



Cohen's "Populus"—mirrors that multiply the levels of space

Art Show

Strongly Romantic Artist

By Alfred Frankenstein

George Cohen, the Chicagoan whose paintings and assemblages went on view last week at the San Francisco Museum of Art, is a difficult artist to confront head-on.

You may think you have his style nailed with a few examples in one part of the gallery, and then you venture ten feet down the wall and your generalization evaporates. It is as if Cohen were so careful, so thoughtful and so reticent about each of his creations that he feels little need to repeat himself; consequently his show is composed almost entirely of unique examples.

In his catalogue introduction, Cohen talks a great deal about space and time and their inter-relationships. One greatly respects his statement, which is too long and too carefully reasoned to quote from; it should be read in its entirety in the show's small catalogue. But one may, perhaps, be permitted to see a few things in Cohen's work which are not accounted for in the artist's own remarks.

ROMANTIC

To begin with, the total effect of his work, at least to my eye, is strongly romantic. It is full of old presences; ghosts is not quite the word for them. The assemblages heavily emphasize the preciousness of discarded things; they are also full of visual puns whereby a soup dish becomes the bars of a prison and a corn plaster transforms itself into a picture frame.

What Cohen does with the arms, legs, and eyes of small dolls is a chapter in itself. They are halfway between the dismembered mutilations of an assemblagist like Arman and the votive offerings one finds attached to saints' robes in Mexican churches.

There is a totemic, primitivistic streak in Cohen's work that goes back, ultimately, to the totems of a Jackson Pollock; but Cohen never goes all out in Pollock's rhapsodic, unrestrained, and grandly scaled manner. Similarly, the paral-



GEORGE COHEN
A totemic, primitivistic streak

lels between his work and the "art brut" of Dubuffet serve mainly to bring out Cohen's essential quietude, mysticism, and thoughtfulness.

His fantastical space, his strange forms, his mirrors that multiply the levels of space and define the specialness of each moment's looking, are all things to be lived with a long time. They are not sensational; they do not overwhelm; one might brush past a single Cohen in a group show and never know it was there. As the artist himself says, the images of art "cannot merely refer to experience but must transform their reference so they will be experience. Things, if they are lucky, become beings." The things that pass through George Cohen's hands are lucky indeed.

The San Francisco Art In-

stitution on it; but I should like to signalize its closing with the observation that it is the best Art Association annual I have ever seen.

The annual has often been a nuisance and a bore and I have several times suggested that it be replaced with a triennial or abolished altogether, but the present display redeems the ancient tradition. The show has more variety, profundity, entertainment, daring, and technical inventiveness than any of its predecessors one can recall. Furthermore, it is beautifully installed, so that one can really see the things of which it is composed.

The reason for the success of the show, no doubt, is that the Art Institute went to the trouble and expense of bringing in three distinguished art authorities from outside San Francisco to serve as judges. They saw the local scene with a fresh eye and opened the door to many new talents; they were also sufficiently ruthless and independent to reduce a field of 1400 entries to a show of 113 examples of painting and sculpture.

It is also worth pointing out that these judges—John I. H. Baur and Alan Solomon of New York and Gerald Nordland of Washington—are all museum men; not one is a painter or sculptor. The Art Institute used to make much of the fact that its juries were composed of practicing artists. And that, one suspects, is one reason why the shows were so bad.