

Song of Songs: Fruitful Relationships



Lillian Klein Abensohn

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Lillian Klein Abensohn

September 9 – October 15, 2023

American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center

Washington, DC

FOREWORD

I like surprises, and Dr. Lillian Klein Abensohn gave me a big one. I had only known of Lillian as a popular professor of literature at American University and a great supporter of its Center for Israel Studies (CIS). At the urging of friends of CIS, which is celebrating the 25th anniversary of its founding this year, I agreed to take a look at what this nonagenarian had been up to in the way of art-making since her retirement.

I was not prepared for the supremely skilled and happily mischievous artist who greeted me at the door to her sunlit studio just six months ago. I was expecting something nice and grandmotherly. Instead, I found paintings of provocative fruits and vegetables made believable by their faultless execution using Old Master techniques and canny compositions, made the more sublime by their grounding in Klein Abensohn's scholarly explication of the Old Testament.

I was somewhat prepared to recognize still lifes as vessels of social/political/economic meaning, having just finished reading AU Professor Nika Elder's brilliant book, *The Curious Objects of William Harnett*.¹ I just didn't expect Klein Abensohn's painted forms to stray so brazenly from platonic relationships. They are about us and our "begatting." They reflect our contemporary and eternal interests and concerns from the sexual to the geo-political. Shall we, after all, heed the call to be fruitful, to "do unto others," to love one another, to get along?

One visit to her studio and I was altogether persuaded by Klein Abensohn's art. But, just in case, I consulted Professor Elder and invited three current or former American University art history graduate students to visit her studio and give me their opinion. Would younger eyes recognize this artistic achievement and experience the same relevance to our own lives?

Claudia Watts, Kayla Conklin, and Alexandra Schuman each saw something of value from their very different perspectives and wrote beautifully about their interpretations, drawing on knowledge from across subjects as diverse as gender and geographic relations. It is such a pleasure to watch new curatorial voices bring their freshly-honed skills and sensibilities and take their place in our museums. Their conversations with Klein Abensohn were so enlightening, effortlessly forming connections across generations. Their writing is testimony to what it is to be part of a university community.

Jack Rasmussen
Director and Curator,
American University Museum
at the Katzen Arts Center,
Washington, DC

¹ Nika Elder, *William Harnett's Curious Objects: Still-Life Painting after the American Civil War*, (Oakland, University of California Press, 2022).



Cuddles, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



A Crowd of Spring, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.

PRACTICING QUEER FORMALISM: THE COVERT INTIMACY OF LILLIAN KLEIN ABENSOHN'S *A CROWD OF SPRING*

KAYLA CONKLIN

Alper Fellowship Alumnus

American University Museum

Six long spring onions sprawl diagonally across Lillian Klein Abensohn's oil painting, *A Crowd of Spring*. The cluster of vegetables, with its striations of deep eggplant-purple and bright charreuse-green, sit on top of a wooden cutting board and spill off the edge of the white linen draped table. The curved length of the onions' green stems softly intertwines, almost braiding together. The posture of the onions, laying atop each other, suggests that the vegetables aren't the subject of the painting at all, but it's the relationships between the forms that matter.

With titles like *Feminine Forms*, *Ripe and Ready* (page 21), and *Tomato Orgy*, Klein Abensohn's vegetables are more than just produce—they are visions of intimacy. It is curious then, that Klein Abensohn chose to engage with the topics of sexuality and intimacy through the genre of still life, a traditionally body-less genre. How is Klein Abensohn able to convey not just the human form, but the complex relationships between them, using only plants? This essay posits that Klein Abensohn's covert depictions of bodily intimacy in *A Crowd of Spring* illustrate what queer art historians have long known, that shapes can code intimacy. The visuality of intimacy then, is not located within the body, but in the shape of the spaces between.

Queer Formalism, David Getsy argued, is an approach to studying art that realizes that the visual relationships between shapes contain meaning, ethics, and politics. The experience and identity of queerness, he explains, can refuse conformity, celebrate sameness, refuse

categorization, and encourage novelty. Shapes, even abstract shapes, can do the same: be defiantly individual, display homogeneity with repetition, or encourage new ways of seeing. According to Getsy, queerness is reliant on form. Thus, by applying this understanding of shapes as capable of revealing queer aesthetics, I hope to throw into relief that Klein Abensohn's painting of onions is in fact a subtle and discretely coded representation of a queer experience and identity—an intimacy that transcends the body. This interpretation should serve as a case study, not only to reiterate Getsy's ideas about queer relations, but also to expand his theories outside of the scope of abstraction and into the genre of still life—a genre of consumption and objectification.

