



Nancy Cohen

The Meaning of Wings, 2020

Pigmented abaca, cotton, and linen

82 x 69 in / 209 x 175 cm

Photo: Christopher Dinerman.

Nancy Cohen

Line is the operative formal element in my recent work and there are many lines in play.

The works walk a line between drawings that might be tapestries or sculptures, paintings, or quilts and sculptures that draw in space. Lines delineate, but just as often act contrarily, blurring distinctions: Is a red line a vein or a tendril, is a purple one a cell, an insect wing, or a bit of lichen?

More fundamentally though, there is a fine fragile line between existence and its opposite, a line we, as well as the small and large environments that contain us, walk as well. Environmental and personal vulnerability has been a longstanding focus in my work. Waterways, in particular, with their almost human balance of fragility and strength, their perseverance through adversity – much of it inflicted by us – trace lines of stress and hope through our landscapes, as well as a strong line through the body of my work.

There is also the fine fragile line between the internal and the external. Handmade paper and glass – translucent, delicate, and yet unexpectedly tough and durable – expose the internal and yet protect it. They are skin and structure, portal, and shield. For decades, these materials have played a central and natural role in my work that explores dualities of vulnerability and strength.

Finally, the line between existence and its opposite has been sharpened for all of us in recent years with the climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, the line between our individual fragilities and those of the collective and the planet have been blurred. Individually, we have often been isolated – themes of escape and flight, literal and imagined, figure heavily in work I've produced in the pandemic period – but our fragile bodies and our fragile environment are inextricably linked.

After twenty years of focusing on sculpture and installations, using handmade paper as one of many materials, in 2014, I began to make large-scale, tapestry-like handmade paper drawings exploring ideas related to waterways. Working

relatively two-dimensionally for the first time, it was thrilling to dive more into color and step back a bit from worries about gravity.

These initial wall drawings began as a component for an installation based on a contaminated site on the Hackensack River in the Meadowlands of Secaucus, New Jersey, and evolved into a primary focus of my practice. The imagery derives from memories of particular landscapes, primarily waterways in industrialized New Jersey (but at times, farther afield). The work evolves from an experience of place. As the climate crisis continues, images of fires, storms, and droughts have entered the work as well, along with more personal observations of not dissimilar struggles of survival and adjustments that accompany aging and those arising during the Covid-19 pandemic.

My drawings are constructed sculpturally. I begin by making pigmented papers and then assemble them, still wet, in a quilt-like fashion; later I draw on these constructed, colored, and textured surfaces with various densities and colors of paper pulp. The wet pulp on the dried sheets causes a buckling on the surface that appears very much like stitching. These large-scale drawings evolve over long periods, often taking a year or more to complete as I use colored pulp to build and removes lines, surfaces, and forms. The traces of the "erased" pulp lines add a ghost-like color and a sense of history to the work. The finished works speak to the physicality of the body and simultaneously evoke an intimate sense of touch, akin to being in nature, experiencing both vastness and quiet moments of focus.

Perhaps because I began as a sculptor and continue to work three-dimensionally, I think intuitively in terms of materiality. Color and texture are inextricably linked. Whether I am making pigmented *abaca* for the body of my drawings, or pouring linen pulp on the surface of a couched wet sheet, or mixing colored pulps to "draw" with on the dry surface, colored pulp is analogous to form for me, there is no work without it.



Nancy Cohen

Merge, 2018

Pigmented *abaca*, cotton, and linen

81 x 68 in / 206 x 173 cm

Photo: Edward Fausty



The artist working on *Extending Your Reach* with Tatiana Ginsburg at Dieu Donn  in 2019.
Photo courtesy of Dieu Donn , New York.

