

An abstract artwork featuring a complex network of lines and shapes. The background is a textured, light grey. Overlaid on this are various elements: thick, dark brown lines that resemble veins or roots; thinner, vibrant blue lines that flow and meander; and several thin, bright red lines that crisscross the composition. The overall effect is one of organic complexity and layered meaning.

NANCY COHEN

ATLAS
of
Impermanence



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THE WORK OF TIME

by Mary Birmingham

The nine monumental drawings in Nancy Cohen's exhibition *Atlas of Impermanence* are from her ongoing series, *The Work of Time*. Their imagery derives from her memories of specific landscapes—places altered by time, environmental crises, or climate change—and her personal observations about the human struggle. The installation also includes ninety-eight suspended glass sculptures placed in dialogue with the drawings. Through their subjects and materials, these glass and paper works explore ideas about movement and transformation and formulate a conceptual mapping of time as well as place.

Cohen's chosen materials physically embody the same qualities she finds in nature and people—fragility and strength. For more than twenty-five years she has worked with glass and handmade paper, attracted by their translucency and ability to be structure and surface simultaneously. There is an inherent tension in their potential breakability that makes them effective metaphors for both the fragile ecosystem and the aging body. It is interesting to note that in their creation, paper and glass are transformed by water, fire, and time—elements that can also affect specific landscapes.

In designating her series of drawings *The Work of Time*, Cohen embraces the phrase's multiple meanings. She is attentive to the ways her work develops and changes over time through the process of its making. Her drawings, which resemble tapestries, are constructed entirely from paper pulp and handmade paper, pieced together while wet. She approaches this work sculpturally, building it in layers and utilizing the interaction of wet and dry materials to create form and surface.

Cohen takes a similar approach in making her glass sculptures, layering fusible art glass or found elements such as test tubes, chandelier fragments, broken glass, jewelry, and wire and fusing them together in a kiln. After the initial firing she transforms these elements further, shaping (slumping) them over molds in a second firing. She sometimes embellishes the sculptures with paper pulp, linking them materially and conceptually to the drawings. Cohen's experience and deep knowledge of her materials enable her to experiment and work intuitively, sometimes with unexpected outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered our concepts of work and time; for Cohen, it also amplified her ongoing concerns about environmental change and survival. Isolated in her studio, she made work that responded to feelings about illness and death, entrapment and escape. In the drawing *The Meaning of Wings*, diverging lines emanate from a single point, suggesting expansion, freedom, and flight. This drawing inspired Cohen to create the array of glass sculptures that hangs suspended in the gallery's window wells. These abstract forms resemble wings that almost appear to take flight above the drawings, which remain firmly grounded in their sense of place. The interaction between the sculptures and the drawings creates a powerful synergy.

If the real "work" of time is transformation, its only constant is change. Rivers rise and shorelines move; trees decay and forests regenerate; people migrate and individuals die; sunlight bursts through stormy skies. These are signs of impermanence and evidence of the vulnerability and resilience Cohen perceives in the natural world. In her work Cohen evokes specific or composite memories of place, arresting the work of time for a fleeting moment and making a record of it. If we could create an atlas of the unmappable to help us locate remembered places and transitory emotional states, its maps and charts would undoubtedly resemble Nancy Cohen's art—work that both *is* and is *about* "the work of time."

Mary Birmingham is Curator at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey.

SHELTERING IN PLACE

THE GEOGRAPHY OF MEMORY

by Jennifer Scanlan



How do we think about places? Do they show up in our memories, located in space like points on a map? Are they snapshots or postcards? Do we remember them in fragments, with certain details surfacing as other forms bring them to mind? Are they washed in emotive colors—glowing and warm or bleak and dark? *Nancy Cohen: Atlas of Impermanence* presents places, in particular memories of places, in all of these ways, from the topographically specific to the emotionally diffuse.

