

For Kent Peterson and Patricia Meyer-Peterson

ARCHAEOLOGY
OF METAPHOR
The Art of
GILAH YELIN HIRSCH

Edited by Donna Stein

SKIRA

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Occasionally and Irrevocably We Blunder into the Garden, 2009
Acrylic on canvas, 152 x 127 cm
Collection of Kent Peterson and Patricia Meyer-Peterson, Charlottesville, VA

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Infinitely Connected, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 61 cm diameter

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Preface

by Donna Stein

The art of Canadian American artist Gilah Yelin Hirsch can be characterized by a search for meaning. *Archaeology of Metaphor* brings together original ideas in art, science, ecology, and human consciousness as well as additional timeless themes, such as contemporary issues of race and equality. At the same time, this book examines and connects psychological, scientific, and philosophical implications of form as represented in Hirsch's oeuvre.

The artworks provide an evolving history of Hirsch's ideas and craft. Her work in multiple and mixed media (paintings, drawings, printmaking, photographs, films, three-dimensional objects) illustrate the evolution of her original theory on the origin of all alphabets, which the artist presents and deciphers in her film *Cosmography: The Writing of the Universe* (1995). Hirsch discovered that five fundamental shapes in nature she had been documenting photographically in wilderness worldwide were the source of all alphabets – from ancient to modern. Indeed, these fundamental shapes were among the first of 57 permutations of Hebrew, variously called Ancient Semitic, Aramaic, or Old Phoenician. Hirsch believes that these forms were recognized and chosen universally as they reflect the neurons and neural processes of perception and cognition, an elegant theory that has gained acceptance in scientific circles. In her most recent film, *Reading the Landscape* (2019) she reveals that while cultures and languages as varied as Inuktitut (Eskimo), Tibetan, Kiche (Mayan), and all others bring unique beauty and richness to the world, all alphabets begin with these five letterforms and thus, as humankind, we are more alike than different.

Since the 1980s, Hirsch has also been a pioneer in the field called psychoneuroimmunology or mind/body healing. A series of catastrophic events prompted her to begin studying the relationship between art and healing beginning in the 1970s, when the artist spent time in wilderness areas of the Sierra Nevada mountains, at Dorland Mountain Arts Colony near Temecula, California, at the Banff Center for the Arts, Alberta, Canada, and in the Tonto National Forest in Arizona. By studying medical texts that present the optimal state of every cell, system, and organ and reconstructing her body visually from the inside out, Hirsch developed a type of visualization practice that serves as an instrument toward wellness. By embedding potent words from different languages within the layers of her translucent paintings, developing mental pictures in her art to connect the internal reality (neurological congruency) with external visual perception, and choosing titles that guide a viewer's experience, she has organized seemingly disparate information into a far-reaching scientific theory, advancing healing practices through the arts. Hirsch is recognized internationally for these techniques, which she has taught to doctors and patients.

Current political and social concerns in the United States as well as globally demonstrate the need to reframe our humanistic understanding of what is important in life and how to achieve these goals. *Archaeology of Metaphor* connects the artist's visual themes to her philosophy and ideas, simultaneously encouraging greater awareness of pattern recognition and interconnectedness.



Chapter 1

Do We Think Because of What We See, or Do We See Because of What We Think?

Gilah Yelin Hirsch in Conversation with Donna Stein
October 2020 – August 2021

Donna Stein: You’ve often said you “got into art accidentally”. Explain how it happened.

Gilah Hirsch: As a child in Montreal my goal in life was to become a psychologist and a writer. I was sent to a four-language elementary school and became fluent in English, French, Hebrew and Yiddish. By the time I was six I was already writing short articles including a published essay titled *Enigma*. The essential question for me at that time was—How was it possible that we had reached the height of civilization, yet we still couldn’t deal with love, food,

and shelter? Of course, the question remains the same.

