

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS AND CULTURE

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Cora Cohen: Michael Steinberg Gallery
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The individuation of singular existence is not a punctual fact, but a linea generationi substantiae that varies in every direction according to a continual gradation of growth and remission, of appropriation and impropriation. The image of a line is not gratuitous.

—Giorgio Agamben “The Coming Community”



The legacies of de Kooning, Franz Kline, and later, the reputations of Brice Marden and Louise Fishman, to acknowledge a few, were established at a time when style was territorial. An artist using stylistic elements associated with another artist would be considered derivative—a criterion by which one could easily discount a work by saying it had already been done. Yet, when so-called second-generation painters turned out not to be “B” painters after all, a rethinking was in order. Despite the challenge to originality put forward in the ’80s by artists such as Sherrie Levine, we have not yet been entirely liberated from the primacy of originality in the realm of appearances, nor has the demand to create similarly styled paintings entirely disappeared.

Cora Cohen's current exhibition in Chelsea, *Come in a Little Closer*, draws circles around this point. Cohen starts with the assumption that painting is a language and challenges us to see it otherwise. In her sparsely hung exhibition, she allows us the room to muse; it is helpful insofar as she tends toward difference rather than repetition. Some of her paintings recall the scale of heroic abstractions. They are hung together with and given the same breadth of space as works that you could carry out of the gallery under your arm. Each of her variously dimensioned pieces struggles to confirm the relationship between gesture and scale—what that evokes in terms of the history of abstraction and what it allows for in terms of a spatial construction. The colors range from subtly shifting clay tones to bright fluorescents; the middle ground between the two appears whimsically irreverent. Transparent washes, often of white or warm off-white, offset areas of serious paint buildup; these extreme contrasts render the material vocal as the paintings begin to unfold.

In *The Same Blank Place* (2008), the largest painting in the front room, broad swipes of green–gray hover to the left on three sides of a central opening. A long red-orange brushstroke meanders through them, emerging on the right side as it moves over and under blocks of white that form a nearly solid ground. Its bright and sporadic appearance serves as a rallying point for Cohen's palette of subdued grays and earth tones. What's compelling here is the soft and sensuous void where one lands by default after circumnavigating all the activity on the painting's edge. It's a comfort zone that moves beyond—beyond the rhythm of daily rituals or hammering needs, a metaphysical nest in a sanctuary for endangered thought. Yet, Cohen's work feels tenuous, as if each gesture were breaking a physical barrier into the unknown, and therefore, moves forward with caution.

On the far wall, two smallish works, *Turquoise Suppression* (2008) and *Brown Object* (2008) hang above one another, one dark on a light ground, the other the inverse. Amidst earth tones that range from a deep caput mortem to mauve and pink, the eyes of 'being' emerge from the forms of painterly practice. In most cases these images are transitory and dissolve again after a moment, not allowing the painting to coalesce into a specific 'thing', but rather keeping the perceptual experience open to exchange.

Within the image of *Turquoise Suppression* an overview of a turtle coincides with the forehead and eyes of a cartoon-like child. Everything about the remaining marks seems to be in keeping with the unencumbered gestures a child might make. In the lower range of the canvas there is a section of crisscrosses, marks in brown over pink that serve as the compositional center of gravity as well as its emotional center. Cohen defies the classical organization of foreground and background; the pink above comes forward to construct the depth for what lies below it. In a structure reminiscent of a canopy or portico in a fresco from the middle ages, we slip into a deeper space and reflect back on what remains on the surface. There is a solidity in her pictorial construction that belies the immediate apprehension of the gestures as childlike, and reminds us that Cohen's ability to render her vision entirely in the formal terms of a painterly vocabulary has been developed over a considerable period of time.

Brown Object whose crackled surface plays the beast to the beauty of *Turquoise Suppression* puts forward a structured chaos of strokes that educe the elongated torque of a dancer in motion; moving out every which way from the center, they also mimic the spastic gesticulating of a hoary beast. As they verge on ‘becoming’, teetering between the autonomy of the singular mark and the resonance of the whole, these marks demand a particular receptor in the mind of the perceiver in order to recognize form. Within this indeterminacy, Cohen offers us the authority in the simplicity of her fluid gestures.