A Crowd of Spring's repetition of forms celebrates sameness by framing homogeneity as erotic. Long spring onion stems pile upon one another, repeating the same tube-like shape with each onion. The same parts comprise every onion: one long green stem, a deep purple root, a white bulb at the end, and short unruly hair-like roots that sprout from the bottom of the bulb. Each stalk lies in the same direction, with green stems emerging from the back right corner of the composition and the white bulbs spilling off the edge of the table in the front left corner. By placing these repeating forms on a white linen tablecloth that resembles a bedsheets, Klein Abensohn framed the repeating forms as an allusion to the body. Thus, the composition's covert eroticism and repeating shapes celebrate



Feminine Forms, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.

the intimacy of sameness.

The artist separated the bundles of onions into two small groups, visually paralleling an important aspect of the queer experience: assembling chosen families, or as Getsy put it, the “creation of self-made kinships.”¹ The onions coalesce into two sets of three stalks. No rubber band or produce tie binds the two sets of onions, but instead they independently bind together as if attracted to an invisible magnetic point in the center of the bundle. They seem to levitate near the edge of the table, leaning on one another for support and leverage. The posture of the still life is precariously dependent, that is— if one removed a single onion from either cluster then

the entire composition would fall. This sense of dependence adheres the shapes to one another and creates an atmosphere of cohesion among the onions, ultimately emphasizing that it is the relationships between the shapes that produce a sense of intimacy.

A Crowd of Spring camouflaged queer representation, coding eroticism, intimacy, and chosen family in an image of onions. This representation begs an expanded perspective of what constitutes the body, where intimacy is located, and the artist’s ability to breathe meaning into shape. At stake in Klein Abensohn’s intervention is a fuller understanding of the ways in which intimacy may transcend the body and the binary.

1 David Getsy, “*Queer Relations*,” *ASAP Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 256.



Tomato Orgy, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



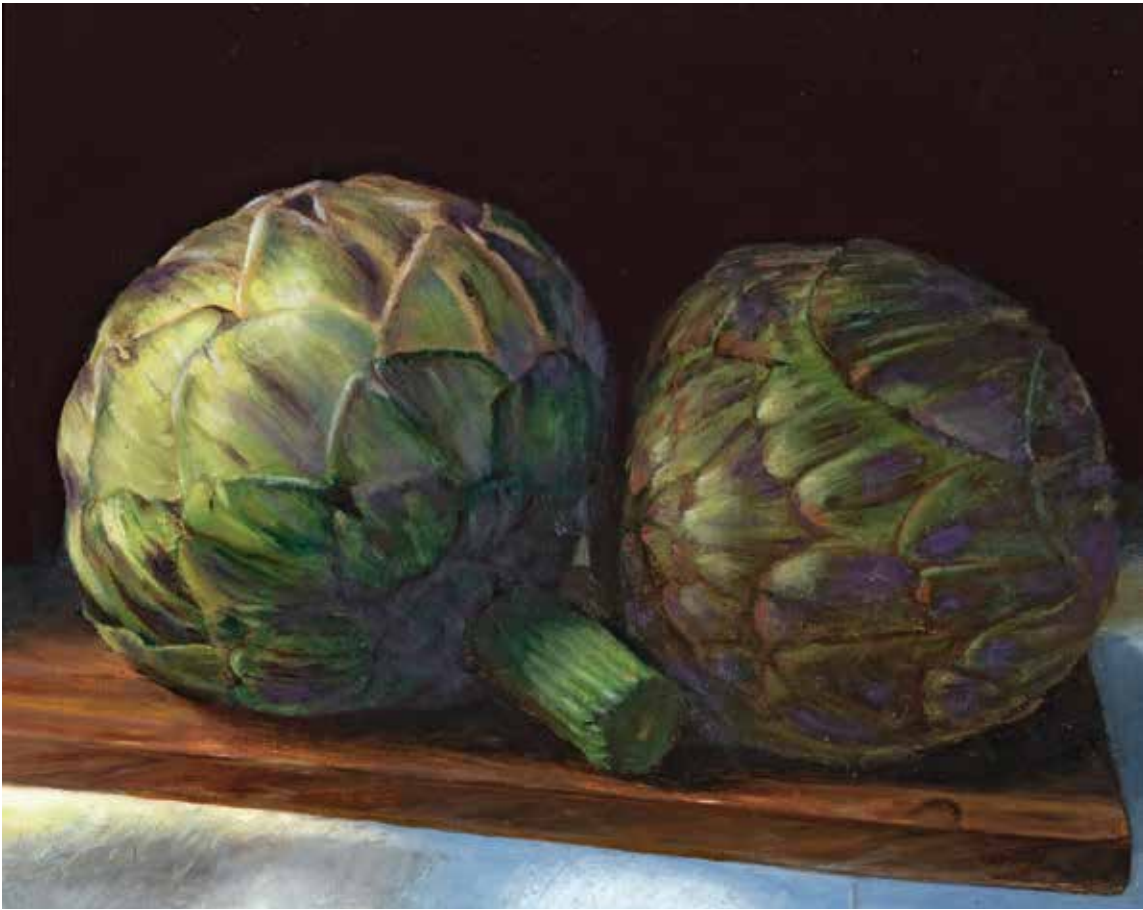
Knowing What's Inside..., 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Comfort, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Looking Elsewhere, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Hidden Hearts, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Forbidding, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.

