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Cora Cohen: Come in a Little Closer at Michael Steinberg
by Jennifer Riley



Curtain, 2007, 75 x 103" (190.5 x 261.62 cm) acrylic and Flashe on linen

Overheard at Cora Cohen's current exhibition was a viewer who wondered aloud "...What would it be like to work today within an idiom as established as abstract expressionism?"

This good question was delivered with something that could be understood as suppressed wonder. I imagined the next thought of the viewer to go something like this: "As if... today... – in this town of towns -how dare, how... could an artist?"

In this show Cohen makes evident tribute to the shaping influences of artists such as Kline, de Kooning, Pollock, and Wols and yet, with seemingly equal force of curiosity explores her fascination with the humble, yet visibly rich, impossibly chaotic, anti-heroic marks and stains of life from street culture: the entropy of urbanism.

Rather than following a single stylistic thread, the ten paintings on view tend to follow thematic paths; each distinguished by its own surprising internal logic. Paintings tend to be paired or grouped according to optical relationships and related painterly syntax. The binding concept is their ability to reflect singular investigations that speak a common language. 'Cohenese' entails many painterly elements, techniques and studio actions such as the recurrent use of irregular rectangles, blunt fragmented strokes, gestural smears, cobbled blobs, sinuous lines, thick pours, intense scraping and delicate veils of paint.

Cohen employs tape, paper, wood veneers, studio debris and spray paint with the same skill and proficiency as with the more conventional materials of oil, acrylic, linen, canvas, ink, enamel and pigments.

Curtain, (2008), the largest painting in the show, occupies most of a wall near a north-facing window where its colors seem to literally fill with air. It features ghostly bone-like forms awkwardly nestling amid multiple layers of muted brownish-lavender wash and creamy whites with hints of mineral green. It is purely abstract in image and effect alike. Forms become clouds, then spills, then bones, then traces of footprints in mud, then strokes, then spills, then clouds again! What may initially recall the dirty clay and rubble floor exposed during infrastructure upgrades can just as eloquently evoke oxidized, faded frescoes of a Cimabue at Assisi. Just as the systematic opening and then closing of a street's surface seems to have a physical counterpart in the activity of Cohen's studio, colors from both inside and outside the history of painting are fluently put into play.

True, the work betrays deep affinities with Abstract Expressionism in all its international guises, including Automatism, Art Informel, Tachisme. But Cohen is not merely working within an established idiom. She widens the net of possibilities. In a decades-long engagement in painting that has flowed in and out of the stream of abstraction's brief history, this broadly conceived exhibition reflects an expansive formal reach as well as a playful, dramatic, spirit. Cohen's painting is a seriously sensual and imaginative response to life.