

Cora Cohen: One Art

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In the course of a recent studio visit I asked Cora Cohen—wondered aloud, really, more than asked—a question that would not arise in the presence of most painters' work. "I want to say that you are the master of something, but just what is it you are the master of?" Disputatious, not humble, she disavowed the mastery of anything. "But if I were to one day walk into this studio and try to make a painting," I who have never made one in my life, "my lack of mastery would manifest itself on a very different level than yours!" I argued. There are levels of achievement in the loss or avoidance or renunciation of mastery as much as in its attainment. I would go further and assert that, dialectically, such a loss or avoidance or renunciation may function, at least in the present, as a more valid sort of mastery than the more straightforward kind.

This was always the great undercurrent of modernism, yet one that modernism itself seemed always keen to disavow. "So many things seem filled with the intent," as Elizabeth Bishop wrote, "to be lost that their loss is no disaster." So, in painting, local color went missing and was not much missed, the clear outlines of things went blurry and yet vision did not falter, the human figure itself took a holiday and yet the work went on...all these hitherto unimaginable losses piled up and still the art of painting had capital to spare. This was the history that led to abstraction, and just when it might have seemed that abstraction as a principle was all that was left, some artists found that, to go on, abstraction had to be lost as well.

The abstract painter seeks to be master of nothing, but no one wants to live with that loss. Malevich reduced painting not only to the simplest, most-nearly-absent image, the square, but perhaps more significantly to the bluntest and most straightforward of techniques. Yet still we read in books of "the triumphant touches of Malevich's brush," of strokes that "gain mastery over technique into form." Pollock had to stare at his creation and ask, "Is this a painting?" but now it is more comforting to see what fine control he could exercise over his thrown and splattered paint. Cy Twombly attains a schoolboy's scrawl—what an adult can never achieve by imitation (the true guide to mastery), only a through strange sort of self-forgetting—but we would rather be reminded of his profound classical culture.

And we are not wrong. Yet for a true appreciation of what is crucial to art, our willful forgetting of how much had to be lost to create it may be the most damaging dispossession of all. So too with Cohen's paintings. My desire to praise her mastery was not inappropriate but her consciousness of how much potential mastery she'd had to renounce was still truer. One of her recent paintings is called *Things belong to her and she belongs to other things*. I assume it's a quotation from some literary source but I'm not particularly interested in knowing anything about the sentence's former context. Here, now, attached to this painting, it articulates how the painting has been made in part through a sense of control but also through a sense of being controlled. Probably the artist would shudder at the melodrama implicit in using a word that is no more than a synonym

for belonging to other things, namely, being possessed. One can see Cohen telling herself what to do as she urges the painting into being step by step, layer by layer, but equally one sees that she need not always listen. “Rules and cheating are conceptually of equal importance for the poet,” as Jack Spicer once noted, and the same is true for the painter. The problem with painting is that anything one sees on a bounded surface can be seen as an image; an image can be mastered but if what counts in the painting is something other than the image that it can carry then the painting’s image-aspect is always going to be as much an impediment to the reception of this other content as it is a vehicle for that. One can look at *Things belong to her...* and find surprising amounts of image-content in it—think of veins in the surface of the cut face of a stone or similar phenomena in nature that manifest the contingent interactions of heterogeneous materials and forces. And why not? The painting is that: acrylic, charcoal, copper, oil, oil pastel, pastel, and pigment on muslin. They don’t easily agree to disagree, I’ll bet, nor quickly find a stable combinatory condition. There’s something of the kid playing with a chemistry set about all this, trying to make something happen as long as it’s not an explosion. But the more time you spend with the painting, that is, the more chance you give it to be a space and not just a surface, the less significant any imagistic associations seem. Not only that, but more broadly, the more questionable seems the intentional status of the painting and its parts. One notices that there are marks that look random or accidental; other ones that look like they occurred over time, like chemical processes such as crystallization; others that appear quite deliberate; and still others that appear meant to efface some previous intention, that is, to cross it out. Perhaps most curious of all are certain crossings-out that don’t actually seem to be of anything in particular: ordinary effacements, one might call them—negations of nothing. Linear elements within the painting may temporarily seem to stand out as “figures” against a more atmospheric “field,” lending a certain sense of structure to an otherwise undifferentiated play of coloristic and textural sensations, but these too manifest instability, merging back into the mix for a time before re-emerging as part of a more deeply resonant virtual space.

What may cause some anxiety in the viewer—and undoubtedly, at times, in the painter as well, although she has clearly learned to live with this—is that the painting is not unstructured, yet is possessed of a structure that is somehow ungraspable, indefinable, in part because it emerges over time, not in the instantaneousness of the image. Going back to the question with which I started—what exactly is it that the mastery embodied in Cohen’s paintings is the mastery of?—the answer may be here: It is a mastery over anxiety, specifically over the anxiety occasioned by the loss of overt and stable structure that was necessary to attain a deeper, more elusive yet resilient one. “The art of losing isn’t hard to master,” wrote Bishop—but then she was a master, as well, of irony. She meant it can be the most difficult art of all.

Text accompanying exhibition at Jason McCoy, September 2004