Techniques and approaches

In my large-scale handmade paper drawings, the work begins in the wet studio and the rest happens using wet pulp once the paper is dry. The work is experimental, and the process is always in flux. I begin making sheets of high-shrinkage *abaca* (usually 22 x 30 in.), pigmenting the pulp in the vat as I go or starting with a large bucket of *abaca* pigmented a dark shade of the palette I am planning to work in. I lighten or alter the pulp by adding new pigments or unpigmented *abaca* as needed. At times, I throw in a handful of different colored pulp and pull a sheet before fully mixing in the new fibers to capture the organic and unpredictable color mixing that occurs.

After they are couched, some sheets stay as they are. On others, I add pigmented linen pulp using an eye dropper or spoons through a Mylar stencil, or I directly pour very watery linen pulp over an object (such as rope) laid on the couched sheet. I allow the pulp to settle and then remove the object.

I also work with cotton blowouts that are made by laying Mylar stencils or actual objects on a base sheet and removing the exposed areas with water pressure. Blowouts might be couched on *abaca* sheets and dried, or left wet and half-pressed, or I might use the blowouts themselves as cotton shapes either damp or dried. The *abaca* sheets are then half-pressed, placed in plastic, and refrigerated until I need them.

I make the paper at Dieu Donn , generally working alone, sometimes with collaborators that have included the full range of papermakers over the last twenty-nine years from Paul Wong, Rachel Gladfelter, Akemi Martin to both Amy Jacobs and Tatiana Ginsburg, who I have worked with and around frequently. I have learned from everyone.

Once the damp sheets are back in my studio, the work begins on the next stages. I assemble the wet, colored *abaca* sheets on the floor, sometimes as full sheets, and sometimes as torn smaller sheets. They are assembled in a quilt-like fashion (using methylcellulose in the overlaps) to create a first layer that is varied in color and texture. I am looking to create a complicated color structure to respond to later.

I dry the paper on the floor under weight allowing for movement, texture, and shrinkage. When dry, I hang the larger paper on the wall to work on the surface using varied densities and colors of pulp. While I can make the paper for one of these large pieces in less than a day, it can easily take six months or a year to complete a piece – it will go through many iterations enroute.

To create the lines on the drawings, I use pigmented cotton and *abaca*, alone or in combination with linen, depending on how much I want the line to emerge from the surface of the paper. I have at least a hundred cups of pigmented pulp (using pigments sourced from both Carriage House and Guerra) on my studio table at any one time. The work at this stage is slow and deliberate. I apply the pulp – the consistency of cream cheese and mixed with

methylcellulose – with two palette knives. As the lines of pulp dry, they cause further buckling and shrinking. I respond to these textures as the drawing continues.

If I want additional flat areas of color, I add wet sheets of *abaca* or cotton on top of dry paper, or I cut into the background paper and replace the missing part with wet sheets. If I want a highly textured, larger shape, I apply the pulp directly, again with palette knives, but this time it is more like icing a cake than writing “happy birthday.”

These pieces change considerably throughout the process as I respond intuitively. It feels very much like I am collaborating with the material.

In addition to this body of work, I continue making conceptually related sculptures in mixed materials – primarily glass, wire, and handmade paper. The ideas are consistent between the two- and three-dimensional work as is the experimental and open approach to materials. I also periodically make installations when there is a site or project I am drawn to, that feels best expressed in an overall environment.



Nancy Cohen
Setting, 2017–2022
Pigmented *abaca*, cotton and linen, ink
61 x 56 in / 155 x 142 cm
Photo: Edward Fausty.



Nancy Cohen

Blue Storm of our Anxieties, 2020

Pigmented abaca, cotton, linen and kenaf

78 x 70 in / 198 x 178 cm

Photo: Christopher Dinerman.



Nancy Cohen
Coming Through, 2021
Pigmented abaca, cotton and linen
96 x 77 in / 244 x 195.5 cm
Photo: Edward Fausty.



Nancy Cohen
Hackensack Dreaming (installation detail), 2014–2015
The Visual Arts Gallery, New Jersey City University, Jersey City, NJ
Handmade paper, wire, paper pulp, rubber, glass
240 × 132 × 156 in / 609.5 × 335.5 × 396 cm
Photo: Edward Fausty.