



Cora Cohen, *Replace the Beloved*, 1985-87, oil and Flashe paint on linen, 78 × 78".

Cora Cohen

MORGAN PRESENTS

About a decade ago, it seemed to become increasingly notable that a number of women painters had been pursuing aspects of Abstract Expressionism in idiosyncratic and innovative ways. In these pages, Mark Godfrey pointed to Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline von Heyl—all participants in the 2014 Whitney Biennial—as protagonists of this effort to reexamine a once “forbidden” style, stripped of its former rhetoric so that, as Godfrey put it, “meaning is thrown back onto the viewer as the artists’ own subjective investments in their decisions around paint handling become indeterminate and unknowable.” Today, partly as a result of this revisionist revival of gestural abstraction, Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell loom as larger historical figures than many of their male contemporaries who formerly overshadowed them.

But this salutary shift may give the misleading impression that, between the painters who came into their own in the 1950s and those (such as the figures Godfrey discussed) who have come to the fore since the turn of the millennium, we saw a hiatus, a period when women artists disregarded the legacy of the New York School. That notion was exploded by this exhibition of Cora Cohen’s paintings from the 1980s. A generation older than Humphries et al., Cohen was steeped in Greenbergian formalism as a student at Vermont’s Bennington College in the 1960s and ’70s but forcefully rejected it. She had her first major exhibition in 1974, which means that the eight works in this show, dated between 1985 and 1988, represent an oeuvre that had reached a certain maturity. Consistent among the canvases here was a dialogue, or perhaps one should say a dispute, between passages executed in thin fluid washes and others that were more thickly and vigorously painted. In some cases, rough impasto passages were also more intensely hued, while the diluted ones were subdued in color. Yet the distinction is not one between figure and ground; it’s more as if the works were arguing with themselves about how the painting should be performed, and what the painter’s role should be. Must the artist’s materials submit to her will; should she dominate them, even *inflame* them, force them into their most dramatically heightened state? Or must she cede some of the initiative to the flow of matter itself, not effacing the trace of the hand but letting it appear without suggesting it’s the guiding force? Where do materiality and intention meet?

This dichotomy becomes most fascinating, perhaps, just when it threatens to tear the painting violently apart. In *Untitled 3085-7 (Can Can Dancer)*, 1987, the viewer’s gaze is vehemently solicited by the roiling conglomeration of short agitated marks in fiery reds and yellows (with just a smattering of azure) that flares up at the bottom center. What in the world does this blazing cluster have to do with the watery bluish world it so brutally disrupts, its drifting chromatic attenuations mixed with some deliciously offhand calligraphic squiggles and flourishes? The painting is at odds with itself, and that’s very much its point: this conflict where its immediacy appears. In other pieces—for instance, *Replace the Beloved*, 1985-87, with its unnamable reddish-greenish-never-quite-brownish cast—the restless impasto swallowed the greater part of the canvas, but in so doing seemed to swallow itself as well, to become a sort of all-over erasure of form rather than its vehicle. And then we viewers, if we were lucky, got devoured too. In works encompassing sufficient heterogeneity, Cohen has said, “the viewer puts the painting together herself,” but when that person becomes one of the mismatched parts, this act of construction suddenly grows much more fraught. Cohen’s determination to evade stylistic consistency has made her one of the most underrated painters in New York.