The exhibition focuses on paper tapestries from Cohen's series *The Work of Time*: large-scale, two-dimensional artworks composed almost entirely of handmade paper. Each piece is formed from a base of rectilinear sheets composed in a grid that recalls a quilt. The textile effect is heightened by buckles and folds in the surface caused by the artist's process of laying wet pulp on top of the dried base to create lines, patterns, and washes. At the same time, the gridded designs of the base recall maps (perhaps the inspiration for the exhibition's title) or landscapes/cityscapes seen from above. Cohen covers these surfaces with abstract shapes that are tremendously evocative, along with lines that sometimes refer to places and objects in the material world.

Forms and themes repeat themselves in the artist's works, disappearing and reappearing in different colors and configurations to form a travelogue that loops over itself the way memories sometimes do. Cohen created *Salar de Uyuni* after a trip she made to the salt flats of southwest Bolivia. The colors and imagery in this paper tapestry represent the salt flats, the distant mountains on the horizon, and a pale blue sky. The distinctive pattern of hexagons formed by crystalized salt spreads across the surface of the work, melding into the ridges of the mountains that pull the viewer into the distance.

Merge, in contrast, addresses the idea of place abstractly, though Cohen connects its imagery to the loss of two very real and important places in her life: her studio, which she was leaving for a new one after over fifteen



years, and the home of her aging parents, out of which she was helping them move. This sense of loss, of things drifting away, of structures coming apart and dissolving, permeates the work. Curving over the surface is a golden crescent, its color one that Cohen associates with impermanence, like an elusive golden light. The golden light here seems to be breaking apart, dissolving into bubbles and floating away. At the center of the piece is a reference to water—an element that shows up throughout Cohen’s work—in the form of large blue droplets that could represent rain or tears of grief.

The subject of water appears again in *Beneath the Surface*, in particular its interaction with light, which dances across the paper in ripples and reflections. Here Cohen plays with the solidity and translucency made possible by her wet and dry materials. Opaque bands of yellow light slowly disintegrate as they move to the bottom of the piece, barely visible as they dive through thick webs and reemerge as thin lines. It is difficult to orient yourself: are you watching changing light on the surface, or moving down into the depths? The all-over surface pattern brings to mind other networks, from the global to the intimate: rivers and tributaries, road systems, leaf patterns, veins, and cells.

Another Way Through looks at a specific body of water: the Atlantic Ocean, which at one time provided sustenance for the fishermen of Eastport, Maine. During her residency in Eastport at the Tides Institute and Museum of Art, Cohen was struck by the ragged remains of industry coughed up on the beaches by the tides. Abstract elements from earlier works reappear in this piece as more figurative elements: the crescent in the center of *Merge* becomes a winding road, while the interlocking, web-like patterns in *Beneath the Surface* here signal a chain link fence. The bulbous drops in *Merge* also show up again in *Another Way Through*, where they seem more structural, almost a counterpart to the water. The ocean itself is barely indicated by a translucent blue and a rippled surface.

The series of paper tapestries that Cohen created after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic remain connected to place, but are laden with the heightened sense of anxiety and despondency that has characterized our collective emotional state during this time. *Espiritu Santo* is a piece whose creation spans the months during which Cohen was still able to travel and the time afterward when she was forced to stay in one place. She visited Baja, California, in January of 2020. Hiking on the Island of Espiritu Santo off the coast of Baja, she came over the crest of a mountain and saw the



tides changing. The swirling waters were so beautiful that she was inspired to create *Espiritu Santo* after she returned to her studio in New Jersey. As Cohen was working on it, however, the pandemic hit, and the ephemeral nature of her memory of the island became connected in her mind to the ephemeral nature of life. The passages of gold in the work, which suggest this kind of impermanence, became an integral part of the landscape she was depicting, at a time when questions of life, death, and spirituality had become increasingly significant to her.