In the gallery’s alcove, the wide-open *Lucio* (2008) begins with a generous, empty space in a shape that resembles a human head. With a minimal intervention of paint on linen, Cohen creates a void that is both illusionary and demarcated by the textured expanse of a surface left untouched. Initially, the large open center is a fast read in this context, since most of Cohen’s paintings unfold towards more complex realizations. Instead, this painting presents itself as a blank slate that the right mind can turn into a trip. In Cohen’s world, interpretation moves on a sliding scale between the creator and her audience, with the balance borne differently in each case—sometimes more is given, sometimes more is asked. *Lucio* asks for as much as you can muster, if you want to read the subtext.

As abstraction moves into its second century, one can begin to distinguish the vocabulary with which it speaks. Tracing any given formal device back to its point of origin allows us to verify an artist’s position and clarify what is being said. *Lucio* shows gesture put at the service of spatial construction and liberated from serving solely as a vehicle for the emotions, as it did in the groundbreaking Abstract Expressionist works.

Nomad (2008), in the same small alcove, is similarly fast, yet feels off the cuff: shapes cut from faux wood veneer intersect with a few streaks of paint sprayed and brushed with gestural abandon. It’s campy, green, and clever, childlike, and sophisticated all at the same time. It packs a punch with its high-contrast forms, but for all its graphic splendor, I find it to be an exception. With the conflation present in her other paintings, Cohen creates a condition that oscillates, moves, and refuses to be pinned down, and so her work continues to evoke thoughts, images, and associations; *Nomad* settles down too quickly. In asking for too little, it seems at odds with the terms with which Cohen’s best work asks to be read. The ability to remain unfixed, suspended in potentiality, is a challenge both individual paintings and her diverse body of work as a whole rises to again and again.

There are several paintings here that initially bring to mind Brice Marden’s later work, yet individuate as they open up. *White* (2008), with its white brushstrokes painted directly over similarly shaped, broad dark strokes winding forward and back on an open linen ground, is a dynamic labyrinth that hugs the plane as it plunges back in space. There is testiness to the gestures here, as if going over and over the same path might drive the point home—and knowingly. The white-over-brown labyrinth sitting on the surface is confronted by the accidental but essential drips and drops from the process of painting, so it is impossible to read “flatness” into the work as the painting unfolds. Beneath the labyrinth, as the whitish stains of a slightly “off-linen” color evoke the light and shadow of the world as we know it, dimensions begin to intersect; it could be the map of a

random day in New York City or the tangled path of thought from a brain scan of the future.

Also in the back of the gallery, opposite the factory windows facing West 26th Street, *Counter Discourse* (2006) is all caught up in a web of its own making. Veils of white—both transparent and opaque—skirt the edges of the composition and send the eye along a trajectory that punches out the volume of an implied void like a boxer trapped in a nylon stocking; all this grit happens on about half of the surface area. The rest, white, offers an area of respite. An older piece, it is much smaller and denser than the other work, and if it seems tight in this grouping, it also gives a clear sense of Cohen's recent evolution.

On an adjacent wall, the largest painting in the show, and perhaps the subtlest and most mysterious, *Curtain* (2008) has been sited to receive the gallery's natural light. The piece is open-ended, transparent, infinitely permeable, and for the most part soft, and yet the composition's main form, merely alluded to, seems to be buried. Veils of white, off-white, and white mixed with reddish earth tones cascade over the linen ground from all directions, allowing a penetrable volume to configure itself within falling sheaths and brushed pathways of color. As the worked-over gestures in the center emerge and vanish again into a series of washes, their tendency towards the articulation of form places the amorphous nature of the painting in check. As in many of Cohen's works, her brushstrokes here hover between the task of delineating form and the state of becoming form. They mimic the fluctuation between being and reflecting on being and so embody the Cartesian dualism that determines our consciousness. One can go a long way with this thought, and the rich texture of Cohen's accidental painterly approach will provide the correspondences needed to keep the journey alive.

At first *Curtain* registers as a monotone, then a layer of spring green appears in the lower left corner to offset the browns and white and enable the piece to play off the spatial potential of color as well as its complex form; with this shift to color, Cohen defines the edge as a threshold experience. As the painting continues to unfold, we see that Cohen has created an armature for her Weltanschauung, a world that is highly refined, carefully considered, and joyfully spontaneous.

One can wonder at Cohen's ability to hold such contradictions together on the surface of her paintings, let alone possess the authenticity to enact them, but this is what we ask of art—to show how the impossible is possible. In painting, this can come down to a simple thing—to create depth of space on a flat surface—obvious and not, but essential, for the resonance of the artist's voice lingers inside the void.