

Cora Cohen: Paintings and Altered X rays (1983-1996)

Sidra Stitch (excerpt)

In 1992, Cohen began exploring a new register of markings and emotive spatial and media interplays in a series of altered X ray paintings. Not only do these exaggerate the relationships between positive and negative, presence and absence, physicality and immateriality, but they also call forth life-and-death issues in terms of the human body – more particularly, bodies in a diseased, declining condition.

Commenting on the X ray series, Cohen has written:

The X ray is more than the support. I consider these altered X rays. They are hung on nails a little apart from the wall, producing shadows. All of these people are now dead and many died of AIDS.

When the X rays came to my studio I put them up all over the windows. After months I began to respond with chemicals and color. The altered X rays are a metaphor for the physical actuality of the body in its immaterial aspect.

The X rays show torsos, bones, and internal organs either as isolated images, or in a grid layout with multiple views of the same body segment. Some are notably unhealthy – enlarged or withered, with cavities or lumps.

For her series, Cohen appropriates the translucent, roentgenograph series (mostly the standard size, 17 x 14 inches), and uses them as the surface planes of her paintings. She also takes the death-ridden corporeal imagery as a point of departure for creating compositions situated at the juncture between figuration and abstraction, between sustenance, destruction, and revival.

Of course, X rays skewed the basic notion of representation. The films set forth body images that were both defined and elusive, quiescent and compelling. The imagery was a photographic picture that recorded the form of a particular individual. And yet, concentration was not on the external appearance or personality traits, but on internal anatomical features – the body that is usually not visible, albeit the prime source of life. Here, then, was a new way of looking at the body and of re-conceptualizing representational imagery. According to Cohen: “Although X rays originally index an actual body, no one ever recognizes a person by an X ray. Every X ray is alien to any living body and any actual life force or character.”

After a difficult period of adjustment to the unfamiliar imagery, the disquieting associations, and the phantom character of the negative film sheets, Cohen proceeded to alter and treat the X rays. Approaching them as artifacts, she sought to call attention to their distinctive features even as she transformed them.

On the one hand, she effaced sections of the film – and the body imagery – by dissolving, shriveling, or burning the surface with chemicals. On the other hand, she enhanced the film's black-and-white appearance and homogeneously smooth, slick surface by applying globs, rivulets, and sprays of pigment and textural substances like metallic powders (copper, silver, aluminum), mica, enamel, paper, wax, and polyurethane.

In some paintings, the body image becomes a haunting shadow, barely visible beneath the overlays of paint and color. In others, the radiogram of a spinal column, chest figuration, or skull is quite conspicuous, hovering as an identifiable entity in space.

Throughout the series, the paint and other materials seem like attacking agents bent upon covering up or destroying the afflicted body and the figurative imagery in the X rays. Paradoxically, they also appear as forces of defiance, refusing to let the image wallow in a state of decomposition, refusing to let the person be envisioned alone, dispassionately as a ghostly vestige.

In these altered X rays, as in many of her other paintings, Cohen overlays evidence of the degradation of matter and energy with expressions of plentitude and vigor. She thus emphasizes the coexistence of such discordant forces, thereby refuting endgame theories about either absolute oneness and stability or total annihilation. And though she provokes awareness of opposites, hers is not an art shaped by dualistic thinking or the idea of an ultimate synthesis. It is rather an art built upon oscillation between different modes; an art permeated with the feeling of constant renewal and ongoing activity.