Off at 13 is the second paper tapestry in the exhibition that comes from the time of the pandemic, but rather than alluding to the beautiful and the spiritual it focuses on the ugly and the prosaic. The piece was inspired by the industrial area near exit 13 off the New Jersey Turnpike. Like *Espiritu Santo*, it was also inspired by water, in this case Moses Creek, the famously contaminated stream by the area's oil refineries. The palette is composed of browns, blacks, and reds—the colors of death and darkness—and the tubular forms that represent pipes have an eerie glow that recalls the strange orange lights of the fires that occur when the refinery burns off excess gas. While Cohen's other artworks are light and translucent, this composition is thick and opaque, and the gray pattern on the surface is inspired by the color of the imitation siding on some of the nearby residences.

In *Fire Season*, the glow of fire once again becomes a symbol of human havoc wreaked on the natural environment. This work was inspired by photographs in the *New York Times* of the California wildfires of 2020, set against the structure of the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco. There should be water under the bridge, but in its place is a brown, smoky sludge. The foreboding field of red at the upper left, representing fire, seems to drip down like blood and flow across the piece like veins or smoke, turning into blackened tree branches by the time it reaches the bottom.

The two most recent paper tapestries in the exhibition are completely abstract and not related to one specific place, though they very much spring from the places in which many of us have been trapped during the pandemic—the spaces inside our homes as well as the spaces inside our minds. In *Blue Storm of Our Anxieties*, many of the motifs Cohen uses throughout her work are present and particularly distinct. The gridded understructure is now delineated less like a quilt and more like an architectural plan, with rooms that enclose us constantly. The capillary-like lines—organs? river systems?—are tightly coiled at the center of the piece, no longer spreading out and extending past the edges like a pattern but turned in on themselves and trapped. The drop forms from *Merge* appear

again, evoking rain or sorrow. The piece could suggest a weather radar map showing cloud systems and storm fronts moving across a city. At the same time, the title points to inner turbulence, both potent and confined.

The *Meaning of Wings* is another work that Cohen notes is entirely about the pandemic, especially the feeling of being trapped indoors. She created its base in thick, opaque squares of contrasting tones, in a palette that is mostly muddy with a few jarring yellows and oranges. (The yellow square made me think of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," about a woman who is slowly driven mad, trapped inside a yellow room.) The squares look oppressive with their distinct boundaries, though the grey-brown of those at the top drizzles into the white rectangle at the center, which in turn drips into the grey-brown squares at the bottom. As with *Merge*, it is not clear what these drops signify—rain, or tears, or the days blurring into each other like pieces of wet pulp.

Yet *The Meaning of Wings* also has signs of energy. Rays fan out from the center of the yellow square like sightlines, and around the edges are shapes that inspired Cohen to create a series of wing-like glass sculptures. As much as there is a sense of entrapment in this piece, there is also a strong will to escape.

Nancy Cohen's paper tapestries in *Atlas of Impermanence* offer us a glimpse into the ways that place is constructed in our minds—as a series of visual impressions, but also moods, textures, sensations, and echoes of earlier spaces. Beautifully and evocatively constructed out of texture, color, and light, the works function as maps for us to follow into our own memories. They also provide us with an exceptional record of an extraordinary time, when a pandemic increasingly restricted place for many of us, and our memories of place began to take on new meanings.



Jennifer Scanlan is an Independent Curator based in Oklahoma City, OK, specializing in contemporary art, design, and public art.



Settling In, 2019

Edwin Torres

TREE

And these hands
uprooted - 3 fingers splintered
And these scragged needles
ripped through earth
And this field
captured by violet sound
And this tree
how was it placed to be looked at
And now midnight
And this parade has passed
And that star field
And these fingernails
eleven stars in every cuticle
And this grip
this sky molten solstice
And all these earth dreamers
wrapped around us
And all the long shadows
like me...
placed to be looked at
far from home

