

VISIONARY ART

The Art of Michelle Cohen

BY DEEANNA FRANKLIN
Associate Editor

A love of art and a desire to teach young children have shaped the life of artist Michelle Cohen. A diagnosis of depression and schizoaffective disorder have dampened neither her enthusiasm for art nor her love of color.

She was strongly influenced by painters of the art nouveau movement, such as Gustav Klimt, and by Asian art, particularly from Japan. The art nouveau influence can be seen in several of her paintings and sculptures, including the painting "Samurai."

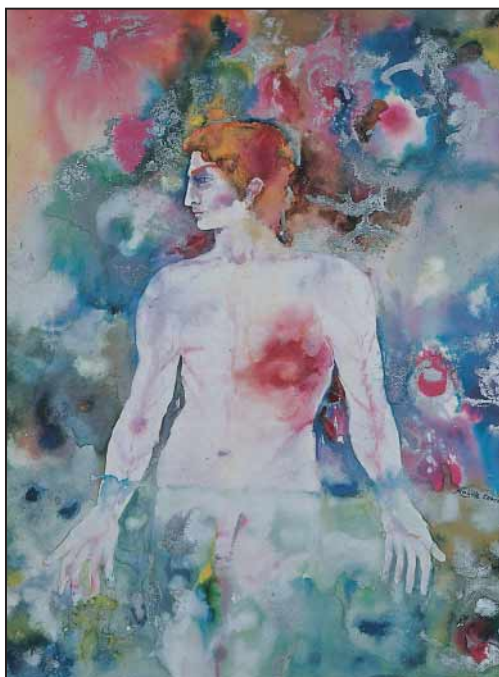
During the times when she was deeply depressed, trying to garner her parents' attention, or coping with yet another family move, Ms. Cohen was soothed by the art she created. She loves teaching art as well.

An article in a magazine inspired "Man in the Stars." Ms. Cohen was excited about the idea of panspermia. Popularized 100 years ago by Swedish Nobel laureate Svante Arrhenius, panspermia suggests that radiation pressure may have protected living spores as they traveled through space, possibly via comets. The theory is that the spores seeded primordial Earth and, millions of years later, gave rise to single-cell organisms and, eventually, humans. Scientists may now see this hypothesis as unlikely, but it is the kind of possibility that has delighted Ms. Cohen.

She is also a writer and earned a master's degree in English from Columbia University. She has had several successful exhibitions at the Fountain Gallery in Manhattan and is a member of Fountain House. ■



Samurai, acrylic, 2003



Man in the Stars II, water color, 1982

The Artist's Reflections

I started being interested in drawing around age 6 or 7, because I had an older cousin who used to draw comics, and I was fascinated with that. Also, my drawings were a ploy to get my parents' praise. As a child I was very introverted and shy. I felt kind of worthless — I hate to say that word. I have two sisters. They're both kind of artistic. But they haven't followed it as much as me.

I was born on the lower East Side. We lived there for a while, and then we moved to the Niagara Falls area, and then moved back to New York. My father had a lot of problems with jobs and getting along with people. He was an optician. We moved a lot. I remember I told my mother: "I'm crazy. I need a psychiatrist." That's why she took me. And I had a terrible temper. This was back in the '70s. I was surprised my mom took me seriously, but she did. I felt a sense of relief, because I felt like I was struggling in this kind of world that I just didn't know how to navigate.

The first year was difficult because I had a male psychiatrist, and I was frightened of him. I was frightened of men, in particular, because of an incident that happened when I was a child; I was nearly raped. And when [the male psychiatrist] left, I got a woman, and she became like a surrogate mother. She was great. I was taking medication, too. This only lasted about 4 years, and then I moved with my family to Israel.

I was in the hospital in Israel for depression. The hospitalization was prompted by a lot of crying and trying to commit suicide in roundabout ways, like walking against the traffic. My father had some kind of business with two other partners, which eventually failed. But we stayed in Israel for 5 years. While there, I decided to go to Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, and I went to Hebrew University. [When] I was 17 and I had just gotten out of high school, I went to High School of Art and Design. When I came back [to the United States], I entered Columbia University. I went to the School for Visual Arts for a while, too.

While [at Columbia], I decided I wanted to teach art. I graduated from Columbia with a B.A. in studio art and art history. I decided I wanted to teach, so I started a master's of art degree. I was going to teach art, but then I made another switch because the dean told me I wouldn't find any jobs in New York City. So I switched to English. I have a master's in English from Columbia. And then I taught for about 7 or 8 years in colleges in New York as an adjunct professor. I taught at some of the City Colleges, and in Jersey—all community colleges.

I was always on an artistic track, but I went through periods of depression. After Columbia, I went through a period where I said, "I don't want to do this anymore." And I almost threw away everything—all of my art. I'm glad I didn't, but I did put a lot of stuff in the closet. They came out again when I started to teach children. After 7 years of teaching adults, I went into the public schools. I also should say I had a great interest in literature and poetry. I also like to write a lot. I thought about it, and since I love to write poetry, I figured English would be a good degree, too.

In public school I taught English, but I also taught children from different countries. I would make art projects and teach English that way for part of the day. It was a third-grade class. The kids really seemed to enjoy themselves, and they picked up a lot of English. We did things like making cut-out puppets, paintings, crayons, watercolors. My job was phased out, and shortly thereafter, the school was phased out.

I couldn't find a job in an area I wasn't afraid to go to; I couldn't get on a train at 5 in the morning and travel to some school where the neighborhood is so bad I'd be afraid to walk around. I substituted a lot on the Upper West Side, hoping eventually something would open up. But it didn't. I only wanted to work with little kids. I was slowly sinking into this depression.

Most of my life, I've taken medication. I've taken a lot of different things. I was on Zyprexa for delusions; I guess you would call them that. I was on Effexor, which helped me the most. I was first diagnosed with depression at 13, but I'm sure I had it during my kindergarten year. I remember I was very unhappy then.

Even before I noticed the delusions, they told me about schizoaffective disorder. I didn't know they were delusions; I thought they were real. I thought the neighbors were trying to kill me by sending electricity through the walls, and I had red splotches on my back. At night I couldn't sleep, because I was getting these stinging feelings, and I was sure it was from the electricity. And I was going around to botánicas, the Spanish herbal stores, where they sell magical things. I told them about my problems, and I was buying things like "magical water" to take away the spells. I also went to every priest in the neighborhood asking for an exorcism. But the priests told me that I needed to see a psychiatrist.

I love Michelangelo. I love the art nouveau artists, like Klimt. I'm very influenced by Asian work, too. I painted a Japanese samurai. I had a solo show 3 years ago at the Fountain Gallery, and my main [promotional] card was of a samurai. While I was at Columbia, my instructors used to tell me to fill up the page. And one day it just hit me, and I did this big Japanese-type figure of a woman. My instructor was so happy. Also, I began to see how nicely Japanese artists use their space.

I love to work in different styles, because it's a challenge, and it's exciting to see if I can do it. There's another image I painted of a man—it was the result of the scientific theory that all of us come from the stars. I read an article on it, and it just smacked me in the face, and I thought: "Oh, my God! That is so beautiful." To think that stars that exploded and fell into the sea eventually led to life—and that's our ancestors! That impressed me, so I tried to show my vision of what the scientists said—not really my vision, but their vision in the painting, "The Man and the Stars." It's one of my favorites, and the theory's been proven. I didn't read about it until '79 or '80, and it got me all excited.

As told to Deeanna Franklin by Michelle Cohen.