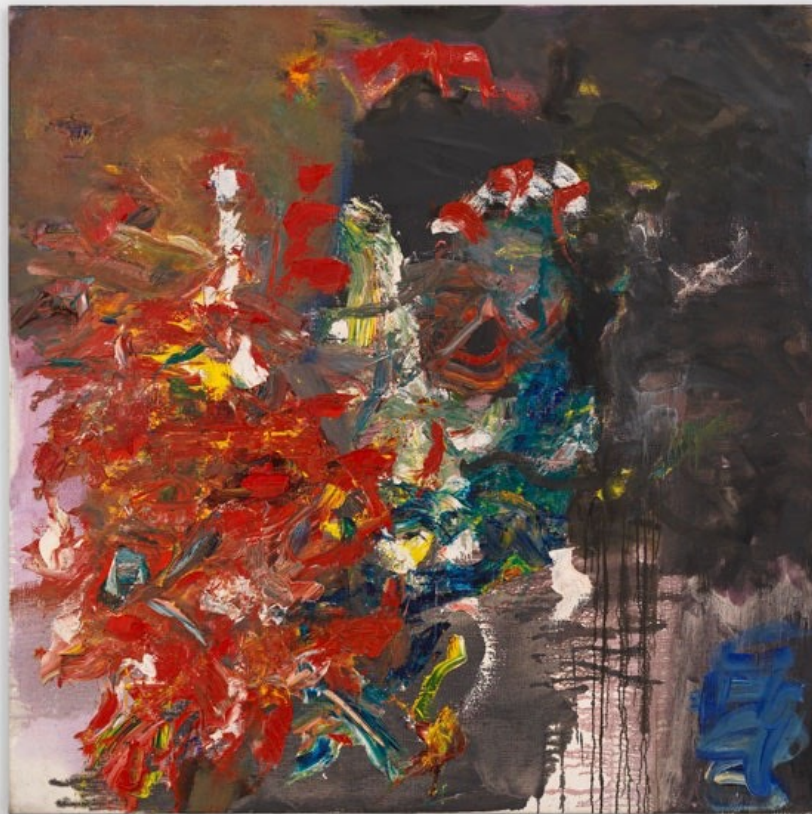


Cora Cohen: Works from the 1980's

By [Alfred Mac Adam](#)



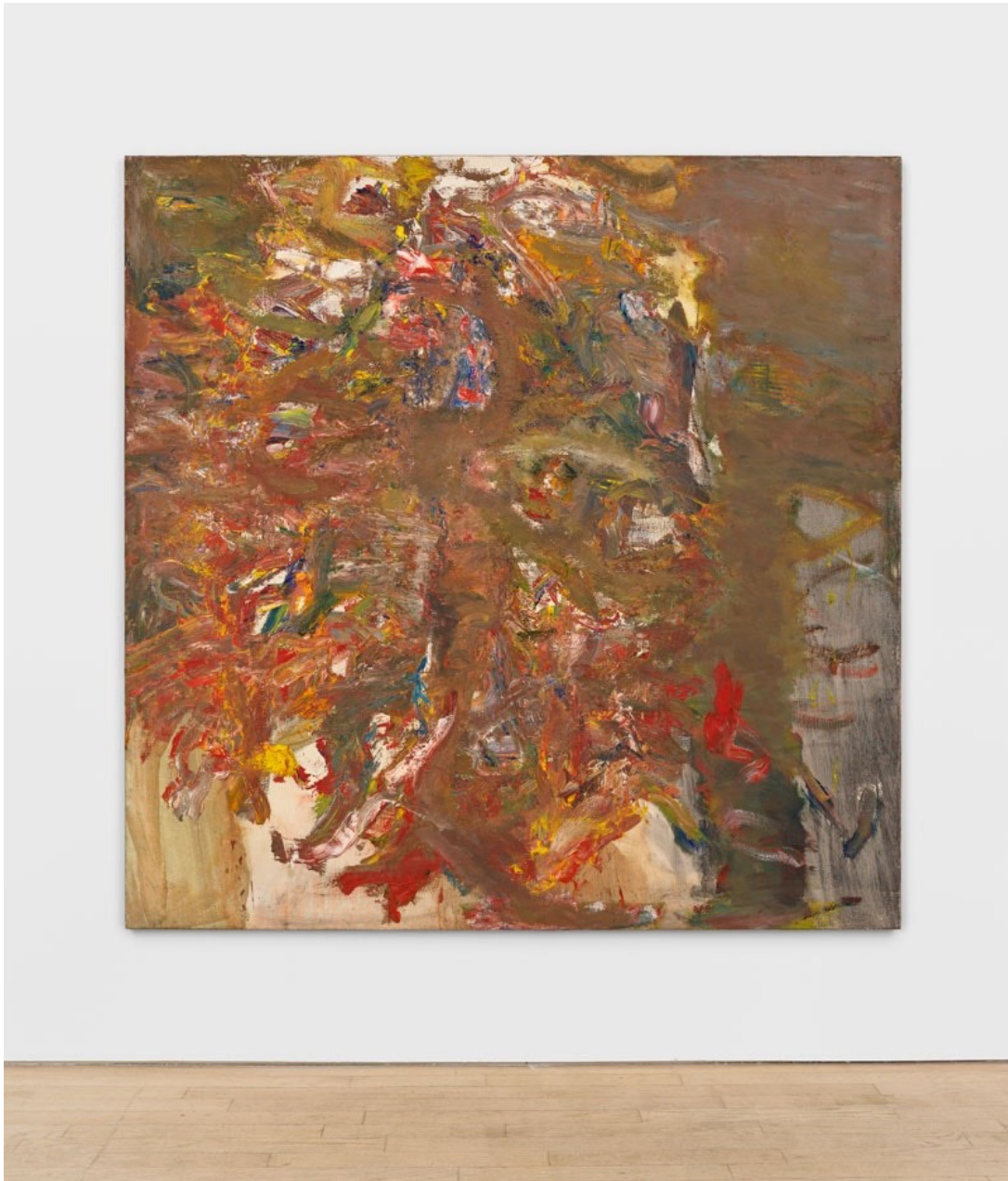
Cora Cohen, *Weinberg*, 1987. Flashe and oil on linen, 60 x 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and Morgan Presents.

