

TWO COATS OF PAINT

Award-winning blogazine, primarily about painting

Cora Cohen's Thoroughbred Abstraction

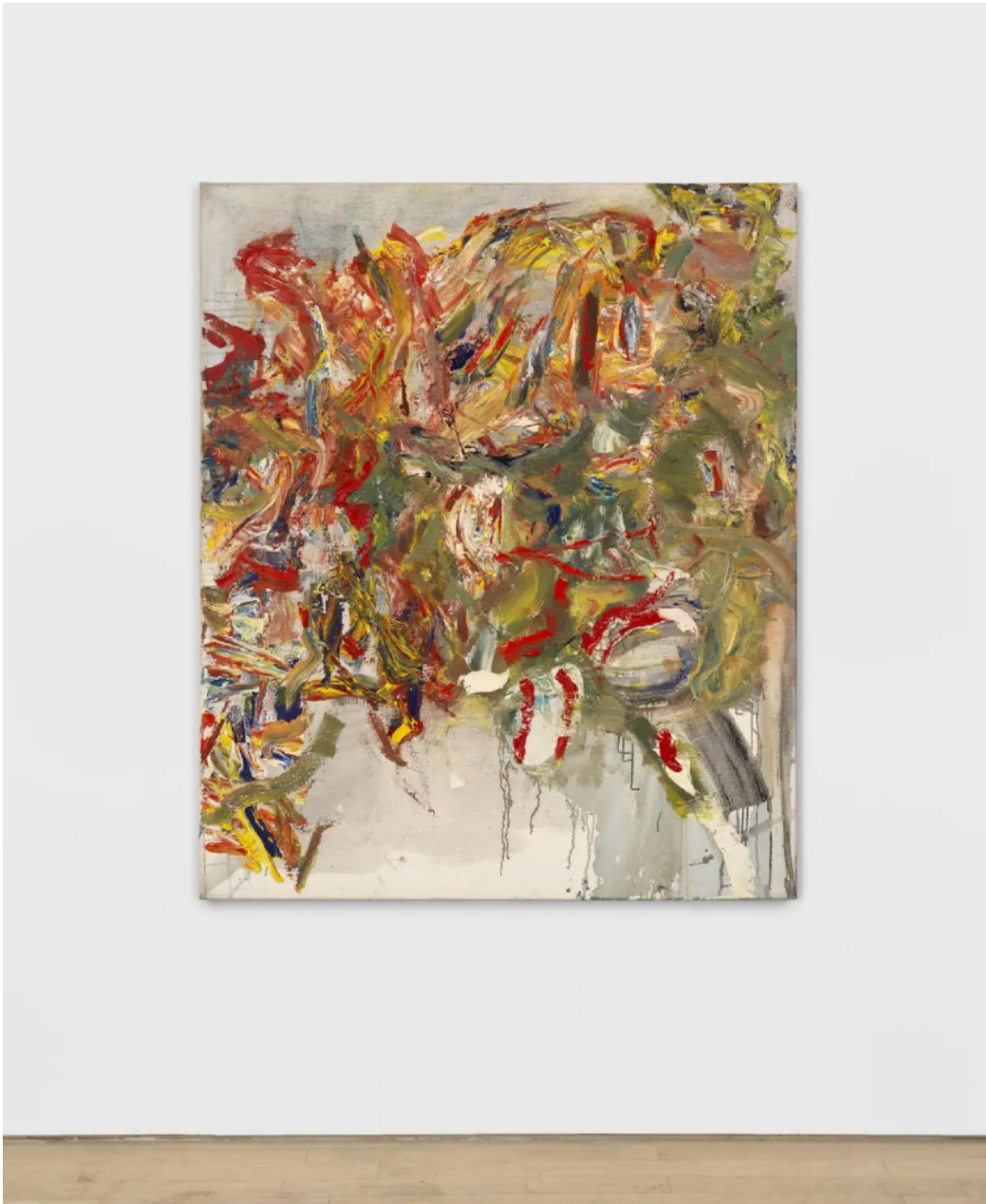


Cora Cohen, *On Transience*, 1987, flashe and oil on linen, 66 x 70 inches

Contributed by Michael Brennan / The virtues of some art emerge only when it steps out of its own time. **Hilma af Klint's 2018 retrospective** at the Guggenheim is an example. Another is **Lou Reed's album *Berlin***, released and widely panned in 1973, only to be performed and filmed by Julian Schnabel 35 years later, celebrated by an unforeseen audience, and subsequently considered a canonical masterpiece. **Cora Cohen** did exhibit her work in the 1980s and has been showing regularly, at a high level, since the 1970s. She's a well-known, well-regarded painter. But the eight large abstract paintings from the 1980s, now on display at Morgan Presents, haven't been shown together until now. They are a revelation that couldn't have fully registered in its own time.



