

NANCY COHEN AT NOYES MUSEUM OF ART
BY DOMINIQUE NAHAS
SCULPTURE MAGAZINE SEPTEMBER 2008

Throughout her career, Nancy Cohen has experimented with materials and forms that underscore the relational possibilities between the appearance of transparency and its opposite, opaqueness. Her naturalist tendencies are abetted by an ethnographer's curiosity and a keen appreciation of cultural parallels and anomalies. All of her various works explore sensations provoked by liminality, that is, threshold states of mind conditioned by factors conducive to transition and transformation.

The principal piece in her recent exhibition, "Water Ways: Interpretations by Nancy Cohen," was *Estuary: Moods and Modes*. Referencing the waterways of southern New Jersey, it forms an imposing yet gracefully undulating installation of layered, handmade, and hand-colored Abaca paper pulp. Cohen's most ambitious work to date, *Estuary* resulted from months of intense study and observation of the biotic community (and its abiotic environment) that forms part of the complex ecosystem of the Mullica River and the Great Bay Estuary of New Jersey's Pine Barrens.

Estuarine systems are formed in areas where rivers or lake meet the sea. Complex cleansing systems, they support and replenish a wide variety of marine as well as terrestrial life. In addition, atmospheric conditions relating to ocean currents and wind formations are tied into these organic regulatory and filtering structures. With its delicately colored, nearly translucent, swirling and trailing papers, *Estuary* evokes the fragile balance and power of nature. Cohen has positioned and colored each part of her work to infer flows of all kinds. Through its formal structure and coloration, *Estuary* hints at intake and outtake of water flows, the shifting of topographical boundaries, the reversals and blurrings of demarcation points between hard and soft terrain and between different concentrations of brackish waters, as well as shifting weather conditions.

The radiantly hued surfaces, sometimes stretched like parchment skins on thin metal armatures, emphasize translucent colorations and contours. These visual explorations are suffused with a sense of circulation and the dynamics of stability and instability. With its invocation of ebb and flow and the changing levels of water and soil that occur throughout an estuarine system, *Estuary* defies easy categorization. While the work functions in part as a bas-relief, it also acts as a walk-around sculpture. An installation, *Estuary* can also be viewed as a colorful schematized drawing in space, a gigantic biodynamic flow chart. Art-making demands problem-seeking approaches to subject and content, not problem-solving ones. Cohen's processes and approaches have always been geared toward energetic problematizing, or serious play.