Cora Cohen: Works from the 1980's is a time capsule, and like all time capsules it is an enigma. Time capsules are supposed to provide people of the future a sample of things typical of the moment when they are buried. Which raises the critical issue of perspective: are we to understand these eight glorious pieces according to what we think they meant thirty-five years ago, or should we understand them according to what they say to us today? Even if we lived through them, the 1980s are as irrecoverable as the 1880s: an abyss separates us from that decade even if human time—memory—may trick us into thinking we actually know that remote moment perfectly.

To try to remember even our impressions of Cora Cohen's work during the eighties is impossible. We might as well try to explain why William-Adolphe Bouguereau or Lawrence Alma-Tadema were sensations in the nineteenth century. Perhaps we should set aside the eighties, be thankful we have the opportunity to see these large, self-confident paintings now, together for the first time, and attempt to fathom them.

Again, nothing in these works defines them as "eighties painting." They in fact create their own time, neither calendar time nor human time but art time. In *Untitled* (1985), Cohen dramatizes herself as artist facing the blank canvas. She is like the spirit moving over the face of the waters, confronting a void that challenges her. The darkness of

uncreated, potential work is almost overwhelming here, only broken by a red flash in the upper right. Cohen defies despair, by seeming to say that she is bringing in the light. There are no anthropomorphic or biomorphic elements here, just pure painting. No overt emotion; rather, a mood, a quiet meditation on the threshold of a self-expression we see enacted in the other seven paintings.



Cora Cohen, *Replace the Beloved*, 1985-1987. Oil and flashe on linen, 78 x 78 inches. Courtesy the artist and Morgan Presents.

In *Replace the Beloved* (1985–1987), the biomorphic does insinuate itself. We find ourselves facing a shape-shifting monster whose eyes fix us in their gaze at the top of the canvas. Never fear, this creature from the depths of the void is drowned in Cohen's paint. Yes, the battle between nothingness or vile nightmares persists, but Cohen enacts Nietzsche's idea of the artistic conquest of the horrible by encasing the threat of unstructured expression in a maze of color and texture. But even here, the right side of the canvas remains virtually monochrome: the unformed void always threatens.

Untitled 3085-7 (Can Can Dancer) (1987) is a joyous painting. The red and yellow splash at the lower center of the painting should be the can-can dancer's flouncy dress kicked high for the benefit of some latter-day Toulouse-Lautrec, but there is something more powerful in that blaze on an otherwise softly hued canvas. The dress is a flame, a manifestation of holy fire, again, a metaphoric self-portrait of artistic energy dancing over the blank canvas. So, dress or fiery explosion, it reiterates Cohen's embrace of overcoming the void. Continuing the loose connection to France in the can-can, *Outside St. Severin* (1987). The Église Saint-Séverin has stood in one form or another in Paris since the eleventh century. By naming the church in her title, Cohen conjures the constant destruction and resurrection that constitute the history of human creation. That is, the title is a link with a specific human artifact, but at the same time, it is an evocation of a creation outside of human time. The actual church may have begun

Romanesque and become Gothic, but it is the fact of the church that matters to Cohen. This she expresses in a mass of paint, often impasto, in ascent. The lower border of the painting, as is the case in most of the works here, refers to that antithesis of art, blank space.

That dialectic is best represented by *The Three Graces* (1987–1988). Cohen sets aside the biomorphic in this magisterial piece to focus on the opposition between creation and nothingness that drives the entire show. We might wonder which representation of the three graces she had in mind when she gave this painting that title. Let's choose Botticelli's entwined nymphs in the *Primavera*, a dance, not to the music of time, but, like the can-can, to the rhythm of creation. There are no graces in this painting, just a two-sided opposition. On the left, Cohen's exultant self-affirmation and expression; on the right, the almost monochromatic void. Cora Cohen saves the day by removing it from time and fixing it in esthetic eternity.