FRUITFUL PASSAGES

ALEXANDRA SCHUMAN

Alper Fellowship Alumnus
American University Museum

“Be fruitful and multiply,” God instructed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden on the sixth day of creation. This commandment is quite literally brought to fruition by Lillian Klein Abensohn in her sensuous still lifes of fruit and vegetables. The former professor of literature and Biblical scholar likens her paintings to Biblical verses, delving deep for meaning using brief passages of narrative. While mapping a Biblical story directly onto a painting in expectation of a neat parallel would be an oversimplification, treating these paintings as exercises in close reading of Biblical literature can offer interpretive resonance to the common themes of sexual, familial, and generational relationships. The fraught, complicated human dynamics in the Bible, while specific in narrative, are timeless in relatability.

While Klein Abensohn’s still lifes sometimes feature a lone fruit or tender duos, she often depicts complexly interconnected triads. An affectionate pair may readily parallel an amorous Adam and Eve, but the artist often adds a third player, opening the dynamic or excluding an interloper. Just as the Biblical matriarchs and patriarchs dutifully multiplied, resulting in generational abundance, a two-person union is no longer the only relationship at stake. Instead, it is the familial network of the nation of Israel.

In one of the artist’s trios, *Sweet Bites*, an array of tangerines comprise a love triangle. The scene is blocked with large leaves extending from erect stems, creating a crisscrossing garden of vibrant greenery; this vitality suggests the fruits were only recently plucked from their tree. The two tangerines on the left, raised on

a wooden board, partially cover themselves with their leaves, which coyly overlap. Their upright stems bend familiarly toward each other—a happy couple. To their right, however, the third tangerine has no place on the board; it has fallen over, stem facing forward instead of proudly upwards. While not included in the coupling, the rightmost tangerine is still not quite an outsider; it is, of course, still a tangerine. In a small but important detail, one of the center fruit’s leaves extends behind its dejected companion, formally connecting the two.

The love triangle is an age-old dynamic present in the Bible. In the Book of Genesis, Jacob’s wives Leah and Rachel engage in a jealous rivalry. In the story, Jacob labors to earn the hand of his cousin Rachel but is deceived by her father into marrying and consummating with her older sister, Leah. After Jacob finally marries Rachel too, God blesses Leah with fertility and renders Rachel barren for years as recompense for Jacob’s favoritism. Leah seemingly does not gain more of the love she desires from Jacob over time, but with the name of her fourth son, Judah, she gives thanks to God for recognizing her and blessing her with children. The feud continues, and in the end, Leah bears seven children and Rachel bears two. The sons born during this portion are the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Sweet Bites offers relational parallels to this Biblical passage. The leftmost tangerine is the largest and the most frontally arranged of the elevated duo, a privileged position often reserved for a family patriarch like Jacob. The



Sweet Bites, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.

center tangerine is clearly the preferred companion, which offers comparison to his favorite wife, Rachel. As a natural extension, the last, least preferred tangerine aligns with Leah's plight. Yet, these designations are not quite so straightforward. The center fruit is the smallest figure and only retains two leaves at the base of its stem, while the "outsider" on the right bears many leaves; perhaps the weight of them is what toppled her. Blessed with abundance, the "outsider's" verdant stem extends forward like a generational family tree. In the Bible, love is valued, but it is fertility that is of primary significance for women. Leah is, indeed, the primary matriarch of the nation of Israel. Perhaps she is not the least fortunate member of this family.