I always look for answers. At 10 I wrote to Albert Einstein, who I understood to be the greatest scientist in the world, and asked him, how could he believe in the God of the Old Testament? He answered saying, “always form your opinions according to your own judgement”, and that my letter, which was extensive for a 10-year-old, showed that I could do so. Professor Einstein died within two months. Decades later I presented my theory on the origin of alphabets at Princeton, and my hosts took me to Einstein’s house where I

saw the desk on which he had written that letter so many years earlier.

Throughout high school and later at McGill (1961), my first of many universities, I wrote analytical and psychologically penetrating essays. I spent my sophomore year (1962-1963) at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where I took classes with archaeologist, soldier, and politician Yigal Yadin and studied Hebrew literature. I was also surprised and privileged to be invited to sit next to Prime Minister David Ben Gurion for a lecture series on the *Human Condition* presented by visiting philosopher Walter Kauffman, the renowned Nietzsche scholar.

Fig. 1. Albert Einstein’s letter,
February 24, 1955; cancelled
stamp/envelope dated February 26,
1955, Collection of the artist



Annan, 1976
Detail
(Plate 16, page 133)

When I was 19, I married Edward (Ed) Hirsch whom I met in Israel. He was a student at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts where I joined him at the end of 1963. After his graduation, we moved to Berkeley, California. I attended the University of California at Berkeley (UCB). As my interests had grown, I designed multidisciplinary majors and minors consisting of art, art history, medieval history, psychology, and philosophy. To fulfill an art history requirement, I took one painting class where I produced 10 works. Each of the paintings demonstrated a different approach as well as innovative technique. I was immediately regarded as an artist even though I had never considered the possibility. My then-husband wanted to go to UCLA for graduate school, and so, I did not accept a four-year fellowship I had been offered at Stanford University for a PhD in clinical psychology.

Because my professors at Berkeley had said, “you are an artist,” I applied to the MFA program at UCLA on the merit of my 10 paintings. To my great surprise, I was accepted, was awarded a teaching assistantship, and was given a campus studio in Dixon Art Center. My graduate committee included Richard Diebenkorn, William Brice, Charles Garabedian, and Les Biller. Rigorous critiques led to my work being enthusiastically affirmed by the faculty. Diebenkorn loved my *Window* series (1967-1968) and told me that I had influenced his *Ocean Park* series, 1967-1988.

In my second year I was already exhibiting at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). When I graduated in 1970, my MFA show received a lot of attention and was televised nationally. I was suddenly showing with the Pop artists in New York as the subject matter of my paintings consisted of ordinary food within surreal scale and context. I imagined metaphorically transformed traditional women’s work in the kitchen, which later was considered feminist art. This is how I accidentally became an artist.

Meaning has always been my primary subject. I’ve never been interested in focusing only on surface or creating something typical or expected. I have looked for substance beyond the obvious, revealing content in more or less subtle ways. By inventive handling of mundane subject matter like everyday food, extraordinary metaphors evolved. And then later, by superimposing images over each other, I was able to manipulate time through space, implying archaeology of consequence and significance.

D.S.: When you were a child did you do a lot of drawing as part of your everyday experience?

G.H.: No. I was a reader. From a young age I read highly complex, adult subjects and authors.

D.S.: Wasn’t art part of your school day?

G.H.: No, art was not part of my childhood. Books and teachers were my escape.



Plate 1. *Red Square*, 1968
Oil on canvas, 122 x 122 cm



Fig. 2. *The Great Pumpkin*, 1969
Oil on canvas, 152 x 152 cm
Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Murray
Osofsky, Pittsburg, PA

Imagining that different pieces of
glass were placed over the image
distorting time and space.

I had to take one art class in high school where I made psychologically probing pictures from my dreams while others were working on still lifes.

I had an unusually dire childhood in a family of modest means. When I was eight, my father, Ezra Yelin, developed a degenerative disease that was precipitated by two car accidents. He became an invalid who suffered deterioration of motor cells ultimately causing complete incapacity of his limbs and speech. I frequently didn't go to school and stayed home to take care of him. My mother, Shulamis Borodensky Yelin, a well-known writer and poet in Montreal, often came home in a rage from teaching elementary and then high school in Montreal public schools. She was physically and emotionally abusive to both my father and myself because of her violent mental illness, currently called Borderline Personality Disorder.

