

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Cora Cohen - Divine Madness

by Willie Kohler

Posted: 03/01/2013 12:09 pm

Cora Cohen's paintings, now on view at Guided By Invoices, invite the viewer to pause, to slow down and to step out of the demands of our time-bound reality. She does this with work that is the visual equivalent of a large-scale whisper or in musical terms, they are analogous to ambient music in its starker and darker forms.

The resonant quiet of her work allows the viewer to contemplate and appreciate the various moves and counter moves that the artist chooses. First, she usually chooses to stretch her paintings on shallow frames that reduce their presence as an object on the wall. Second, in many of the paintings she builds a dense, and very physical textured ground reasserting their material presence. Third, over this she may brush washes of pigment and graphite dispersed in water, so thin and diffuse that they barely register any physical paint depth, if at all. Out of this non-presence an illusory and allusive pictorial depth emerges. That is not to say that the artist is purposefully painting an image, because she is most emphatically not; yet, with the barest means a world not quite of this world is suggested.



Cora Cohen, *Drawing4 Grey*, 2013
60 x 65" (152.4 x 165.1cm), acrylic mediums, Flashe, gesso, graphite, pigment on linen

In "Drawing4 Grey", the painting can be read as veils, diaphanous curtains or as the

echo of a forest. Towards the bottom left of the canvas, Cohen has left a very small square of the white ground showing, which reads clearly as a door or an opening out of the forest. Though this was an accidental remainder, a result of painterly process, and not an intended illusion, she did leave it. The entire nature of the piece invites a meditation on the eternal and what lies beyond this plane of existence. The veil-like quality invites thoughts, at least for this viewer, in a metaphysical vein.

In another twist it is difficult to look at this work and not think about The New York School. But this is a bit of sleight of mind, as the work is absent of the heroic gesture typical of at least many of the practitioners in this tradition. This is not the grand opera typical of abstract expressionism. Cohen has a way of undermining the directness of her own mark, burying it, blurring it and hiding it. The paintings are diffuse, elusive and allusive, raising more questions than they answer. It is easy to imagine many hours spent in the studio looking, thinking and waiting; restraint as a working principle rather than haste or aggression.

The works in this show fall into three color groupings. One is a poisonous or muted acidic range of green, yellow and orange. Others could be categorized as rust or red earth. Still others are almost entirely in black and grey tones. The range of color that Cohen coaxes from these limited palettes is profound, and a testament to her mastery, in particular the paintings that are based primarily on a range of black, white and gray; they never read as monochrome. Taking color that looks as if it could be soot from a New York window she expands it into a sublime otherness.

Cohen speaks of the desire to counter that aspect of our world which is fragmented into endless tasks, distracted, time-bound and overloaded. Sitting and looking at her work and in conversations with her, I am reminded of the alchemists as seen in Dutch genre paintings; passing days with their pots of materials, transforming stuff with little value into something transcendent and rich. This is divine madness and ultimately what draws me to and keeps me looking at these paintings.

Cora Cohen- The Responsibility of Forms - recent paintings is on view at Guided By Invoices, 558 W 21st St. NY, NY through March 16th, 2013. All images courtesy of Cora Cohen and Guided By Invoices. Photography by Stan Narten.