While *Sweet Bites* initially presents a straightforward scene of a tangerine love triangle, closer

inspection suggests that interpersonal favoritism is not the only measure by which we can analyze the featured trio. Contrary to a sidelined, least loved member of a fraught love triangle, our "Leah" occupies just as much space on the canvas, if not more, than the patriarch. It is her leafy stem that reaches into the foreground, across time and generations of the family tree, and invites the viewer into the painting. While still maintaining the connection to her kin, perhaps our "Leah" has the wisdom to separate herself from the complicated emotional ties of her companions so she may dedicate herself to her own purpose. She is more than just a part of a couple; she is an independent and interactive participant. In her role of the "outsider," she invites the audience into their complicated dynamic to judge, to interpret, and to relate.

OLYMPIA RISING

CLAUDIA M. WATTS

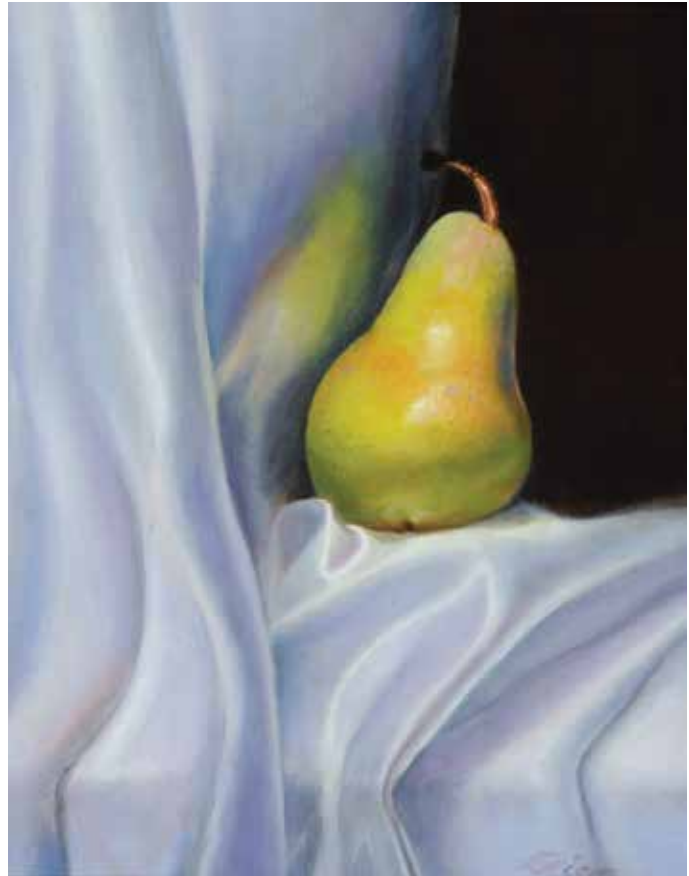
Alper Fellow

American University Museum

Edouard Manet sent shockwaves through the Paris Salon in 1865 when he recast the virginal nude in Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1534) as a Parisian prostitute. In his painting, entitled *Olympia* (1863), he simultaneously defiled the goddess of love, sex, and beauty, while stripping away idealized treatments of subject matter and painterly techniques long proliferated by artists past.

There were no lavish and laboriously rendered details, no characters, or structures lurking in the background, adding to the narrative, save the servant in the corner. Without question, the viewer is meant to confront the intensity of an intimate encounter through Manet's lens on society. In this break from tradition with the academy, art historians locate the early rumblings of modernism. As artists continued to push against the boundaries of subject, medium, and technique, representations of the feminine remained trapped in the dynamic of purity or promiscuity.

Reimagined as a pear in Lillian Klein Abensohn's painting also entitled *Olympia*, soft, subtle curves allude to the traditionally



Ingenua, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 14 x 11 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

objectified body. Lounging seductively, *Olympia* invites the viewer into a world of desire. The sheets swirl romantically beneath her, forming a delicate pedestal. Rendered with the same realism as the original, the viewer is almost tempted to pluck her from the scene. In this exhibition, she is joined by Klein Abensohn's two additional paintings, *Diva* and *Ingenua*. Together, these names allude to perceived levels of sexual experience dictated by the male gaze. They also present the viewer with a unique opportunity. Klein Abensohn's paintings of *Diva* and *Ingenua* allow us to consider the idea of *Olympia*'s agency.

