

Far Less Tangible States of Being, 2006

by *Lauri Bortz*



Towards Train Station, Köln, 1997,
4 x 6" photograph, Edition of 3

Cora Cohen is among America's foremost abstract gestural painters. For over forty years she has been exploring an improvisational approach to art, creating rigorous compositions that unravel the DNA of painting. With an arsenal of materials, including powdered pigment, oil pastel, acrylic paint and graphite, Cohen pushes her medium to distress and breakdown, producing works of unsettling opticality.

While abstract painting is what this artist is best known for, she has also been practicing photography over the past decade, creating subtly haunting images of her own urban environment. Entropy is the main subject of Cohen's photographs, which capture quiet moments of decay, such as melting snow, rotting garbage on the city streets, crumbling buildings, and, on a more personal note, her own hand frozen in time, spilling her mother's ashes into the Hudson River.

New York City is where Cohen was born and raised, and where she resides today. She has documented her hometown in intimate detail. Though Cohen spent significant amounts of time in rural Vermont and suburban North Carolina, it wasn't until the late nineties that she found a home away from home in Cologne, Germany. Cohen's photographs of Cologne are often less anonymous than her images of New York. As a Jew in Germany, she can't help but be fascinated by the dozens of monuments to World War II dead that are ignored, even while being trampled over, by the general public on a daily basis.

Much like her photographs, Cohen's drawings map her existence in various places, following their respective topographies, be it the ring configuration of an old Roman city like Cologne, or the grid-like structure of the more modern metropolis, New York.

Stripped of the greater range of materials used in her paintings, Cohen, with her drawings, responds to life's stimuli in a far simpler way: the hand, the line, the paper are all that's needed.

Another relatively newfound form of expression for Cohen is her "altered X-ray series", X-ray and MRI films of friends and colleagues that she's been painting and enhancing chemically since the early nineties. Materiality itself is held under intense scrutiny while the landscape of the body is in Cohen's radar. Though her altered X-rays reflect on a more obvious sort of interiority than her paintings and drawings, they do so in a no less romantic way. The X-rays of persons now passed serve as poignant elegies. Body parts weakened by disease are doctored in somber tones that lament the loss of vivacity. Meanwhile Cohen's healthier subjects are powdered and primped in fauvist tones, boldly ready to face another day.

The altered X-rays bridge whatever gap there may be between Cohen's photography and her painting. The images were given to, rather than taken by, the artist, and though they afford the viewer an unusually close proximity, this adds little to the subject's recognizability (unless the viewer is in possession of an MD). As Cohen alerts us with her close-up photography, physical nearness doesn't always help decode life's mysteries. Cohen's altered X-rays, like her paintings and drawings, are deeply personal records that serve as maps, not of cities but of far less tangible states of being.