

Arrested Memories

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Text | Ria Vaezian



"The sky was red. It was like a volcano had erupted in the clouds." Uzbek-Israeli artist Nathan Slate Joseph whispers to me in his thick Brooklyn accent. He is recalling the year 1948, when bomb blasts shook Israel and he was just a boy.

Joseph pauses before explaining, "When I create sculptures, I go back to the colours and materials I was raised around. It's like an act of arresting memories." Indeed it is as though Joseph is gazing into the depths of his childhood when he constructs his deeply coloured metal works. A veteran in the New York City art scene, the 67-year old artist has become known for his exuberant steel sculptures and three-dimensional paintings.

Growing up Rishon LeZion Israel, Joseph was surrounded by metal. The ground was littered with military debris. Refugee camps of makeshift metal dotted the landscape. And metal skeletons of boats lay shipwrecked on the coast. Perhaps most vivid is his memory of the rusted nails he picked up to reuse.

Everything was considered precious, he explains. Arriving in New York City in 1959 was a shock for Joseph. "People threw away so much in America. You could build entire countries with the waste," he muses. It seemed only natural then for the young artist to explore the detritus that filled the streets. Unsurprisingly, he began collecting junk and discarded metal.

By the mid-seventies, Joseph began applying bright mineral pigment onto scraps of zinc-galvanized steel — a method which he continues to use today. Working in his outdoor studio in Williamsburg, New York, Joseph pours granules of pigment, water and acid onto steel. He then exposes the metal to wind, rain and sunshine. Over time, the once ordinary surface morphs into a powdery expanse of colour. "Metal is alive in some funny way, you can have life or a relationship with it like a relationship with a woman. It is forgiving — I can make a mistake but I can go back and correct it," says Joseph with a smile. Cutting the metal with an oxyacetylene torch, he transforms the sheets into grid-like paintings and various sculptural forms.

Recently, Joseph has begun creating boat-like vessels that

hang from the wall. He bends pieces of coloured steel into sinuous forms that are welded together. The fragments of metal cut fluidly through space with their shape echoing the ruined boats Joseph knew as a child. Yet it isn't just boats that have inspired these forms.

During a recent trip to Japan, Joseph became fascinated with the structure and color of kimonos. "Women in kimonos are like ships or sculptures in themselves — they are imbued with movement," he says. For Joseph, the form of a kimono conjured ideas of travel, journey and discovery.

The notion of discovery and the search for the unknown is a central theme in Joseph's art. "Sometimes it is serendipitous as to why you gravitate towards certain things and a certain thing gravitates towards you," he shares. It is apparent that he isn't just talking about art here. His own life has been about fortuitous encounters.

Coming to New York in the fervent of the 1960s, Joseph landed in the right place at the right time. "The village was vibrant with artists like Bobby Dylan, Joni Mitchell and John Chamberlain — there was real hotbed of young talent in Soho," he says.

Spending hours in famed artist hangouts including Mickey Ruskin, the Ocean Club and the Chinese Chance, Joseph immersed himself in the city's exploding art scene. By the late 1970s, Joseph had a 7,000 square foot penthouse studio with a vast rooftop where he could work outdoors under the lights of the city. He lived with actress Ellen Barkin and later shared a studio with singer Joni Mitchell, who remains a close friend and avid collector of his work. Over time, his work developed and his circle of collectors grew.

Today, Joseph is firmly established in the city's contemporary art scene. Constantly probing the possibilities of his medium, he continues to unearth new memories. Peering forward in his wide-rimmed glasses with a cigar clenched firmly in hand, Joseph surmises, "Trying to figure out why and how is not good in art, it's just what you react to and what reacts to you."



Nathan Slate Joseph,
Kimono Evening, 2009,
pigment on galvanized steel,
97 x 28 x 14 inches



Nathan Slate Joseph,
Sari Kimono Suite II, 2008,
pigment on galvanized steel,
48 x 14 x 9.5 inches



Nathan Slate Joseph,
Night at Kimono, 2009,
pigment on galvanized steel,
67 x 17 x 12.5 inches

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