

George Cohen

The Thinking Man's Painter

By Ross Edman

As artist and person, George Cohen is a phenomenon. Many consider him the most distinguished painter in the Middle West, yet his work is not well known. Cohen is perhaps better known as a teacher (he is a Professor of Art at Northwestern) and as a witty and pleasant art world personality.

George Cohen, Chicago born (1919) and reared, studied at the Art Institute (1937-41) and at the University of Chicago (1946-48). The Art Institute cannot claim a single Cohen painting, even though the artist has won four prizes in exhibitions sponsored by that institution. The current exhibition at Richard Feigen Gallery, through January 6, is his first in Chicago in five years.

Yet the selection of George Cohen as the only artist on the board of trustees of the new Museum of Contemporary Art was inevitable. Even those who do not "dig" his work generally consider him an artist of stature. Those who are not enthusiastic about his work frequently blame their own shortcomings. Consciously or not, they sense that George Cohen's paintings are intellectual heavy-weights. But many people are unwilling to take the time to fathom what he has to say.

Two decades ago Cohen's concern for art with a message was by no means unique in Chicago. Cohen himself has remarked that in those days Art Institute School students spent much of their time romping in the Field Museum's primitive art collection, ignoring the more traditional models of Western European painting available in the Art Institute. The tangible result of this interest in art that was crude but significant in content and form made the words "Monster School" seem an apt description of Chicago's avant-garde group of the early fifties, the members of the Momentum Group.

Yet an early work of Cohen's such as *The Sanctified*, although it may exhibit a certain familiarity with primitive art, owes as much to Surrealism, then, as now, a major interest of Chicago collectors. This triple-faced image, with tiny helpless appendages for arms, has often been compared to the insane personages of Dubuffet. The artist has rightly pleaded that at this time—1949—Dubuffet's work was unknown to Chicago artists. Yet when the French artist came to Chicago in 1951 for his first exhibition at the Arts Club, local



George Cohen. *Rockettes*. 1967. No. 2 of 5 panels, each 84x34". Acrylic and cloth on canvas.



Study for Time and a Half. 1964. Gouache. 21 1/2 x 18". Richard Feigen Gallery, Chicago.

artists instantly recognized a kindred spirit.

Much as Cohen may have admired Dubuffet, there are notable differences in their work which must reflect profound differences of artistic personality. Dubuffet at his most seemingly childish and casual is—since he is French!—chic. In comparison, Cohen's work seems more turgid and, perhaps, more honest and direct, as one might expect of a Midwesterner.

Such a work as *The Sanctified*, with its brooding blotches and smears, could have directed Cohen into the mainstream of abstract expressionism in vogue in New York in the early fifties. But, like most Chicagoans, Cohen remained maddeningly provincial in his concern for explicit content as the key to his painting. Nevertheless, his work of the next few years explored accident and chance, and so in his own fashion he parallels the painters of the New York School. The process of creation received in Cohen's work a peculiar twist, most clearly observed in a collection of assemblages which he later grouped under the common title *The Phenomenology of Mirrors*. It all began with *Anybody's Self-Portrait* as Cohen sat at a kitchen table fussing with his daughters' toys.

The fact that this work was included in the Museum of Modern Art's mammoth *The Art of Assemblage* show (1961-62) and acquired almost immediately for MOMA's permanent collection show that, as far as the avant-garde Establishment was concerned, George Cohen then was "in". There are a number of reasons that this nod of approval from New York is significant. It is not merely the fact that he was *au courant* in 1961. Fads on the New York art scene are precisely that. *Anybody's Self-Portrait* had other things to recommend it.

Cohen's small painting-construction anticipated by several years the idea of assemblage and of an out-growth of that: spectator participation—happings, kinetic sculpture, walk-ins. These have been primary concerns of artists for the past 10 years. In Cohen's case they grow out of a single idea—the separation between real and imaginary space. Tangential to this thought is the nature of time in art.

The importance of *Anybody's Self-Portrait* is not limited to its timeliness, or even its anticipations of current artistic concerns; it is, above all, the key to subsequent questions and answers revealed in Cohen's own later work.