Cora Cohen, *Replace the Beloved*, 1985–87, flashe and oil on linen, 78 x 78 inches



Cora Cohen, *Outside St. Severin*, 1987, flashe and oil on linen, 60 x 50 inches

Organic abstraction like Cohen's, with its Modernist features, would have been too far outside of the discourse to get traction. Few paid attention to the intersection between art and nature – a hallmark of Cohen's work – in the media-fixated 1980s, when the gap between Postmodernism and Modernism was widening. The arch Postmodern emphasis was on appropriation, explicit critical references, and conceptual models of abstraction. AbEx was exhausted, and the New

York School was being reframed as a provincial style. Although AbEx stayed alive in quotable form in the 1980s, as in Gerhard Richter's dragged abstractions, it was no longer a promising model for young painters. Museum retrospectives of Willem De Kooning and Clyfford Still were ill-timed and disparaged. The dismissiveness carried over to other strains of abstraction. It would have been very hard for Cohen's paintings, rooted in the late style of Claude Monet, to win serious critical discussion. On top of that, of course, Cohen was a female painter when women were struggling for recognition in art. The now-venerated Joan Mitchell, whom Cohen knew, has herself only recently escaped the implicitly subordinating "second generation" designation.



Claude Monet, Water Lily Pond, 1917



Joan Mitchell, Hemlock, 1956



Arshile Gorky, One Year The Milkweed, 1944

Cohen's work has a noble lineage. It draws on the lyrical abstraction of the 1960s and 1970s, but it is also linked to Pollock's "I am Nature" wing of Abstract Expressionism. Yet Cohen's strain of organic abstraction, with its dense and thorny gestural tangle, has more in common with the work of Surrealist painter Arshile Gorky, a proto-AbExer, and that of Cohen's immediate abstractionist contemporaries, including Louise Fishman and Bill Jensen. Mitchell's work too has an obvious influence on and kinship to Cohen's painting. *Outside St. Severin* refers to a village in France that Cohen visited with Mitchell. *Untitled 3085-7 (Can Can Dancer)* was just *Untitled 3085-7* until Mitchell herself suggested adding the parenthetical.



Cora Cohen, *Untitled 3085-7 (Can Can Dancer)*, 1987, flashe and oil on linen, 70 x 66 inches



Morgan Presents: Cora Cohen, Works from the 1980's, 2022, Installation View

In 2022, Cohen's work feels as fresh and contemporary as Mitchell's. It is organic abstraction at its toothy best. The paintings are large, most of them square or close to it. Cohen's color is elemental, alternately earthy and fiery. She makes particularly fine use of piercing cadmium red for punctuating flair and layers paint masterfully. Her brushwork is often latticed in diagonally crosscut lashes of thick oil, sometimes painted over looser, flatter washes of flashe vinyl ground. All of Cohen's paintings have a lively sense of risk and derring-do. She clearly thinks very well on her feet, as her gestural marks consistently land on point, snapping from edge to edge, from corner to corner, from thin to thickly woven surfaces. Each painting culminates in a real finish, with real flourish, every single time. "Cora Cohen: Works from the 1980's" is a terrific show of museum quality. In my view, it is a fitting companion to **"Painting in New York: 1971–83,"** organized by Ivy Shapiro at nearby Karma gallery, which recently opened. See them both now. Get the fuller feminist context. Fill those painting gaps. See what everyone else missed the first time around.

"Cora Cohen: Works from the 1980's," Morgan Presents, 155 Suffolk Street, New York, NY. Through October 18, 2022.

About the author: Michael Brennan is a Brooklyn-based painter who writes about art. Follow him on Instagram [@hopfroggowanus](https://www.instagram.com/hopfroggowanus)