At ages 6 and 7, I was sent to a Yiddish speaking ethnic culture summer camp north of Montreal, and from 8 to 16 to a Hebrew speaking orthodox camp, further north in the Laurentian Mountains. I was interested in the language but not in the orthodoxy. While my bunkmates were engaged in camp activities, I would escape to a little-known lake in the forest with the volumes I brought with

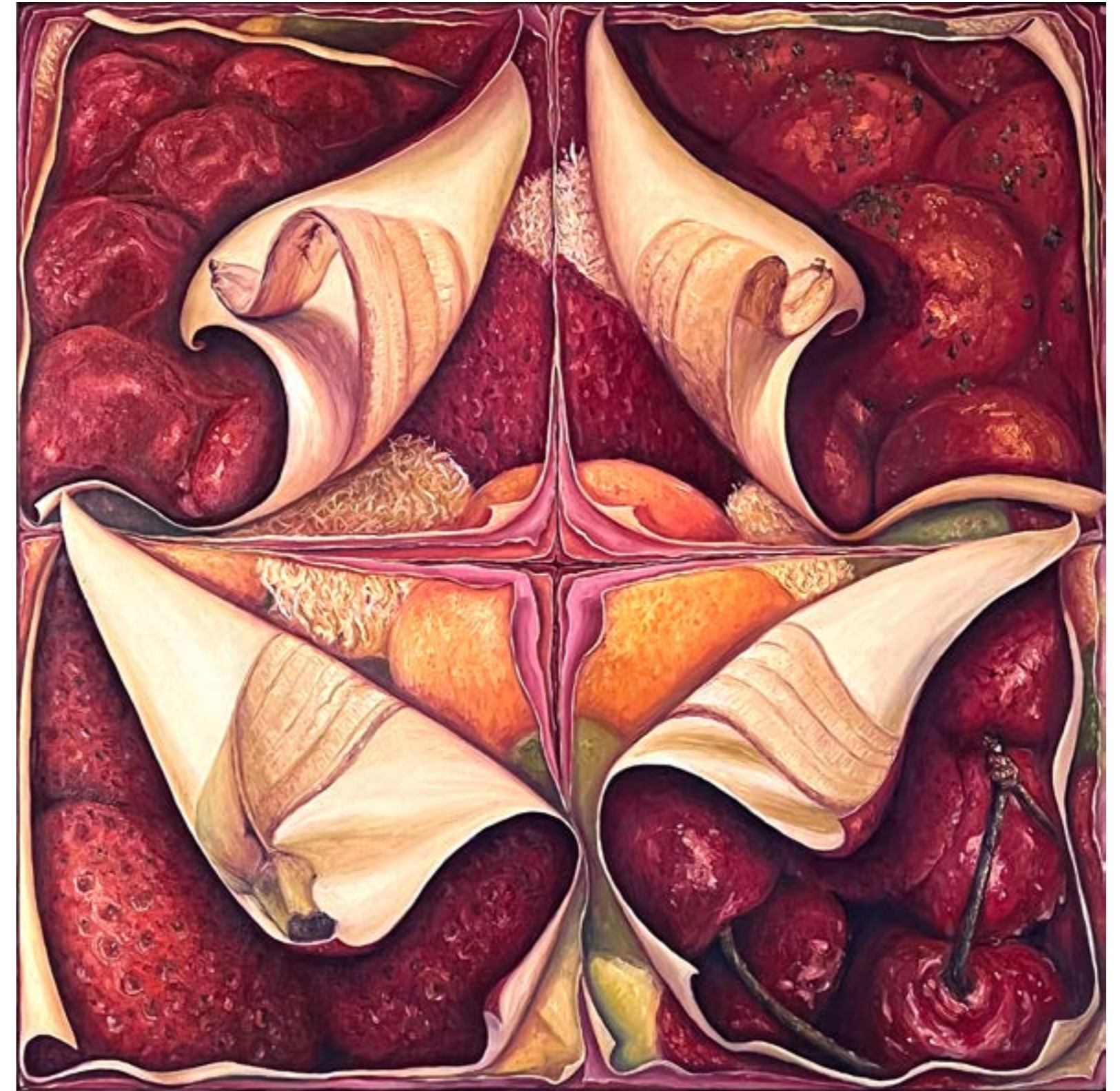


Plate 2. *Four Square Peeler*, 1972
Oil on canvas, 122 x 122 cm
Collection of Shirley Loeb, Los Angeles, CA

