



"Funeral Games for Patroklos," by George Cohen (1981) on display at the Frumkin and Struve Gallery.

George Cohen returns with bravado: Hyde Park show just trivial impulses

ART Franz Schulze

Several weeks ago it was observed here that the 1983-84 season promises Chicago artists an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate the extent to which the city's bright new '80s reputation as a creative center is warranted.

The first returns are in already, borne on a wave of October exhibitions that feature a host of Chicagoans young and old, former, new and even part time. Literally dozens of galleries are showing local talent this month.

The two most provocative exhibitions of the moment are a solo effort by Northwestern University professor George Cohen at the Frumkin-Struve Gallery, 309 W. Superior (through Oct. 25), and a large group show called "Fans," curated by veteran painter Ellen Lanyon and hanging at the Hyde Park Art Center, 1701 E. 53rd, through Nov. 5.

At 64, Cohen has lived through more of the history of Chicago art than most of the 70-odd Hyde Park exhibitors. His biography itself is as much a part of the legend that has grown around him as his art. He was one of the first Midwestern painters to gain a national reputation after World War II, and for a while in the late '50s was probably the Chicago artist to whom New York paid the most serious attention—this, despite the fact that his work was not at all consistent with the then-prevailing symbols. It suggested surrealist origins, as did much early postwar New York painting.

Cohen, however, pushed his ideas in the direction of dense psychic narrative, while the New Yorkers were moving ever closer to reductivist formal abstraction. By 1960 he and several other younger artists had become identified with a "Chicago-style"

art based on bold imagistic content.

Less than 10 years later Cohen had almost vanished from sight. He stopped exhibiting altogether, and rumor had it he was no longer even painting. The facts of the case have never been fully explained, though in the years of his youth, when nearly all American painters had to struggle to justify their very existence, it was not uncommon for some of them to drop out of the action, at least for a time. Yet with Cohen it has been almost two decades since his last major one-man show of paintings, in 1965. In view further of the common knowledge that he was one of the most intelligent and best-educated American artists of his generation, his loss to Chicago was as substantial as it was puzzling.

One is likely, then, to approach his return engagement at Frumkin-Struve with a measure of trepidation, wondering how much Cohen himself has lost, or gained, during so long an absence. He must have had similar worries. Yet the most striking thing about his current ensemble is its sheer bravado; he is painting more extrovertedly, more aggressively—or is it angrily?—than ever before.

His palette is high-keyed and warm, almost feverish, as if in response to his tumultuously discursive narratives, in which fragments of famous historical works of art are re-interpreted to illustrate a variety of universal themes or moral points. Motifs from Picasso and Cezanne seem to be greatly on Cohen's mind, and the former emerges here and there in sharply unflattering light, like some willful plunderer of other artists' inventions.

But bumpuously amatory subjects are in evidence, too, together with an assortment of symbols that seem to stand for the endless combat of art as well as of life. The paintings, not easily divined without scholarly help, betray a tendency toward overkill, in both story elements and formal

design, that distinguishes them from Cohen's reserved and lyrically introspective early works. The latter are still the standard of his achievement. On the other hand, since this is his first outing in a long time, a certain amount of wasted motion is to be expected—along with greater restraint later on. Above all, he is wrestling with large expressive issues and ideas, mounting a terrific energy in the process.

That last thought transports us to the Hyde Park Art Center, where curator Lanyon, herself a native Chicagoan who now maintains residences both here and in New York, has asked about six-dozen of the best-known, most active local artists to produce works inspired by the idea of the Fan. Puns are permitted, so that peacock tails are fair subject matter, along with the human hand, fingers spread radically, and even the lunettes high on the wall of the gallery. These last shapes prompted Lanyon's theme in the first place, and they are now covered with semicircular paintings by nine Chicagoans, herself included. The rest of the pieces in the show tend to be done on the scale of fans themselves—small, that is, in both a physical and an ideational sense.

What went wrong with this show? Lanyon is as well-informed as she is sensitive, and she must have known the major names to invite or disinvite to such a convocation. Moreover, a show based on fans would seem legitimate enough on the face of it, judging, say from the elegance Japanese designers have historically brought to the subject—or Lanyon in her own work, for that matter.

But it is not the Japanese who comprise this display. It is latter-day Chicagoans, who are not collectively notable for elegance, or delicacy, or whatever expressive virtue might seem most appropriate to fans. Instead, a fascination with the charmingly outrageous little gesture, a ten-

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Six Chicago Artists in Search of an Audience

By Franz Schulze

TWO COMMONLY held opinions about the Chicago art world are that this city produces a commendable quantity of gifted painters and sculptors and that they do not stay here long.

There is no trustworthy way of demonstrating this statistically, but the feel of experience firmly assures it. The number of able artists who have grown up or have taken their training here is impressive enough to suggest that Chicago is a good place—indeed an excellent place—to learn the arts of painting and sculpture. However, the rate of emigration among these superior people to places with more vigorous markets is high enough to keep Chicago from being a first-rate center of art. To enjoy that distinction a city must be able not only to mold but to hold its promising youngsters.

This is a fact of life to which the Chicago art lover need not resign himself, but to which he must certainly adjust. The problem is seemingly not a dearth of local talent but a dearth of local art public—and not that public's lack of enlightenment so much as its sheer lack of size. In fact, the talent is copiously evident in current exhibits by six Chicago-grown artists.

Two of these have already said a presumably final farewell to Chicago. Ivan Mischo has moved to New York, Kestutis Zapkus to Paris. George Cohen, Roland Ginzl, and Vytautas Virkau have stayed here primarily because they are among the relatively few artists who have been able to find challenging teaching jobs on the college level in the Chicago area and Miyoko Ito's husband is a businessman with ties here. It is not the local art world so much as their established livelihoods that keep this quartet of gifted painters in Chicago. Others like them who have not made such bonds have strayed, reasoning that the struggle—for it's a struggle everywhere—is at least more savory in places where artists play a more vital role in human culture than they do on the windy shores of Lake Michigan.

These artists make up a compelling group, not alone because each of them is mature, but because in their maturity several of them appear still to be growing.

GEORGE COHEN is the oldest, a member of that hungry and exciting postwar Chicago generation that developed such an obsessive concern for private myth and imagery. Cohen has always been the most discursive and complicated imagist of this group. More intellectual and less visceral in his painting approach, he is a surrealist first and an expressionist afterward. His painting is a long, involute essay in the fragmentation of form and of content. Its predominant symbols, mirrors and female forms, emerge, vanish and emerge again in a restlessly faceted picture space, as if to suggest the multiplicity, the mystery and the terrible, sustained force of the unconscious.

Though he draws with an apparently naive bluntness, the organization of these cubist-like ideograms is rather clearly the product of a thoroughly schooled and highly sophisticated intelligence. Among his very recent pieces at the Feigen Gallery, 53 E. Division, a number of complex axial torso reliefs reveal a new intensity of figure imagery and a richer level of realization.

Roland Ginzl returned not too long ago from a fellowship year in Rome, and most of the paintings in his current show at B. C. Holland Gallery, 155 E. Ontario, are the fruits of that foreign labor. These shaggily brushed, dense, and colorful mass are executed in the generic manner which Ginzl had employed long before his trip abroad, meaning he is now no less American than he was before. His abstract expressionist proclivities than he was before. The tightening of his stylistic grip seems to have been in the meantime, as if he were squeezing his hand harder. The result is that the pictures are composed of dense and the colors are drenched with greater opulence. In short, his attack is more refined, and one gathers he has forged a more thorough commitment to it.

This is the kind of painting that has recently come to be categorized as "landscape," but which might more properly be called field abstraction. The impulsive splashes of color and skeins of line total up to a kind of spatial



"Flesh Painting VIII" by George Cohen, at the Richard Feigen Gallery.

field, gossamer and vibrating, just suggestive enough of light and air to tempt the landscape comparison but not descriptive enough to warrant full acceptance of it.

THE WORK of Kestutis Zapkus is even more tenuously poised between the figurative and the abstract, and consequently depends greatly on ambiguity of form for its

impact. Zapkus is one of four artists on the roster of the Gres Gallery, 156 E. Ontario, who won prizes at the recent Chicago Arts Festival. Gres is celebrating this happy windfall with a review of recent work by Zapkus and the others: Mischo, Virkau, and Miss Ito.

From the look of a couple of very new canvases, the 25-year-old Zapkus has engaged a much brighter palette since he settled in Paris, with vivid yellows and greens dominating a resonant color scheme. It is still too early to decide whether this amounts to a permanent change. Nor is there any reliably visible alteration in his compositions, which still apparently tend to be organized in zones or registers of shallow space. Within these registers he models clusters of proliferating forms which push against their background and sometimes against their zonal limits. The result is an extreme tension of forces which, undergirded by his ceaseless inventions, has caused much of the emphatic interest in him.

The Mischo canvases are not his latest, but they are choice reminders of a promising ability in this artist to achieve what has rarely been achieved in America during the last several years: To use abstract expressionism for the building of architectonic space, not just flat pattern design. There is a reminiscence of De Kooning and the earlier Milton Resnick in these brawling Mischo oils, of a time when action painters worked into the picture plane, not merely across it.

Virkau contributes a number of lyrical studies after nature, undertaken in sumptuous color and carefully etched forms. While tension and purposeful equivocation interest several others among these Chicagoans, he appears more concerned with clarity, harmony and resolution. Miss Ito's forte remains the fastidious placement of shapes within the space of the frame, laconic shapes which derive strength from reticence, now more than ever constructed with severity of brush strokes and acid hue.

This is surely too brief a treatment of these six artists, yet we have not even begun to deal with a number of other worthy Chicago artists whose work can be seen in the local gallery circuit. One can only hope there may be time enough for the viewer to get around to them before the expected majority flees to greener fields.

Art Events

Phyllis Kresnoff, sculpture; **Claude Bentley**, oils and collages. Through Feb. 6. Kasha Heman Gallery, 952 N. Michigan.

Sari Sherman, paintings. Through Feb. 1. Fairweather-Hardin Gallery, 141 E. Ontario.

Sheila Solomon, sculpture. Through Feb. 8. Deborah Sherman Gallery, 619 N. Michigan.

Carole Harrison, sculpture and drawings. Through Jan. 31. Gilman Galleries, 103 E. Oak.

Frank Salantrie, paintings. Through Jan. 31. Monroe Gallery, 59 E. Monroe (Loop YWCA).

Elena Cibula, paintings. Friday through Feb. 26. Hyde Park Art Center, 5236 S. Blackstone.

Paintings, Drawings, Sculpture, work of local artists. Through Feb. 26. Cranford Gallery, 714 N. Wells.

Ruth Migdal, Jerome Walker, Martin Hurtig, Jack Powell, paintings. Through Feb. 5. Bernard Horwich Center, 3003 W. Touhy.

Rafilson, paintings. Through Jan. 31. Distelheim Galleries, 113 E. Oak.

Jules Olitski, paintings and drawings. Through Feb. 1. Richard Gray Gallery, 155 E. Ontario.

Heather P. Kortebein, oils and drawings. Through Feb. 8. Adele Rosenberg Gallery, 931 Linden, Winnetka.

Frances Foy, paintings. Through Jan. 31. Old Town Art Center, 1714 N. Wells.

Robert Burkert, serigraphs. Through Jan. 31. 4 Arts Gallery, 1629 Oak, Evanston.

Fred Sperry, drawings; **Walter Chruscinski**, paintings.

Through Jan. 26. Gerald Bernard Gallery, 205 W. North.

Arts Festival Winners: Zapkus, Ito, Mischo, Virkau. Through Feb. 15. Gres Gallery, 156 E. Ontario.

Drawings, Prints, Collages. Through Jan. 31. John L. Hunt Gallery, 1529 N. La Salle.

Tom Strobel, paintings. Through Jan. 31. Blackhawk Restaurant Gallery, 139 N. Wabash.

Jurors' Show, paintings. Through Feb. 10. South Shore Art League. The Gallery, Country Club Hotel, 6930 South Shore Drive.

7 Directions, paintings. Through Jan. 31. Countryside Gallery, 10 W. Miner, Arlington Heights.

Group Show of Contemporary Artists, in all media. Through next Saturday. Goldwach Gallery, 226 E. Ontario.

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