a period in Cohen Levy's work that was marked by the creation of three series – *Sunflower Heart*, *Thatch* and *Honeycombs* (all from 1992).[8] The two later series include medium-sized watercolor and ink works on paper; *Sunflower*



5

Pond, from the series Munich, 1999, ink and diluted watercolor on rice paper, 96x177, private collection

בריכה, מתוך הסדרה מינכן, 1999, דיו וצבע מים מדולל על נייר אורז, 96x177, אוסף פרטי

Heart, by contrast, is mostly composed of large oil paintings measuring 128 by 121 cm. As one examines the works in *Sunflower Heart*, one notices no process of linear development; rather, the spirals at the center of these images gradually and rhythmically take over the entire canvas. In the series *Thatch*, by contrast, the natural image's transformation into a pattern is less developed, yet clearer; it is evident in the effacement of the vestiges of representation that allude to an illusory space and to light effects, and in the transformation of the palm fronds into a motif that uniformly covers the surface of the canvas. From this moment on, Cohen Levy can arrange the surface as she wishes, creating a range of contrasts that cancel out effects of light and shade, space and depth, image and ground. The series *Honeycombs* is a quintessential example of the manner in which she uses natural objects to produce forms and patterns that constitute an enchanting world: here the source of enchantment is the honeycombs' varying degrees of transparency and opaqueness, whose layered effect disrupts the two-dimensional appearance of the pattern. The series *Honeycombs* involves an additional effect, which would later recur in *Pools* – that of sinking below the surface; it momentarily appears as if the viewer is the shadow, buried in the depths and gazing upwards to the surface of the painting. This seeming inversion of the viewer's position is produced by both the multiple transparencies and the tremulous light effects made possible by the use of watercolors. The honeycombs are thus transformed into living organisms, whose epidermis alternately absorbs and is absorbed.

Earlier, in the series *Dance Structure*, the works represented different forms of order within the universe – images of men and women, birds, wolves and hybrid creatures on the one hand, and celestial bodies such as the moon (and lunar eclipses) on the other; these images were assembled and ordered around a sacred or symbolic architectural structure, which appears upon the surface of the canvas or is hidden beneath it. As mentioned above, these

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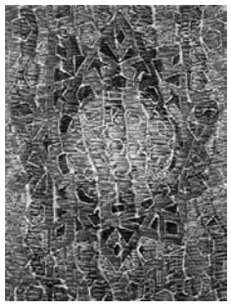
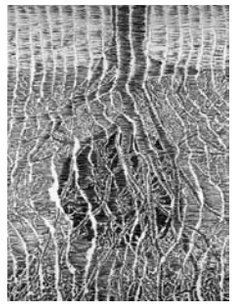
The three series created in 1992 were simultaneously exhibited at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, and at the Chelouche Gallery in Tel Aviv. Their motifs were discussed by Tami Katz-Freiman, "A Call to Order: Maya Cohen Levy's Painting – Proposal for Putting the World Aright," and Dorit Peleg, "Maya Cohen Levy: *Sunflower Heart, Honeycombs, Thatch*," in *Maya Cohen Levy*, Meira Perry Lehman (ed.), exh. cat. (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1993).



6
Islamic Ornaments: Door of the Blue Mosque, 2000, oil on canvas, 200x150, private collection
אורנמנטיקה איסלאמית: דלת המסגד הכחול, 2000, שמן על בד, 200x150, אוסף פרטי



7
Roots, 2000, oil on canvas, 200x150, private collection
שורשים, 2000, שמן על בד, 200x150, אוסף פרטי

works constitute an encoded narrative, or script. In the following series of works, various heterogeneous elements – which were forcefully assembled into a single meaning-producing unit – are assimilated together into a uniform texture capable of carrying the symbolic charge that already infused *Dance Structure*. In the series she created during the 1990s, Cohen Levy used images culled from nature in order to give a logical explanation for the analogy between various creatures and substances. In this manner, the moon could be interpreted as a bulb-shaped ovule sprouting roots underground. It seems that at least part of the works in the series *Islamic Ornaments*, from the early 2000s [fig. 6], are a reincarnation of the bulb motif, which nourishes the roots that protect it [fig. 7]. In another reincarnation of this ornamental motif, the bulb comes to resemble a cell or a fertilized egg, as well as the skin in the drawings of hands from the early 2000s. It seems that the paintings or drawings have now come to serve as x-ray beams that penetrate the material, rendering its opaque substance nearly transparent. This act of penetration transforms all that is real, solid and alive into a shadow.