Using the canvas as a vehicle to explore and
reveal layers of personal history.

me from my parents' floor-to-ceiling library. I was enthralled by Freud, Jung, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard and later the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, and Camus. I happily waded through the deep fare, entranced by the beauty of nature and wide-ranging ideas. At the end of a day, when I returned to the cabin my bunkmates showed their resentment by punishing me for my otherness. They threw garbage on my white Hudson Bay blankets and "frenched" my bed, inserting raw eggs, ketchup, and cereal between the sheets while I was away in the forest. Despite my difficulties with the girls in my bunk with whom I had little in common, being in nature was far better than being at home where I was constantly confronted with the painful tragedy of a very ill father and an unpredictable mother.

In my youth, the only time I used art media outside school was during the "Color War" at camp. For a week and a half, the entire population was divided into two teams who competed in various sports and intellectual pursuits, including writing and performing plays, declaiming poetry, composing songs as well as operas that were judged not only for the music, libretto, and singing, but also for the costumes and sets. Everything was conducted in Hebrew and points were taken away if English was heard, even in the cabins. All activities were monitored for excellence and the team that had the most points won. I started making large-scale signs for my teams using Hebrew words and letters. These were celebrated and it was understood that Gilah's team would have the best signage, a key aspect of the Color War. That proved to be my first experience as an artist.

Recently, I reunited on Zoom with eight women who had been my bunkmates at camp. They remember my colorful signs, particularly one that was very tall, probably about 10 feet [304cm] high by 3 feet [91.5cm] wide, gouache on brown butcher paper, that contained the Hebrew words *kadosh kadosh kadosh*, which means "holy, holy, holy." The letters were intertwined as a spiral from bottom to top, so that they appeared woven while revolving. I vividly



Fig. 3. *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*, 2002
Oil on canvas, 229 x 51 cm
The third in the artist's 9/11
Trilogy, 2001.



Fig. 4. Emily Carr, *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky*, 1935
Oil on canvas, 115 x 68.5 cm
Vancouver Art Gallery, British
Columbia, Canada

recall the power of the image, but at the time I didn't understand its complex nature. Some forty years later I revisited the camp and was surprised to find my sign hanging in the dining hall. My initial foray as an artist was also my first combination of image and text in a meaningful yet artful way. In 2011, I recalled the sign when I painted *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh* (see fig. 3, p. 14) as the third work in my 9/11 *Trilogy*, in which the many souls are transformed into one through fire.

D.S.: Which painters from art history have impacted your work and inspired you? You've talked about Leonardo, Peto, Harnett, Van Eyck, and Vermeer... who are your heroes?

G.H.: While others have compared my work to Arcimboldo because of the way he manipulated food imagery, I could never relate to his paintings, which always seemed satirical, superficial, cruel, and far from my interest.

My heroes are Emily Carr and Vincent Van Gogh. Reproductions of Carr's *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky* and Van Gogh's *Starry Night* hung over my crib, so they were the first artworks I saw, and their depictions of the spiritual aspect of nature imprinted deeply and remain in my heart. Carr, who died seven months after I was born, influenced me more than any other artist. I felt a strong sense of camaraderie or at least familiarity with her. In various ways, Carr and I shared a life story including many parallels, which is probably why I continued to be attracted to her work.

I learned about Carr only after I already was spending time alone in nature.



Fig. 5. Vincent Van Gogh, *Starry Night*, 1889
Oil on canvas, 74 x 91.5 cm
The VANGOGH Gallery,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands