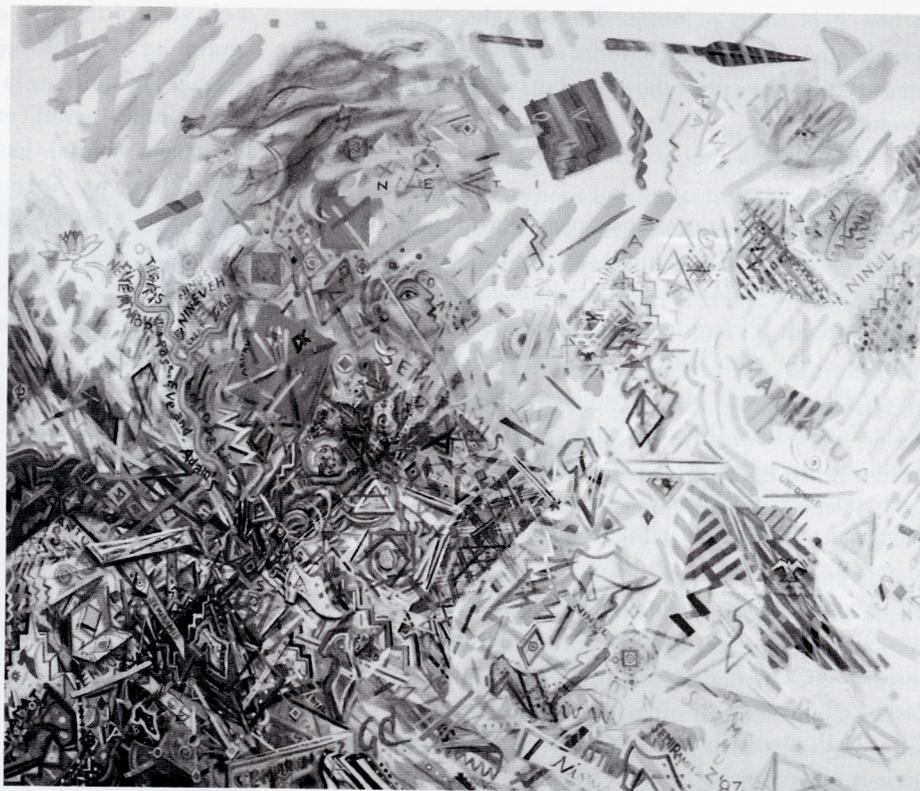


George Cohen, *Semiramis Uncombed*, 1987–89, oil on canvas, 66 × 78 inches. Collection of the artist.



George Cohen

Interviewed by JUDITH RAPHAEL

Evanston, Illinois, June 29 and July 7, 1991

George Cohen became known in the forties and fifties for his paintings and board constructions with objects and mirrors affixed to them. He is considered a major influence on and harbinger of the Chicago imagists, as well as an important contributor nationally to developments in painting in the fifties and sixties. Born in Chicago in 1919, he received his B.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute and did graduate work in art history at the University of Chicago. In 1948 he began teaching at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, a position he held until his retirement. He has been the recipient of many awards and prizes, including the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim, and his art is owned by private and corporate collectors as well as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. Cohen has shown for many years with the Zabriskie Gallery and the Charles Alan Gallery in New York and with Richard L. Feigen in Chicago and New York. His most recent museum show was in 1981 at the Art Institute of Chicago, and in 1982 he exhibited his paintings at the Frumkin Struve Gallery in Chicago. Cohen and his wife, the artist Constance Teander-Cohen, reside in Evanston in a nineteenth-century house brimming with paintings, books, and musical instruments (two of their three children are professional classical musicians). Half of this interview in the summer of 1991 took place there; the other half was in

George's studio in downtown Evanston, which was also full of art and smelled of fresh paint.

Judith Raphael: Now that I'm middle-aged, it seems more natural to contemplate the subject of aging as an artist than it was twenty years ago when the issue wouldn't have crossed my mind.

George Cohen: You mean, when you were immortal?

J.R.: Yes, but tell me, are there significant changes in your life and work since middle age?

G.C.: I don't see any disconnection. I'm not sure that my particular sort of introspection is directed towards the way I've changed. I find in my painting, though, that I'm delighted with whatever the changes are which have taken place. The painting I now do seems to be less and less about me and more about its possibility of becoming and, if it clicks, a source of exhilaration. Succeeding with a painting gives me a sense of joy I don't remember having in the past.

J.R.: Were you more concerned about external responses and pressures?

G.C.: I think so. Now I don't care as much. I mean I do care about a response, but after seventy one wants to be alive, and the act of painting vivifies. There is a rediscovery and regeneration in the notion that things happen. Maybe it is kind of a cliché, but when you paint, it's like a generative process in language. Every new construct is a new statement,

one that is different from any that has gone on before, and that is how it is when painting. The work has become more complicated. It seems to have its own logic, and I feel like someone who is not quite the editor but the one who judges the resolution.

