

Art and Infinity
Painting and Sculpture by Sasson Soffer

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When an artist creates something truly original that is infused with insight, beauty, and intelligence, it may catch us off-guard. This may be attributed to the kind of routine everyday world in which we live, where standardized images, logos, and synthetic affectations inundate us. Traditionally, the role of the artist functioned much like medieval alchemists who sought to heighten our sensory awareness of everyday life. Sasson Soffer was one of these artists. Over the years, his remarkable artistic legacy has been to create a highly imaginative, poetic world filled with elegance, mystery, and expressive delight.

Born in Iraq, Soffer was later forced to emigrate to Iran, where he worked in a pencil factory for two years. He then traveled to Israel and France before settling in New York in 1950 and developed his career as a painter, sculptor, and printmaker. He was a true visual artist who took the signs and colors from his conflicted cultural past and translated their essence in a new light. Known for several large-scale public works sited throughout New York, including the Battery Park Promenade, Lincoln Center, and New York University, Soffer was an accomplished painter, with many important exhibitions and collections. There are examples where the forms in his sculpture coincide with those in his paintings, as in the playful metaphysical work titled *Wait* (2001), where four triangular lines in blue, orange, red, and

green enfold upon one another. A similar sculpture in stainless steel manifests similar triangular shapes that interlock into one another. Other paintings in the exhibition, done mostly in the year 2000, employ a similar color field in Persian blue. These include four major canvases, titled *Oh*, *Wish*, *Ah*, and *Within*, in which calligraphic markings, possibly associated with Arabic script, represent imaginary constellation patterns. The sense of infinity in these paintings is related to the artist's past in which astronomy and cursive writing play a major role in the indigenous art of both Iraq and Iran. Earlier paintings from the 1990s, such as *Loneliness*, *Coming*, and *Afar*, are more explicit in their identifiable use of five-pointed stars, which are painted on a blue field over collaged fragments of canvas painted in primary and secondary hues.

Concurrently, Soffer worked on large sheets of paper, often creating linear portraits, such as *Peek-A-Boo*, in which small planetary shapes might also be read as eyes or facial features. Here the colors retain a pastel effect, primarily due to the pinkish aura that embeds these free-form linear constructions within the surface. Other portraits on paper can be found in *Who?*, *You and Me*, *Me and You*, and *Wise One*, which contain humorous and subtle off-hand expressions. These qualities are augmented through the mounting of the paper in decorative kitsch-style frames using gold leaf borders.

Another important work on paper, *Ursa Major*, is a blue painted field in which many small circles pull us into an illusionist space suggesting an infinitely elusive universe. *Ursa Major* might be seen as the companion piece to another work, *Us and Them*, in which a crowd of faces with

expressive features are all bound together. Here Soffer offers a provocative metaphor as to the meaning of infinity. His work suggests that the universe is not only something we observe from the distant perspective of astronomy or that we study from the point of view of physics and mathematics, but it is also a very human universe.

Sasson Soffer's work functions as a kind of poetry in visual terms. Through his art, we approach infinity as a phenomenon that is much closer to us than we might have expected. His universe is both intimate and beautiful, yet also boundless.