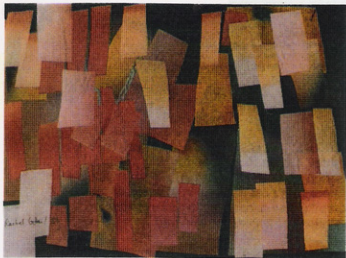


Painting on silk

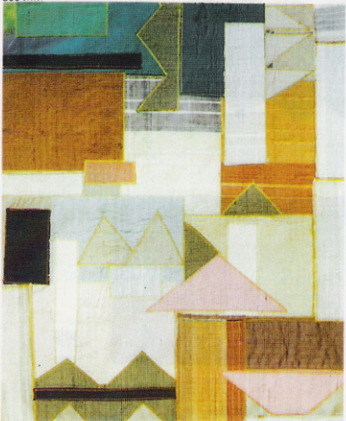
Rachel Gitai is an Israeli living temporarily in South Africa. Her hand-painted pure silk creations, some of which incorporate cotton fabric and hand-made paper, are different from work she was doing in Israel. Rachel describes them as a response to the South African environment: the particular qualities of light, and the different spatial situations in buildings here — domestic, commercial and institutional.

In Israel, Rachel Gitai worked as a lecturer, teaching design and fine art students, and exhibiting her own work in galleries.

Her work with students took into account creativity, visual communication including visual codes, the presentation



This work incorporates more structured shapes — rectangles and trapezoids of silk layered on silk. The dimensions are 400 mm by 300 mm



Mainly raw silk has been used here, incorporating more regular shapes, and subtle colouring



Pieces of silk in a muted range of colours are sewn together. The overall dimensions are 350 mm by 350 mm



A landscape-like effect reflecting an unusual combination of colours. Cotton, silk and paper are sewn together

and understanding of concepts, and the psychology of colour, textures and light.

She first visited South Africa in 1984 when her husband came on an assignment. Rachel brought some of her water colours with her, to display in her apartment. She was astounded at how 'wrong' they were — in colour, size and subject matter.

In reaction, she began to experiment with what, for her, was a new art form: painting on silk. The technique has been used in the East for many years, but Rachel had to find her own way.

Hundreds of types of silk are produced in the Far East, and a choice had to be made — the tension of the weaving, the softness of the cloth and the flexibility of the fibres had to be appropriate. In some cases raw silk is used. Rachel notes that natural fibres absorb colour more effectively, and refers to the great strength of silk thread.

The white silk in widths of 900 mm or 1 150 mm, has to be processed by the artist before painting can begin. It is submerged in water baths — alternatively in hot and cold water, to stabilise the warp and the weft fibres, and while wet, the edges are affixed to a flexible frame and the required directional tension is applied. On some occasions the fabric is stretched unequally, to create a desired effect, as for a recent commissioned work which required a streaming effect as in a deep sea setting.

Painting

Highly concentrated paints for use on silk are applied with small, fine brushes, similar to those used for water colours. The paint spreads quickly on the fabric and the finer the brush, the better the control. The application of paint is time consuming, and often many layers are applied to achieve a screen-like effect. It is best to paint in humid conditions, for example in the early morning or during wet weather, particularly when working on the dry Highveld. In this environment the silk absorbs the colour more slowly, and there is a longer drying time. This facilitates the blending of colours and achieves more interesting effects.

The painted fabric is left to dry — sometimes this will take as long as two days — and thereafter it is put through a steamer for stabilisation.

When the fabrics are ready to use the creativity begins, and different shapes, sizes and colours are incorporated into the design. Often the cut pieces are layered.

Generally Rachel sketches a design in advance, sets the drawing aside and works independently of it, but some work is entirely spontaneous. Correct framing of the finished work is important, and where possible Rachel likes to attend to this.

The required silk, which comes from China, is expensive and difficult to acquire in South Africa, and Rachel has

had to source it through Israel.

During this period in South Africa Rachel wrote articles on interior design for the Israeli publication, *Man* and his house, recording her impressions of the work being done here and her own responses to a new situation.

Rachel's perception, altered by her transplantation to a different environment, expresses itself in the use of strong, vibrant colours and larger formats. The work is abstract, but often the forms have connotations of landscape, or the organic shapes are suggestive of plant forms. Others appear as cityscapes.

"I love colours," says Rachel, "and I am fascinated by the endless possible combinations and solutions."

In some works cotton and silk are used on a paper backing, in others only silk is used.

Rachel Gitai returned to Israel in 1987, but barely a year later, a further assignment brought the family back to South Africa. She continues to work in her chosen medium, constantly experimenting with colour and form. The work ranges from the small scale to large wall hangings for corporate environments.

Work may be commissioned by private individuals, interior designers and architects, and Rachel Gitai will act as a consultant in determining interior design needs.