The *Ingenua* stands deep within the frame; flowing white curtains do little to hide the ripe



Olympia, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.

figure but seem to provide a layer of security for a body that's not fully come into its own. With skin slightly blushed, inexperience and innocence are amplified by the light, creating an angelic glow. In contrast, the *Diva*, presented with complete self-assurance, occupies the entire frame. Here, shadows underscore sensuality and drama, while the skin is flushed by a deeper rouge and shows signs of wear.

Ingenue and *Diva* are the poles and Olympia's allure stems from her ability to flow effortlessly between the two. Left with no space for self, her existence is an eternal masquerade.

In her portrayal of the *Ingenue* and *Diva*, Klein Abensohn's placement of each proves to be one of the most critical decisions of the work. From the back of the frame to the front, positionality allows for transformation. The literal space, as



Diva, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 14 x 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.

it appears on the canvas, between *Ingenue* and *Diva* can be read as a spectrum wherein both identities are freed from the binary, becoming points on a grander scale. Though this space is fixed within the confines of the canvas, it symbolizes a continuum that's unyieldingly infinite in its personalities and points of intersection.

In this sense, *Olympia*, mediated through fruit, creates space for expansion. She is

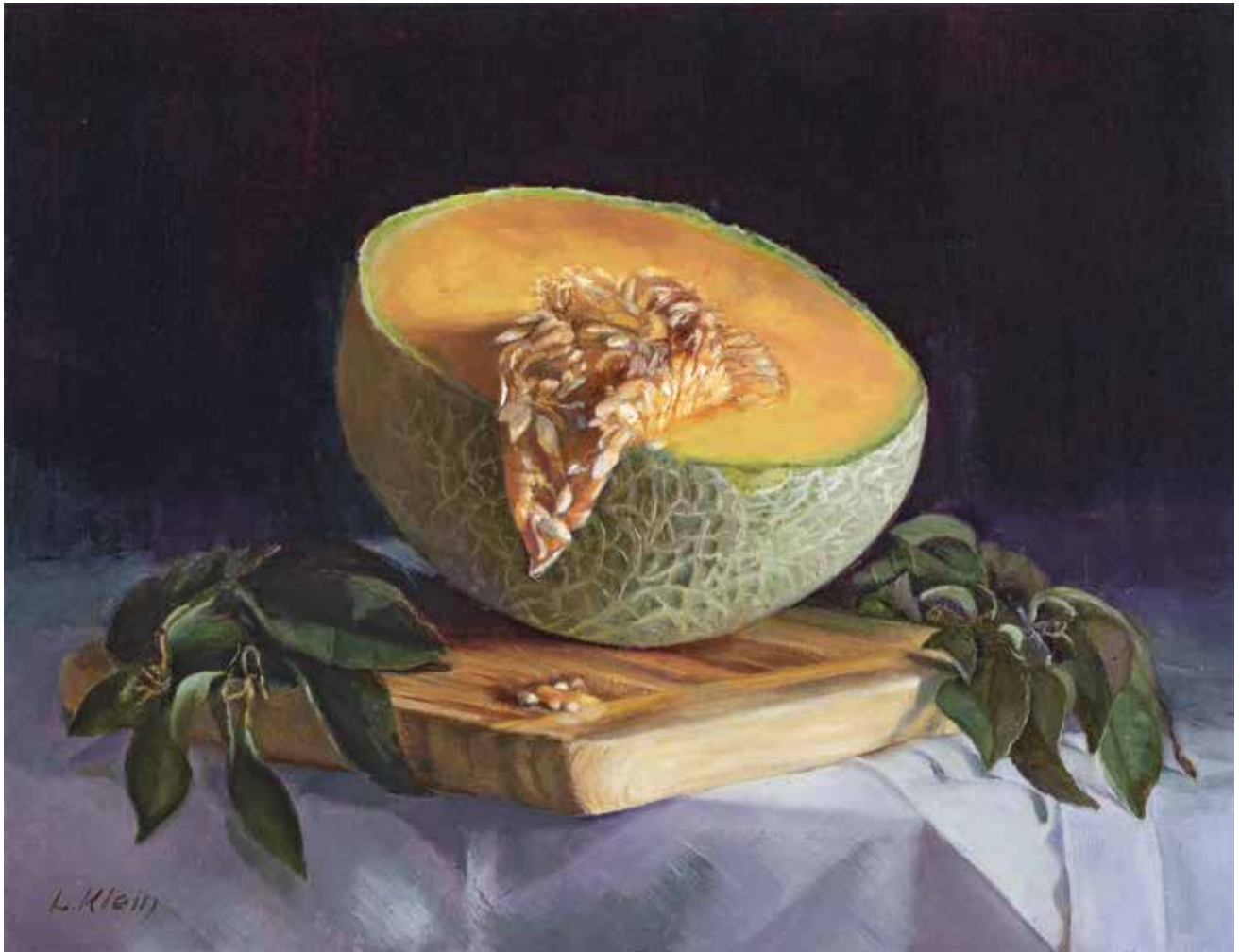
granted a second act, when removed from her original association. Now, simply a pear by another name, the sexual connotation of the painting shifts the conversation between viewer and subject into a space of greater interpretation. Perhaps the figure in the corner isn't a servant at all, but a lover looking on affectionately.