The exploration of space by means of fragmented and active female forms is more conventionally presented in the large painting of 1954, *Emblem for an Unknown Nation*. Actual penetration of space is present in the form of holes drilled into the painting and the wood frame (not shown). The broad areas of rich reds and greens are pulled together by a few sharply defined areas of creamy yellow and white. The forms are flat, sinuous shapes which are organic without being over-specific. The imagery is both Dada and Surrealist yet the blobby shapes suggest a warmth and affection not found in plastic mannequins or dolls. The flat areas of paint do not reflect the same declarative personalism of

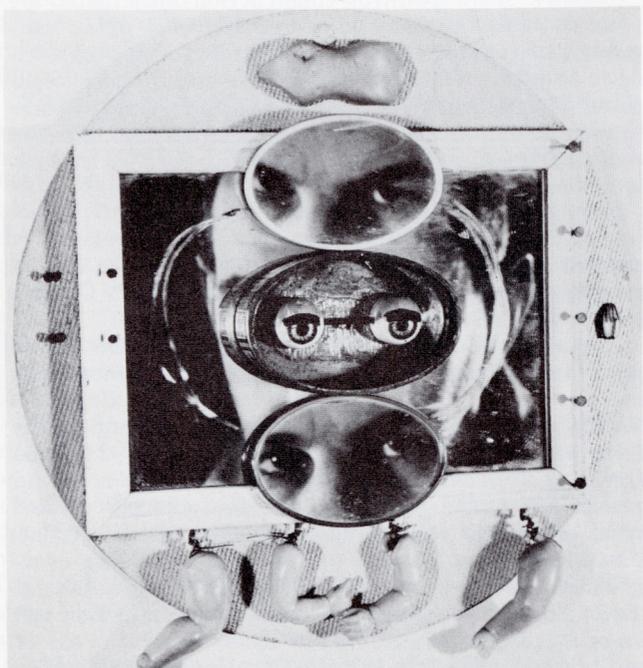
Action painting (as in De Kooning's women, for instance) which are elegantly savage caricatures. The idea of the cage is suggested in a novel way. The total woman is within; outside is a collection of bits and pieces—arms, legs, and hands—spinning around the margin, imprisoning the striding form within.

In the next few years Cohen's imagery became increasingly complex. While the titles remain clear and traditional—*The Serpent Chooses Adam and Eve*, *Maenad*—the paintings are more difficult to read. In *Hermes*, graffiti heads, blotchy bodies, a skullish face and female legs with high heels float through the eerie light of a sandpaper celestial body, propelled by a pinwheel of four clawlike hands. The painting is macrocosmic in its allusions to space and time. Although the neat frame-within-a-frame of *Emblem* is gone, the symbols—arrayed right-side-up, upside-down and sideways—become a spatial construction more flexible and more confining to the central image than any actual bars could be. The scratchy surface continues to show the disdain for slickness that is still as characteristic of most Chicago painters as it was 20 years ago.

As if aware of the dangers of ambiguity of form, Cohen suddenly turned to the egg as a study in itself. (Characteristically, this new interest also was accidental; it was prompted by the mounds of fresh market eggs Cohen saw while living in Rome the winter of 1958-1959.) The result was a curiously arresting series of pointedly named paintings; *Incubus*, *Oval Nude*, etc. An engaging work in this series, *Nocturnal* is a direct and sensuous study in dark browns, blue and white. The hazy visage is only fully revealed in the mirror—painted, not real—in the upper left. It is at once a virtuoso display of traditional painting techniques and a take-off (Picasso would understand) on his own work.

In the past few years Cohen's work has become brighter in hue and more complex in organization, more specifically keyed to questions about time and space. *Atrium II* is a sombre red painting of fragmented spaces and forms. The illusion of mirrors in paint is now the chief motif and the means by which the artist explores the nature of space. Broken figures appear and disappear, here entrapped by the spaces and there passing unconcernedly from one confined area to another. In the brighter *Agora* both spaces and forms are splintered into ribbon-like curtains. In recent works, such as the watercolor study for *Time and a Half*, the fragmented spaces are more rigidly organized. In contrast, the working women—the first painting in the series was called *Working Girl*—float clockwise and counter-clockwise around the circles in the center. The staggering of the floating shapes of various sizes forces one to consider the question of relative distance within a series of confined areas. Optical illusions, most often puzzles worked out with hot and cold colors and fluid geometric shapes, were at this time current interests allied to "Op." Last year the questions were pursued even further with paintings of white on white, a kind of minimal art then popular in New York, where Cohen was living at the time.

Cohen would not deny his own interest in current fads in the art world. His importance as a painter derives from his willingness to explore the validity of all ideas, old and new. But whatever he produces attests thoughtful consideration of new ideas. They are assimilated into George Cohen's personality. Because their meaning is beneath the artist's skin, they rarely captivate at a glance. Elusive, they ask the spectator to think. Those who do will know that Chicago's George Cohen is a significant artist.



Aaron Siskind

Anybody's Self-Portrait. 1953. Assemblage: framed square mirror mounted on painted masonite, 9 5/8" diameter, with 2 oval mirrors, plastic doll's torso, legs and arms, painted doll's eyes with fiber lashes in anchovy tin can, small metal hand, nail heads, screw eyes, hooks, string and cloth. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. This work is reproduced in color in MOMA's 1968 appointment calendar, "Artists by Artists."

Photographs Courtesy Richard Feigen Gallery, Chicago and New York.