

# ARTE FUSE

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## Nancy Cohen: Hackensack Dreaming at Agnes Varis Art Center

1 DAY AGO by **A. BASCOVE**



Walking into a Nancy Cohen installation is to be immersed in a riotous array of sensations. Texture, color, and light are her elements, her inspiration, the innumerable forms of nature altered by time, but in their imperfections, possessing the spirit and expression of their history.

This exhibition was inspired by the unlikely landscape of the Mill Creek Marsh, a polluted wetlands section of the Hackensack River squeezed between the New Jersey Highway and Secaucus's outlet malls, Cohen and a friend had seen from the highway. "The malls, and the skyline of New York form the background for experiencing this isolated puddle of the organic in a deluge of the human-made" she remembers.

Yet Cohen found this Meadowlands marsh a deeply primal experience, igniting a fervor of compelling and exciting interpretations of what that damaged landscape, the remnants of a former cedar forest, had experienced over centuries.

"A few steps from the shopping center parking lot we entered a quiet space where pools of flat still water gave way to the tops of wooden tree stumps that seemed to break free from thin sheets of ice while simultaneously appearing to encapsulate them as they ruptured the surface of the pale blue water. The stumps forms are inexplicable, magical, sculptural. They seem to embody fragility, perseverance and a caught moment. Conceptual ideas I have been moving around in my work for years were suddenly presented to me besides the New Jersey Turnpike"

Hackensack Dreaming is a site specific, room-sized, glass, rubber, metal, and handmade paper installation, with passages to walk through, and floor and wall coverings encrusted with thought provoking delights.

A master of the laborious art of handmade paper, she integrates the soft, pliable material with metal, glass and rubber. With thin delicate, see-through skins, and thick sculptural forms, she explores the contrasts of these materials in ways that allow her to duplicate nature's constructions, covering, stretching, pulling, and coaxing, often seeming to be defying the limits of rag and fiber. Then there are the voluptuously textured and painted, dyed, and embedded paper sheets lining the walls and floors in gorgeous rich, overlapping colors of bodies of water, riverbeds, and wet sand.

This is a dream of thousands of years ago, before mammals walked the earth, when these waters teemed with trilobites, brachiopods, jellyfish, early crustaceans and sea sponges, the earliest forms of sea life.

The structures of these basic forms are turned into a veritable rhapsody of variations. Some are opaque with metal and stretched thick paper, some translucent glass, others resting on the Center's floor, which is prepared with swirls of cerulean, blue and cream, illustrating the way the light would penetrate through water and reflect on the bottom of the riverbed. Some forms are delicately leveraged against curved sheets of saturated cobalt, light ultramarine, or gray heavily surfaced, painted, and sculpted paper. Some float lightly from invisible ceiling wires, giving the illusion of floating on water. In this way Cohen fills not only the floor and walls but the very air itself.

The paper surfaces are varied; smooth and rippled, painted and raised, adding to the sense of changes in the space. Among the most complex pieces are two large wall hangings, the "Hackensack Marsh" and Hackensack Dreaming Drawings." Made from patchworks of light paper, one of intense warm colors, the other pale and icily ethereal, they reflect a similar landscape with mollusks and shellfish at different times in different climates.

Cohen's skill and virtuosity are in full command as she finds the poetry in the ruins and memories of a forgotten, once vital, living body of water. The passage of time, the impersonal destruction by human encroachment never entirely supersedes the recognition of sublime beauty and the pulse of life in the most unexpected places.