Belonging, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Luscious, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Spilling Seed, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Seduction, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Fertility, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.

PAINTING MOVING STILL LIFES

LILLIAN KLEIN ABENSOHN

When I told my late husband that I was considering retiring from teaching literature at American University, his immediate response was, “What will you do?” I, just as quickly, emphatically replied, “Paint!”

I loved teaching, even the grammar and essay-writing courses, and of course feminist and wonderful literature, but especially my literary approaches to reading the Hebrew Bible course, which introduced students to the sophistication and subtlety of non-theological interpretation. We’d read short narrative sections intensely, deeply, as means of understanding not the broad picture but the local, cultural relationships as relayed by the stories. My identity was so involved with my teaching I couldn’t imagine life without it—but when it seemed necessary, at least I could embrace a long-neglected ambition, to draw and paint.

I registered for class at a local JCC in Rockville and loved it immediately.

I learned the ABCs and happily continued, learning with my fingertips. I studied with various instructors in the area, at Glen Echo and privately, over the next decade or so, moving from one instructor to another until I started studying with Glen Kessler, first at Glen Echo, then in his own studios, and in his program at The Compass Atelier. Glen had been formally trained and was unplumbable: he could answer my questions and tease me just a bit further, without fail. Glen also invited renowned artists to conduct workshops at the Atelier, workshops which further expanded our artistic horizons.

At one such workshop, I was introduced to the work and techniques of Cindy Prociou, who works in the style of the Dutch Masters. She had us arrange whatever fruit/vegetables/whatever we had brought with us, counseling on composition in the process. She was gently

demanding, eye-opening, and I responded on the canvas, quickly realizing that this was my next step.

I was painting two ripe dark plums on a white surface in a black box. We did take photos but painted essentially from life. In trying to arrange two plums, I duly noted the stem and the pronounced, grooved longitudinal seam: I decided to use them in a suggestive composition. With a private chuckle, I arranged an enticing juxtaposition. The colors and texture of the fruit said everything else. Thus did my foray into many aspects of fruitful relationships begin.

Phallic stems, onion breasts, voluptuous mangoes, seductive pears, “bushy” arugula all stimulated my thoughts on reproduction, making me aware that sex is the single driving force of all life, even at one cell. It’s hormonal but also cultural for many life forms, including humans; sex is relational beyond the hormonal component. This realization led me to the next phase of my paintings: relationships. These vary from self-image to racial, insiders/outside; family; generational: all discerned in images of our everyday fresh living produce. Some foods embrace each other on the canvas as they do on the plate: think of eggplant, onion, garlic, two bananas.

Some persimmons are not accepted by other persimmons! The fruits and vegetables suggest their commentaries on human relationships.

On method: I use only Raymar fine linen panels, which provide a firm surface (preferably toned, but sometimes enthusiasm gets in the way). I sketch the composition in a neutral earth color, paint in the “black” background thinly, and begin with the darks of the subject matter. I generally work dark to light, back to front. Once the first value layer has covered the canvas, I put it aside to dry. The next layers are focused on the



Ripe and Ready, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 5 x 8 in. Courtesy of the artist.

arrangement, introducing cool and warm colors into the layers as well as in juxtaposition, always maintaining lucidity (and color!) in the lightest

values and transparency in the darkest. Through it all, I am looking deeply for nuances in values, edges, colors. It is a process of discovery.



Root Form, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Over the years, I have painted in a variety of styles and subjects from “loosely” and landscapes to a limited palette and subject. I discovered that I choose to paint much as I read the Bible: brief narratives of specific “individuals” and situations, plumbed deeply. I can discourse for half an hour on some four-verse Biblical narratives; similarly, I employ the ancient techniques and subject matter (still life) of the Dutch Masters to explore values and their expressions in contemporary human relationships.