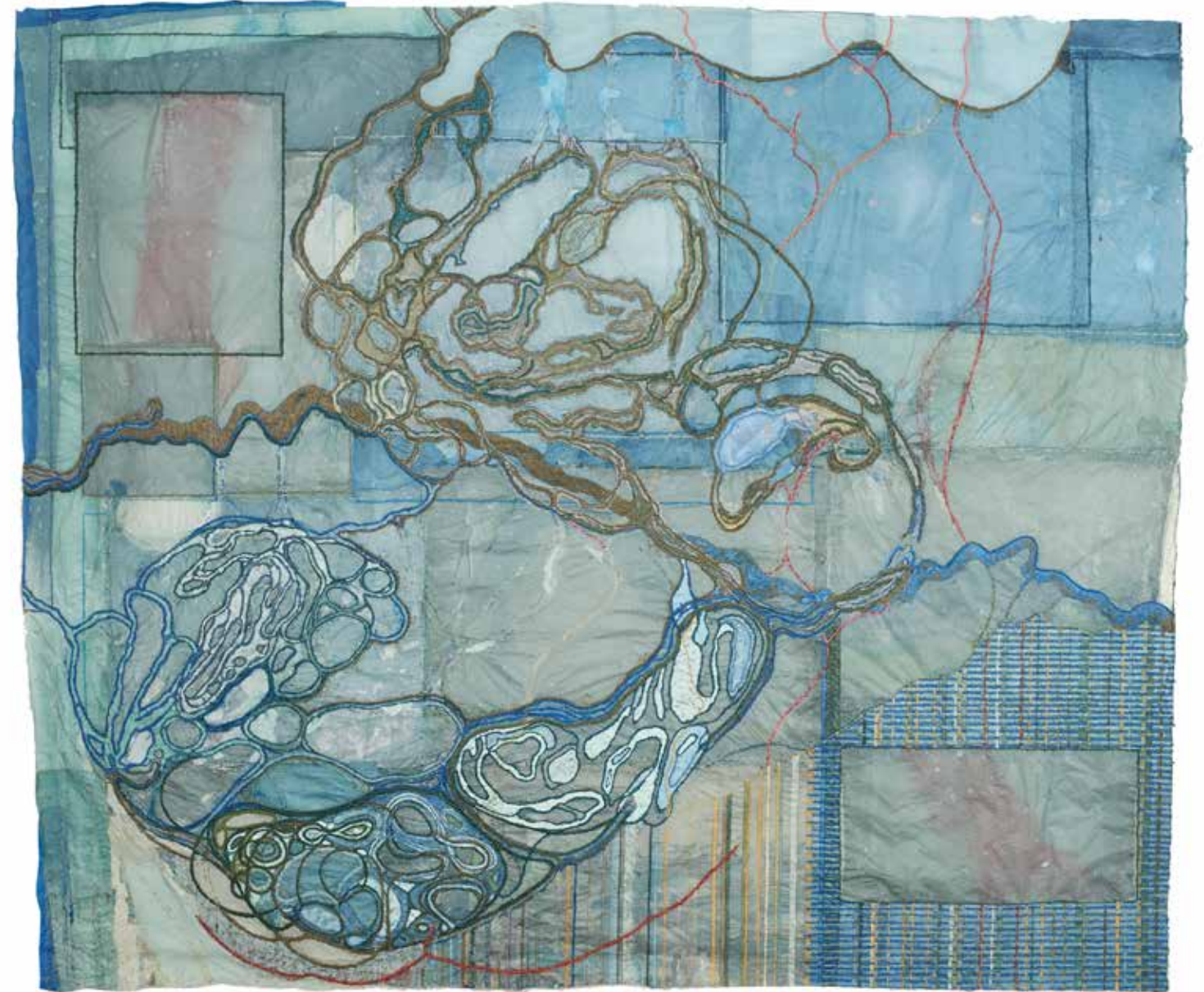
Edwin Torres is editor of *The Body In Language: An Anthology* (Counterpath Press) which includes an essay by Nancy Cohen. He has ten poetry collections including, *The Animal's Perception of Earth* (DoubleCross Press), *Xoeteox: the infinite word object* (Wave Books) and *Americoscopia* (University of Arizona Press). Fellowships include; Foundation for Contemporary Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, The DIA Foundation, and anthologies include, *Manifold Criticism*, *Who Will Speak For America*, *American Poets In The 21st Century: Poetics of Social Engagement*, and *Kindergarde: Avant Garde Poems For Children*.



