

Essay to accompany the solo exhibition *Oblique Forms: Spray Paint Paintings, Photographs, The Hybrid Indexical Adventure Series* at Abaton Garage, September 9 – October 31, 2007

Keeping it Real

Stephen Maine

A painting is a fiction—a conglomeration of materials, thought, and time. It is also an assertion about what really matters to the painter, about what in his or her imagination of the wider world is worth attending to in optical and material terms. And it is an attempt to restate on a human scale the daunting complexity of existence without diminishing any sense of its exhilarating, sloppy contradictoriness.

A big problem for abstract painting is how, absent of narrative or iconological referent, to ground the work in the present, and not float above or away from the viewer's experience of the here-and-now. Because it does not depict elements of the visual world (other than itself), abstract painting is sometimes castigated for being remote from it, disconnected from the phenomena we routinely navigate.

But just as there are archetypal forms in nature that give meaning to representation, there exists an archetypal formlessness as well. Such entropy expresses itself everywhere in the interstices, among the rigid structures of the urban matrix. Cora Cohen is determinedly alert to the unexpected beauty of this kind of breakdown, these system malfunctions, whether in the accumulated debris of a disused subway platform, the neon streaks of a polluted sunset, or the ashes of life in New York City drifting on the Hudson River.

A photograph is a fiction, too. Cohen's photographs of the streets of Manhattan and Berlin engage the textures and tonalities of neglected spaces within the metropolis. They provide the evidence that, though the paintings suggest spaces of oceanic vastness, they are anchored to the world of appearances. The photos—snapshots by an artist who seeks out the unfiltered—are field notes, specimens, raw data. They often show features of the public domain refit to private ends, which is precisely analogous to Cohen's studio procedure.

The Spray Paint Paintings (acrylic, oil, spray paint on linen), in particular, are tethered to the quotidian by the use of spray enamel in colors such as fluorescent orange and aluminum, evoking not graffiti so much as the utilitarian marking of construction workers and maintenance crews. The graffitiist's spray paint awaits the inevitable solvent or whitewash that will erase it; the maintenance worker's spray paint is shorthand for where and how deep to dig.

Cohen is in closer contact with her pictorial forebears in the Hybrid Indexical Adventure Series (acrylic, pencil, colored pencil on synthetic paper). Ryder, Hartley, and Dove were keyed to the world as much by their robust grasp of materials and structure as by iconography. Describing her affinity for the early American Modernists, the artist cites that shift in the viewer's awareness "from the first thing you see, to what the whole thing becomes." In their unremitting materiality, Cohen's surfaces ensure that such a process of visual decoding unfolds perpetually. Through a medium hardwired to extract form from

inchoate materials, she channels dissolution, unraveling, and decay, in the process mirroring this lovely, concrete, curdled world.