

Cora Cohen: Recent Paintings

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Cora Cohen's recent paintings first strike you with their remarkable richness and vivacity of form. This is definitely "hot" art rather than cool: it is multifarious in its motifs and polymorphous in its pigmentation, deploying the most varied range of media. The sheer, dazzling prolixity of a work like *Through the Oaks*, the smoldering glitter of its metallic glazes, the contrasting delicacy of the veils and pools of lambent color which flow over its surface overwhelm the critical faculties until you realize how much intelligence has gone into the construction of these works: how much knowledge of and engagement with the history of abstraction itself, from its beginnings through Pollock and Rothko and Frankenthaler to the present; how much decision making about where to let chance have its way, where to impose the sanctions of aesthetic will. Hers is an art, a sense of form which is the opposite of minimalist or reductive. Imperiously rejecting reductivism as a goal of abstraction, these canvases might be thought of as "maximalist" if the term could suggest the inclusiveness of vision and the expansiveness of formal reach the artist achieves in them.

Such daring, risk-taking construction demands the attention of an active viewer. After the initial impact, which is both powerful and pleasurable, I found myself "reading" the paintings, left to right, up and down, across the canvas, then front to back, in terms of depth, which varies wildly from thin veiling to the thickest and most substantial impasto. Perhaps "reading" is not quite the right term for my way of experiencing these canvases: the better analogy might be musical, following the motifs as they develop, coalesce, and then open out and fade away, unite in complex polyphony and fade out in single, hesitant notes. Yet the musical analogy can take you only so far. It is stopped dead in its tracks by the sheer physicality of the painted matter itself, the coloristic substance of the work. The demands of these paintings, ultimately, are visual and tactile, although not limited to this realm.

Process, an awareness of abstraction as form in the making rather than a final result, lies at the heart of Cohen's ambitious project. In *For the Listener*, a medium sized work (49 x 52"), combining iron oxide, graphite, polyurethane, and oil, the artist refuses to erase evidence of previous decisions on the canvas. The viewer is, in a sense, invited to participate in what the artist did, her struggles and decisions, which are all unmysteriously present. Temporality, the evidence of change, is layered into the work, most overtly in the traces of orange pigment beneath the strong dominating presence of the irregular white rectangle to the right. What makes the painting so interesting—tensely dialectical in its implications rather than simply flowing—is the ghostly iteration of the grid, the historic basis of modernist abstraction, which functions as a "return of the repressed" here most forcefully in the oblique dense, white rectangle itself. The thickness of this assertive element, its whiteness, like the white of the canvas itself, plays against the dynamic freedom of the skeins and pools of dripped material to the left and beneath. But of course, despite its aggressive domination of the right hand margin, this rectangular shape participates in the looseness of the dripped portions of the painting: indeed, at times, it merges with them.

Through the Oaks is a large-scale, expansive canvas (83 x 95"), in which spatial references play a compelling role. Here, the fact that the painter works with the canvas on the floor becomes apparent in the intense graphic dynamism of the black pigment dancing from lower left to right. Pouring and throwing are the activities called into play, with occasional touches of the hand bringing a more direct relation to the material into the viewer's consciousness. If the world of nature is evoked by the ethereal, cloud like veils of pigment, the blues, corn-colored patches and the rosy red, these are clearly images rooted in the contemporary world. Industrial materials, the stuff of pollution itself, insure that the work is in the world, not conjuring up some abstract utopia. The "cloud" to the left has a silver lining of aluminum oxide, at once ominous and beautiful, like the poisonous substances seeping into the modern urban landscape and becoming an inseparable part of it. If the title, "Through the Oaks" evokes nature, and the transparency of the pictorial structure itself, it is clearly the product of an urban sensibility: the black eloquently suggests the random effect of the oil spill rather than the more orderly pattern of birds in flight,

say. The brutal underside of modern, impure nature makes its presence actively apparent here: the black is the most resistant and domineering part of the painting, tar like in its consistency.

Must gender play a role in the work of all women artists, even the most abstract ones? Think of the work of three women abstract artists who have had shows recently: Joan Mitchell, Joan Snyder, and Cora Cohen. Their work is more different than it is alike it would seem, except in the negative sense: they all seem more part of their respective generations—male and female—than to share in some sort of essentialist feminine sensibility. Or, one might add, their work is only alike in what it is not: reductivist, “cool”, purified. Cohen, I might think of more as a feminist than as innately “feminine”, whatever we mean by that term. Male artists have the privilege of femininity; indeed, some of the most “feminine” art—lyrical, lightly brushed, evocative—has been created by men like Watteau in the 18th century or Paul Klee more recently. Cohen’s work, on the contrary, is expansive, challenging and feisty; engaged with impurity, with challenges of aesthetic choice and the robust surprises that dripped, flung pigment can produce on the canvas. Her worldliness is deliberate, her challenges to the tradition of abstraction—the grid, the drip, the platonic essence—overt. She rejects mysteriousness as a strategy but the work is mysterious anyway, in the way that a baroque ceiling is mysterious—distanced, transcendent but dynamic and intensely materially present to the senses.