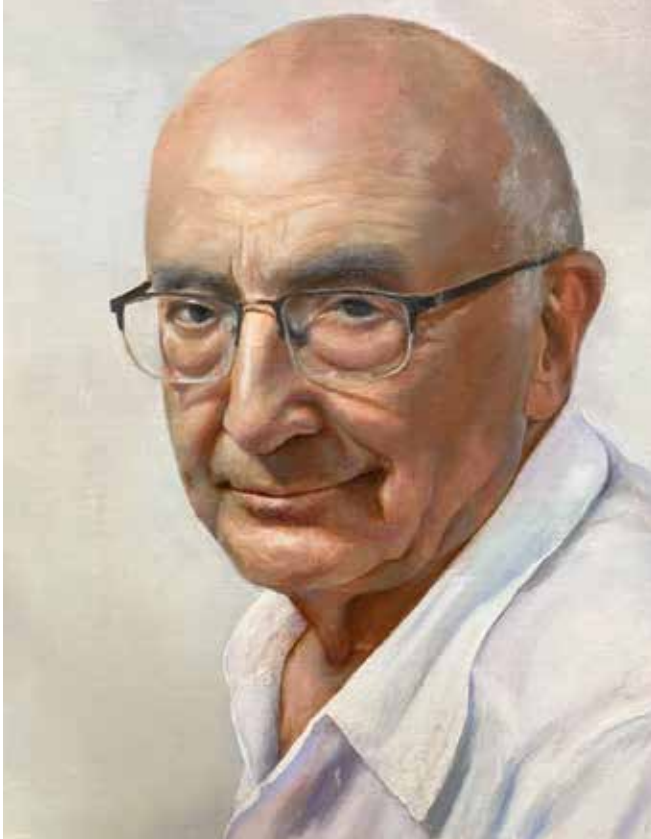
Susan, 2022. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 14 x 11 in.
Courtesy of Susan Tova.

ON PORTRAITS

LILLIAN KLEIN ABENSHOHN

About the time the COVID pandemic began, my son sent me a photo of my grandson—a photo which expressed so much intense feeling that I needed to capture it, to paint it. I had painted portraits in the past, but with this painting I wanted to bring into play much I had learned since. My work in still life paintings had imbued me with sensitivity to textures—to the materiality of various things—as well as to the subtlety of colors in shadows and reflections. I sought to incorporate this awareness, these techniques into capturing not only the likeness but also the character, the “life” of my subjects.

I spent the entire 2 years of COVID happily isolated and painting portraits every day, always with fascination. Each face posed new “problems” and new moments of revelation. The portraits were executed in layers, as many as needed to achieve the desired effect. Often, as I painted in the third layer or so, I would suddenly see a bit of paint turn to flesh before my eyes; or I would experience the face before me suddenly “talk” to me: come alive. Such moments are incredibly gratifying, as I feel I have revealed the inner character of the sitter. My joy is in the process, the painting; and I am grateful to have had such wonderful subjects.



Vladimir, 2021. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 14 x 11 in.
Courtesy of Vladimir Lumelsky.



Elizabeth, 2022. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 14 x 11 in.
Courtesy of Elizabeth Harless.



The Basket Weaver, 2023. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 20 x 16 in.
Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Pamela K. Brown

ON TITIAN TECHNIQUE PAINTING LILLIAN KLEIN ABENSOHN

The Basket Weaver and *Maria, Who Serves Coffee in Cuba* both evolved out of my interest in learning Titian's painting techniques. Titian was a master of the "materiality of things": flesh looks like flesh and fabric like fabric. Initially, a friend, Kathy Lindert, and I copied Titian's *Cupid and the Wheel of Time*, the original of which hangs here in the National Gallery of Art. We were attracted to this

painting because it is almost monochromatic; we felt we were in the midst of Titian's procedure. Intrigued by the process, I wanted to paint contemporary portraits using Titian's techniques; I also sought to explore the power of masses of cool and warm colors to convey milieu and intimacy. *The Basket Weaver* is based on a photo reference taken by my daughter Pamela Brown in Umbria, Italy just a few years ago. *Maria, Who Serves Coffee in Cuba* is based on a photo taken by Linda Lindert in Cuba in 2014.