J.R.: How is this process different from when you were younger?

G.C.: When I was younger the images seemed more clear-cut. It was exciting and of course new for me and, I hope, for others. Now the presence and appearance of my imagery is more gradual. It's familiar and keeps reappearing.

J.R.: Your work looks very youthful to me. Is this a conscious effort? Do you think about the notion of currency?

G.C.: I'm glad you think that the work stays young. I wish I could say the same for me. I don't think I can consciously keep up with new trends or ideas. If I do, it's because independently the internal nature of my painting may have kept up.

J.R.: I can think of a major difference between our lives right now. I teach full-time and you are a professor emeritus. How does that feel after years of structuring your life around your teaching?

G.C.: Well, obviously I spend a lot more time painting. I was serious about teaching, and I must say how wonderful it is now, when I'm walking down the street, that instead of thinking about what I'm going to say tomorrow, I can actually think about the painting that I'm working on. When you have ideas and you are serious about them, your class becomes your material, and you use your ideas in class. A friend once described teaching as "reinventing the students for themselves." That made me realize that I didn't have the luxury of reinventing myself. Perhaps now I have the luxury. It is much more isolating, and maybe it has to be. I don't know whether to love or hate it, but here I am with the painting.

J.R.: I've seen you at openings with a couple of people from your art-school days at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. One is Connie Cohen, the artist, who is also your wife. Do you still see other colleagues from those days?

G.C.: A lot of my friends from art school moved away. I have been associated with the university [Northwestern] for a number of years, and I have very close friends in various departments who are not artists. Of course, I see Connie, and I see Ted Halkin. Recently two of my closest associates died, one of the things you have to deal with when older . . . memories rather than realities, at least with old friends.

J.R.: That is one of the more sobering aspects of aging.

G.C.: Yes, and for an artist aging brings new problems, not just your recognition of mortality but you have a physical awareness of possible interruptions or obstacles. I've had a bad year as far as that's concerned, and I'll be glad when 1991 is over, but . . . I have hope for renewal.

J.R.: People of your generation in Chicago were intent on developing an art based on a personal mythology. How do you respond to some younger artists now who attempt to be in dialogue with current world issues?

G.C.: I don't know how much one's painting should reflect one's view of the rest of the world. Maybe this is what is happening to me in recent years when I talk about being isolated. My painting is in its own world. I don't know what it is to "express myself" except in conversation. For me, painting is more internal. Jack Tworikov once told me that when you are teaching you always have to have an opinion. For him, painting was the one place where you didn't have to have an opinion. I guess I think the world of opinion and the world of paint are separate. Goya is certainly more than a reporter.

J.R.: Well, how do you feel in general about the current world of paint?

G.C.: I find that too much painting I see has no life for anyone except the critics and maybe the folks who read them. The work has no evolving, no organic, no revelatory nature. It's like a scientific experiment that simply wants to get a certain result. Do you know what I would tell someone who wants to become an artist today? I would tell them to augment their art studies by going to a good university that has courses in marketing and promotion.

J.R.: Is your criticism directed at the contemporary theoreticians and cultural proprietors or only the artists?

G.C.: Are you trying to tempt me to get angry, to say something about the modern scene and how it's bypassed me? [laughter]

J.R.: I'm not so sure it has bypassed you. I'm not sure you actually sought it out recently.

G.C.: Well, I haven't tried. You're right. But I *have* tried to paint. You do have to go out and pursue it and I don't. It's too much of "the expense of spirit in a waste of shame." That line from a Shakespearean sonnet strikes awfully close.

J.R.: You've always been considered an intellectual among the artists of your generation here. How would you describe the changes you experience in your intellectual life today?

G.C.: One's musings are circumstantially different now. I think you become more practical because your options change. I'm more interested in politics, not my own but the politics of the world. I don't read much about art any more. Lots of philosophical and art-historical writing that I used to like seems less relevant to me. Occasionally, if I'm interested in some aspect of a theme or image, I know about where to look for it. I don't have to search like I used to, and maybe that limits me because I'm letting discoveries take care of themselves. But then, how long can one go on finding what one wants to be when one grows up?

J.R.: Now you have brought up something I've always wanted to know. When you reach old age, have you finally grown up?

G.C.: It seems you've raised the question of the interior self and the exposed self. My exposed self is more grown-up. I'm probably viewed as an elderly fellow who ought to know better, but you know, as far as the consciousness that started a long time ago, it's still on the same string. It may have snapped a few times and been retied, but it's still the former and present me.