

Falling Mountains

By Nayoung Jung, Curator of Seoul Olympic Museum of Art

The main genres Israeli artist Avital Cnaani works in are sculpture and drawing, and the exhibition *Falling Mountains* introduces her drawings. She generates a texture of lines diverse and rich using graphite, ink, and etching on carbon paper. Her rough, freewheeling lines create ambiguous forms neither figurative nor abstract through numerous overlaps. This way of creating forms is closer to automatism, expressing intuitive feeling through hand movements, rather than imitation of objects - the artist is attentive to energy generated by hand movements. That is, her work is a process of converting inner energy to mass or form, depending on her feeling toward natural objects.

Cnaani explores the problem of materials from lines in drawing using carbon paper and pencil. She also explores mass and weight in her drawing. The mountain, her trademark motif has two connotations: it is part of nature in her memories, and is of great significance in Israeli history. For example, Mount Zion from the Bible located in west Jerusalem is spiritual home and religious hub of the Jews, and thus represents Israeli territory.

Cnaani lends significance to her experience, saying “You can understand a mountain by ascending it.” Such experience links the mountain to the body. Based on the body, her work represents her experience in diverse forms. These include primal animals, parted land pieces, plants growing upward or downward, and heads. The mountain in her drawing is indescribable and indefinable: “the mountain is a motif from my childhood memories. It stood with serene, vigorous, and beauty. Mountains may be intimidating and be a place of serenity and sorrow” she says. The mountain symbolizes ever-changing nature. A variety of forms from nature are an artistic record of emotion and sense she experienced in daily life.

References to nature and geography in her work associate with the political Israeli landscape: the mountain as piece of land, redolent of settlement, control, and separation, is an object of awe and objective of subjugation, and inapprehensible manifestation of nature. Cnaani’s work replaces human desire to settle on the land with imagery of mountains. A falling mountain is a metaphor for chaos on the land where territorial disputes continue. In *Falling Mountain* a bird with broken wings seems to fall. In *The Big Birds* series soaring or falling animal images are divided into fragments. Such fragmenting reflects her anguish at humanity’s twofold nature of freely flying and stably settling, and divided political reality.

The artist discovers narratives not only in Israel but also in her relations with other cultures.

Intricate aspects appear in the work *Untitled: The Yemenite*. In this work Yemen is related to place-ness and identity, and Cnaani represents feelings she had for Yemeni women's traditional ritual applying henna to their bodies. Women veiling their bodies with clothes, and their hats covering their faces associate with female identity. A heavy, sunken conical form is a mountain that looks like a house or Yemeni woman's hat.

Cnaani presents questions from her inspection of her own identity as an Israeli, a woman, and a human being. In *Self-portrait* is a plant floating, growing downward, rooting in the ground, growing by an unknown force. This work reminds me of Blaise Pascal's celebrated saying, "Man is a thinking reed." Her drawings are about stories concerning conflict and conciliation among nature and man, ideality and reality, through correlations of heavy or light, sorrow and cheer, monotony and intricate lines and forms.