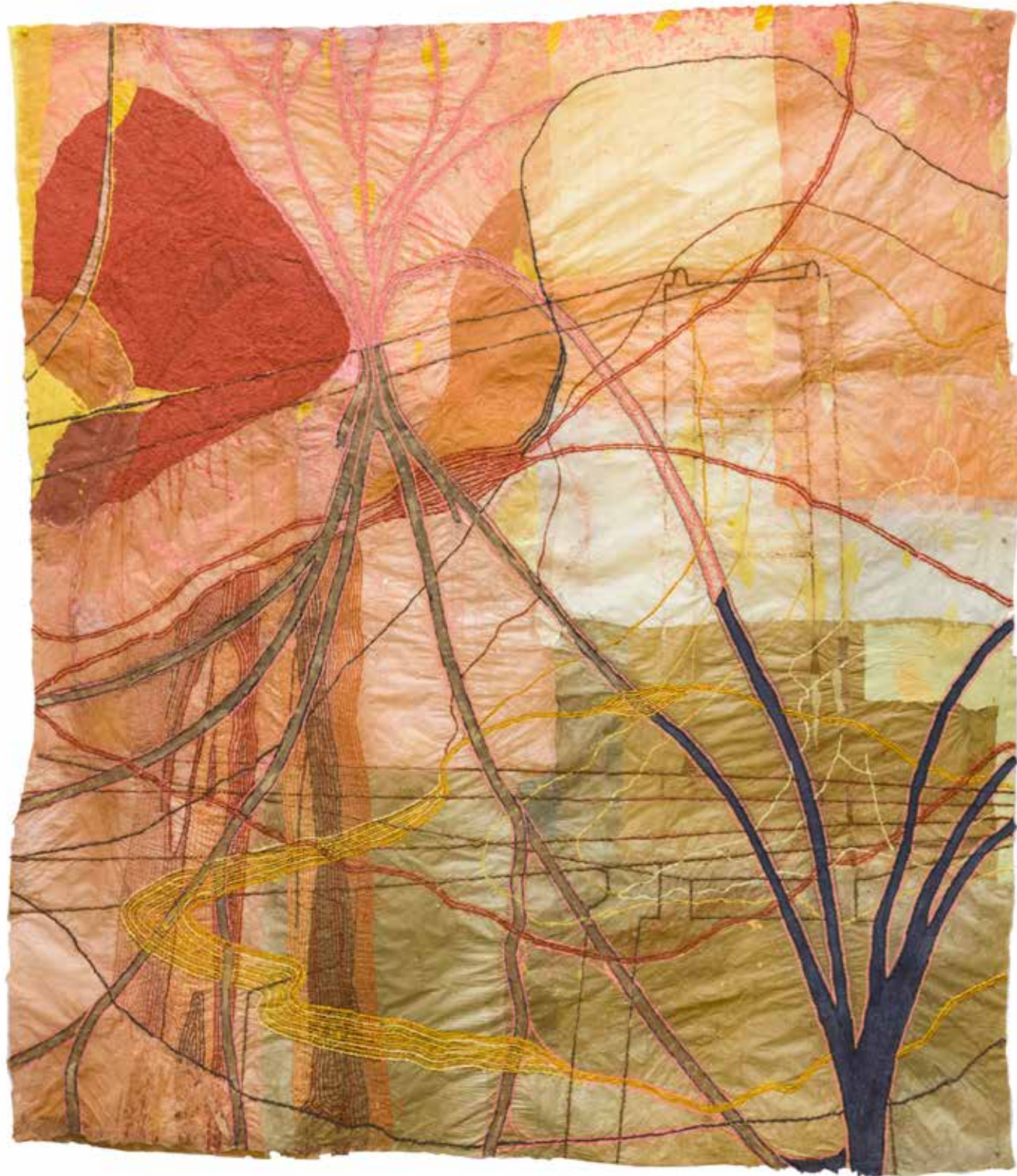
PLATES



Another Way Through, 2019



Blue Storm of Our Anxieties, 2020



Fire Season, 2020



Beneath the Surface, 2018



Merge, 2018



Espiritu Santo, 2020



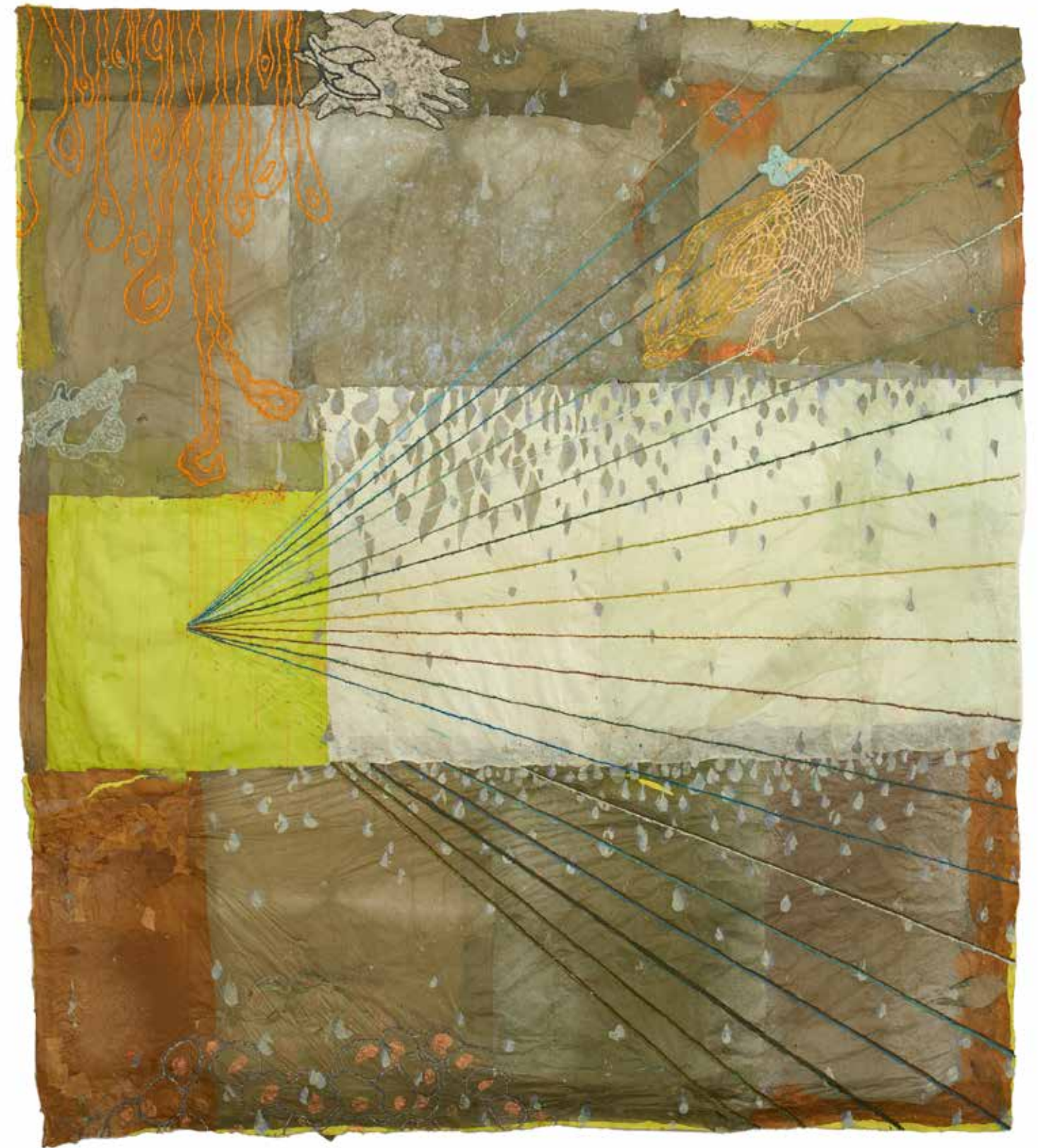
Salar de Uyuni, 2017



Tacking Home, 2019



Off at 13, 2020



The Meaning of Wings, 2020



Migration Drawing, 2020



Rubber River, 2015

LIST OF PLATES

All works are handmade paper and paper pulp, courtesy of the artist



Another Way Through, 2019
80 x 90 in.



Beneath the Surface, 2018
84 x 74 in.



Blue Storm of Our Anxieties,
2020
78 x 70 in.



Espiritu Santo, 2020
80 x 72 in.



Fire Season, 2020
76 x 68 in.



Merge, 2018
81 x 68 in.



Migration Drawing, 2020
67 x 55 in.
(not in exhibition)



Off at 13, 2020
98 x 74 in.



Rubber River, 2015
112 x 96 in.
(not in exhibition)



Salar de Uyuni, 2017
82 x 76 in.



Settling In, 2019
77 x 73 in.
(not in exhibition)



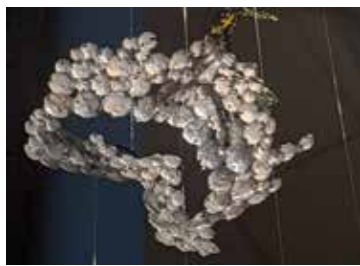
Tacking Home, 2019
96 x 73 in.
(not in exhibition)



The Meaning of Wings,
2020
82 x 69 in.



The Meaning of Wings, 2020-2021
Window installation
Glass, wire, paper pulp
On following pages: Details of individual sculptures



