

Moti Cohen, About Being Human Paintings and Drawings 1990-2000/ Peter Frank

Moti Cohen's art is like the desert: deceptively simple and pretty or, conversely, deceptively coarse and barren. And, like the desert, from one angle – optical or emotive – the same artwork, the same picture can assume these contrary conditions of deception. What is unmistakable about Cohen's work is its rawness, its plain spokenness – a lack of surface complication that allows one to sense a resonance, a profundity of meaning, while still relishing its few but intense visual stimuli.

Cohen works at some remove from the Israeli (not to mention international) artistic mainstream, but he is no naïf. A graduate of the Tel Aviv Academy of Art, his gestural way with paint harks back to the early Israeli abstractionists, recapitulating their vigorous interpretation of European *art informel* and their sympathetic grasp of American abstract expressionism. Cohen's overall approach is quieter and more classical, however, and at the same time, more dependent on color (whether luminously present or conspicuously absent). His work is closer, in fact, to his own generation of Israeli artists, artists who have worked in Tel Aviv, Paris, New York, and other world art centers, and whose work straddles narrative figuration, pure non-objectivity, and the notational methods of conceptual art.

Still, Cohen stands quite clearly apart from the predominant discourse(s) of contemporary art, Israeli or otherwise, content to produce images that can seem embarrassingly passionate and thus anachronistic in the face of the distanced position most artists assume today. (Their intensity may well derive from Cohen's vocation as a rehabilitation counselor for those handicapped by work or car accidents, but he is certainly not documenting the pathos of his clients). The intense humanism and gravitas embodied in even the least representational of Cohen's paintings and most elegant of his drawings was last prevalent just after World War II, as a visual manifestation of the existentialist dilemma that gripped the western world in the wake of the conflagration, especially the Holocaust. An inward – turned seeming pessimism – very different from the fervent, extroverted angst of the 1980s neo-expressionism – characterized this work, and we see it re-embodied in Cohen's wrought, isolated and self-contained figures, restrained still lifes, and landscapes so sparse they seem like still lifes.

Or are these “landscapes” pure abstractions? Or are those “abstractions” actually landscapes? Or interiors? The economy of Cohen’s formal means allows him a fluidity of pictorial meaning. It’s not ambiguity Cohen strives for, such less achieves; we can easily determine that the vertical figure there is a person, the bulbous silhouette in the middle of the canvas is a pitcher, one horizontal line is in fact a table while the other determines where the earth meets the sky. No, in Cohen’s pictures the mystery lies in where the thing or person is, or what the place is, or what the person or place is doing – a mystery not so much of narrative as of cognition, even of sensation. What does the air feel like around the subject? It seems so often filled with anxiety and yet filled with contentment, filled with longing and yet filled with a rootedness in the here and now. Nothing is in motion (except the ever-present hand of the artist), and yet nothing is fixed. Nothing is tentative, and yet everything is tenuous.

In this respect Cohen also gains some distance from other otherwise obvious artistic sources: the work of early 20th century expressionists. On one level you can comprehend his art as synthesizing the arc of European expressionism, from Munch to Klee, stopping just short of Orthodox surrealism (although we might suspect that, at least on occasion, Cohen relies on a bit of surrealist automatism, a touch of accident occurring on the paper or canvas, to spark his imagination). On another level, of course, his vision is that of an Israeli Jew, struggling to resolve a heritage of nomadism, forced and otherwise, by rooting himself in a region that resists such roots. Israelis never allow the underlying Sisyphean ironies – physical and political – of their existence and their history to betray their can-do ethos, but they can never ignore them. And they inflect Cohen’s art, subtly but powerfully.

Note, however, that Cohen’s art is not about Israel or being Israeli, any more than, say, the work of Jean Dubuffet – an obvious, if not all together direct, predecessor – is about being French. It is about being human; otherwise, it simply is. Every other, more particular characteristic simply inheres to the sensibility it embodies. You can play the game of “what if Cohen were American? What if he were Japanese? What if he lived in Stockholm? Or Buenos Aires?” But not that many characteristics modify all that much in the process. True to its existential heritage, Cohen’s art finds – not by striving for, but neither by glibly assuming – a universality of spirit. In that universality of spirit are the beginnings of a universality of

meaning: even Arctic peoples know flowers in a pot when they see them, and few on this Earth would view a rendition of a standing figure bending over a bedridden one without sensing a tinge of tragedy. But that's where the universality of meaning ends, not begins. Beyond that point, sense meets sensibility, and the slippage of meaning overwhelms meaning itself.

The ellipticality of Moti Cohen's art steers it emphatically away from the prosaic. While the attractive colors and sensuous handling of materials (resulting frequently and ironically enough from Cohen's use of discarded and surplus stuff such as wrapping paper and calendar pages) invites us in, what *allows* us in is his refusal to tell stories or even set stages. The beginnings of stages are there, and many of these images would seem to begin with "once upon a time"; but that's as far as Cohen will go. The rest is up to you. If the voice clamoring in the desert is Cohen's, its cry reaches your ears as a wordless song.