Maria, Who Serves Coffee in Cuba, 2023.
Oil on Belgian linen panel, 20 x 16 in.
Courtesy of the artist.
Photo credit: Linda Lindert

CONTRASTS

LILLIAN KLEIN ABENSOHN

While painting various-textured fruits and vegetables, I happened to place some pears in a crystal bowl. I was immediately struck by the transparent rigidity of the crystal embracing the tender and colorful fruit, the light reflected and refracted, the colorful shadows.

I selected a different crystal bowl in cut, design and shape for each fruit, observing the interplay between hard and soft, clear and solid, colorful and transparent surfaces; distortion and clarity of the fruit as the crystal revealed its contents. The crystal surfaces seemed to emphasize the textures of the various fruits; the subtle refractions added a spark to the compositions.



Doubly Delicate, 2020. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 14 x 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Soft and Sweet, 2020. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



A Tisket A Tasket, 2020. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 14 x 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Additional Works by Lillian Klein Abensohn



Embracing, 2020. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Tender, 2019. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Glorious, 2019. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Embrace, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Sumptuous Flesh, 2019. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



For Play, 2021. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



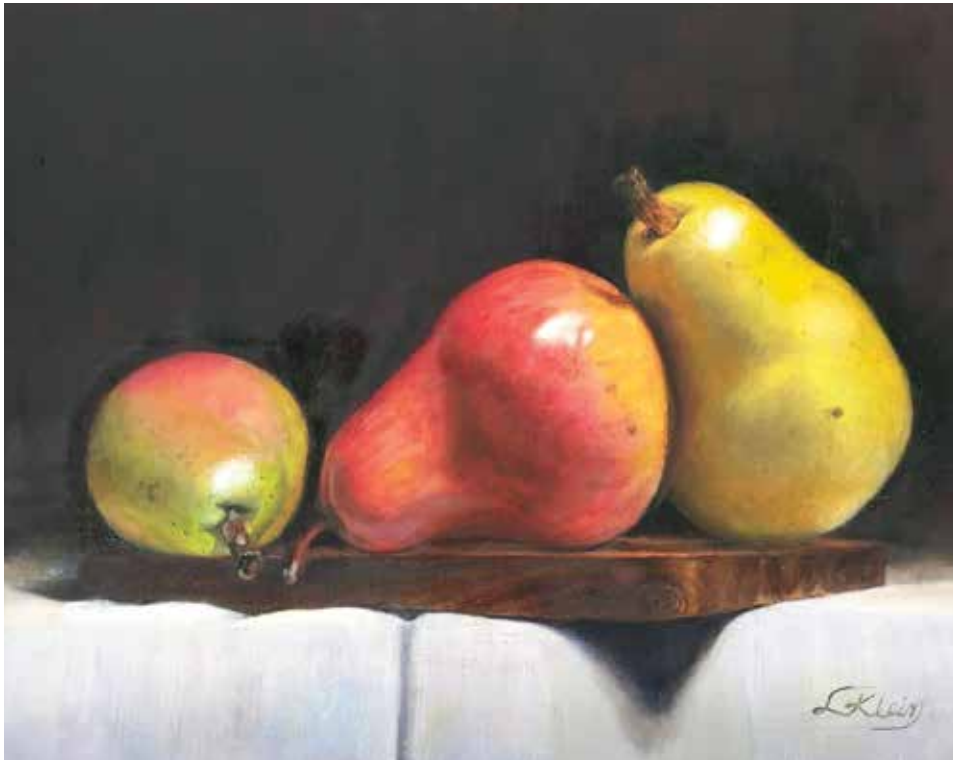
Acceptance, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Hanging Out, 2021. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Consent, 2021. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



A Family of Pears, 2020. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.



A Pair of Pears, Au Pair, 2021. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of the artist.

LILLIAN KLEIN ABENSOHN (Philadelphia, 1929), wife, parent, biblical scholar, author, and artist, received her PhD in literature from UCI. She taught literature at the University of Maryland Munich Campus from 1973–1992 while researching and publishing analyses of Biblical texts. Upon her return to the States, she taught primarily at American University. Upon retirement from teaching in 1998, she resumed a long-neglected passion, oil painting, studying with various local schools and artists, and graduating from The Compass Atelier’s Master Artist Program. She has shown widely both locally and abroad and enjoys a devoted following.



Lillian Klein Abensohn (self-portrait), 2018.
Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

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Cover: *Hanging Out* (detail), 2021. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in.
Back Cover: *Belonging*, 2021-22. Oil on Belgian linen panel, 11 x 14 in.



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