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first met Nancy Cohen on a sidewalk in New York. She was coming out of a gallery as an artist friend and I were going in. My friend introduced us, and I was delighted, because I knew Nancy's work and had heard many colleagues speak of her. After we parted ways, my friend said, "Nancy is great, a real artist's artist."

The second time I met Nancy was in the company of a group of art lovers as we toured studios as part of an Art Center program. Nancy engaged us with the stories of her work--both what inspired her and her process in creating them. She was generous with her time and open to answering all of our questions. Her work captivated us. I thought again of the term my friend had used: an "artist's artist." When I think of an artist's artist, I think of someone who is deeply aligned with the artistic spirit and whose practice energizes the rest of us. After the studio visit, I felt my friend was right.

And so, it is a great pleasure to exhibit *Nancy Cohen: Atlas of Impermanence* at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey. The Art Center extends a special thanks to Nancy Cohen for sharing her artwork with us. We would also like to thank Curator Mary Birmingham and Exhibitions Manager Aliese Andersen Volk for their work in organizing the exhibition and this catalogue. The installation of this exhibition, especially the glass works, was no easy feat, so we'd like to extend additional thanks to installers Peter Brauch and Sneha Ganguly.

Catalogues take the effort of many hands, so we would like to thank designer Matt Barteluca, editor Robyn Roslak, photographer Etienne Frossard, Dan Bartlett at GHP Media, and contributors Jennifer Scanlan and Edwin Torres. We appreciate all of you for creating this book so that we can see, consider, and enjoy the work of Nancy Cohen long after the exhibition is over.

Nancy Cohen would like to thank Accola Griefen Fine Art, Kathryn Markel Fine Art, Dieu Donné, and her studio assistant Tavmeet Kaur. In addition, two drawings in the show came out of artist residences. *Another Way Through* was inspired by her time at The Tides Institute and Museum of Art, Eastport, Maine and *Espiritu Santo* was in response to a residency in Baja with Ninth Wave Global. Thanks to these residencies for offering time and space so that artworks like these can be created.

Melanie Cohn
Executive Director



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