

FLORA

Contemporary Artists and the World of Flowers



Anne
Abrons

John
Alexander

Joe
Andoe

Ciel
Bergman

Dale
Chihuly

Bruce
Cohen

Joseph
Goldyne

Robert
Kushner

Carol
Mothner

Patsy
Norvell

Raymond
Saunders

Idelle
Weber

Richard
Willenbrink

Paul
Wonner

Robert Rahway
Zakanitch

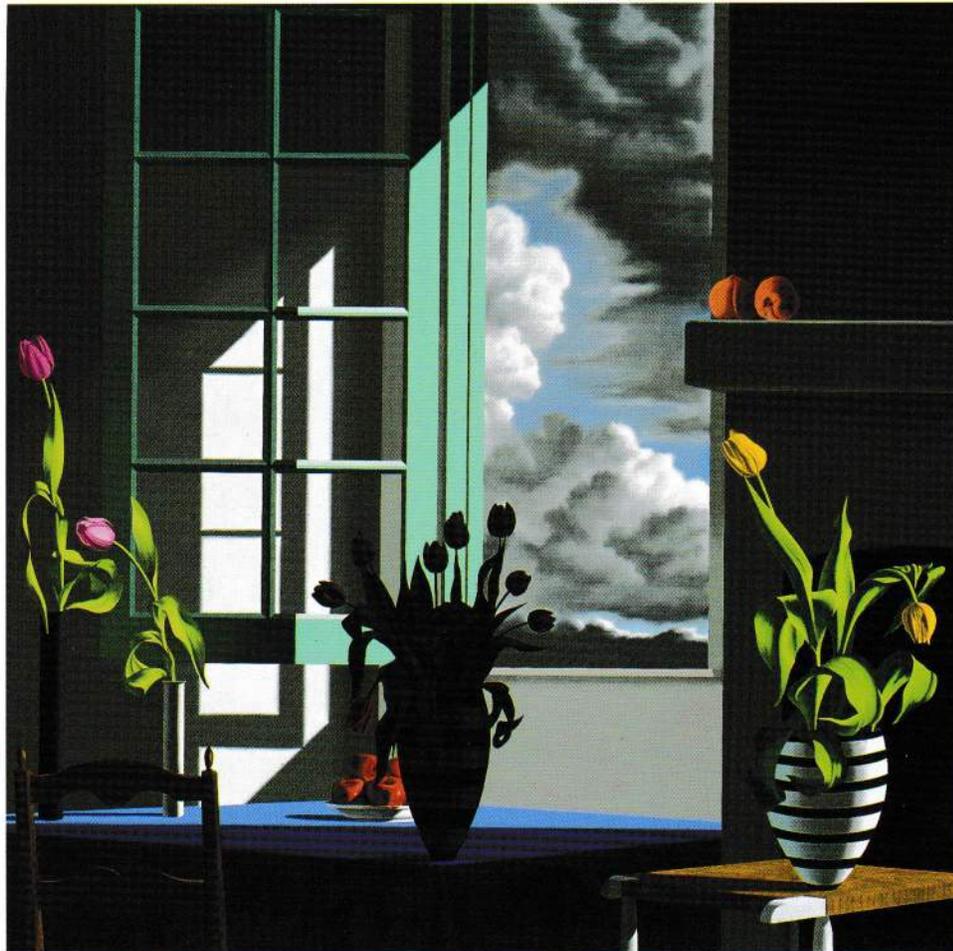


Bruce Cohen is something of an anomaly to the outsider's view of Southern Californians; he is a native son of Santa Monica who still lives within a few miles of his birthplace. His studio is a cubbyhole in a cul-de-sac. There are screenwriters upstairs, set designers next door, car customizers across the way. Cohen's own space is very small and white, a "colorless" space in which the color in his paintings becomes the focus of the room.

Like his paintings, Cohen is deliberate of manner, a careful person who parcels out his information willingly, yet sparingly. He acknowledges that "I don't feel that the ideas of painting translate into verbal equivalents, and I don't think I have a great ability to articulate these ideas verbally." Both Bruce and his elder brother, Larry, are artists, the latter specializing in *plein-air* landscapes. They grew up in solid, middle-class circumstances and exhibited their art interest early on. Both parents encouraged them in their endeavors, although Cohen acknowledges that his mother was most active in "bringing culture into our family." Drawing started early with fanciful landscapes, but "even then I was very attracted to Dutch still-life painting. I was amazed at the technique and how the painters could capture the sensation of materials." During his high-school years, Cohen began making studies of actual "things" and copying Old Master drawings from reproductions. A summer scholarship enabled him to study life drawing at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles.

He attended the College of Creative Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where prospective students were carefully screened, then given wide latitude. Every quarter brought two new visiting artists to the faculty, and there was no pressure to conform to any prevailing styles. The training discouraged traditional academic teaching in the visual arts. "You were encouraged to follow your own interests, and you could do just about anything and feel that it was vital and important to you." Cohen's work at this time was strongly influenced by the Surrealists,

Blue Table with Many Tulips, 1989
Oil on canvas
48 x 48
Private collection



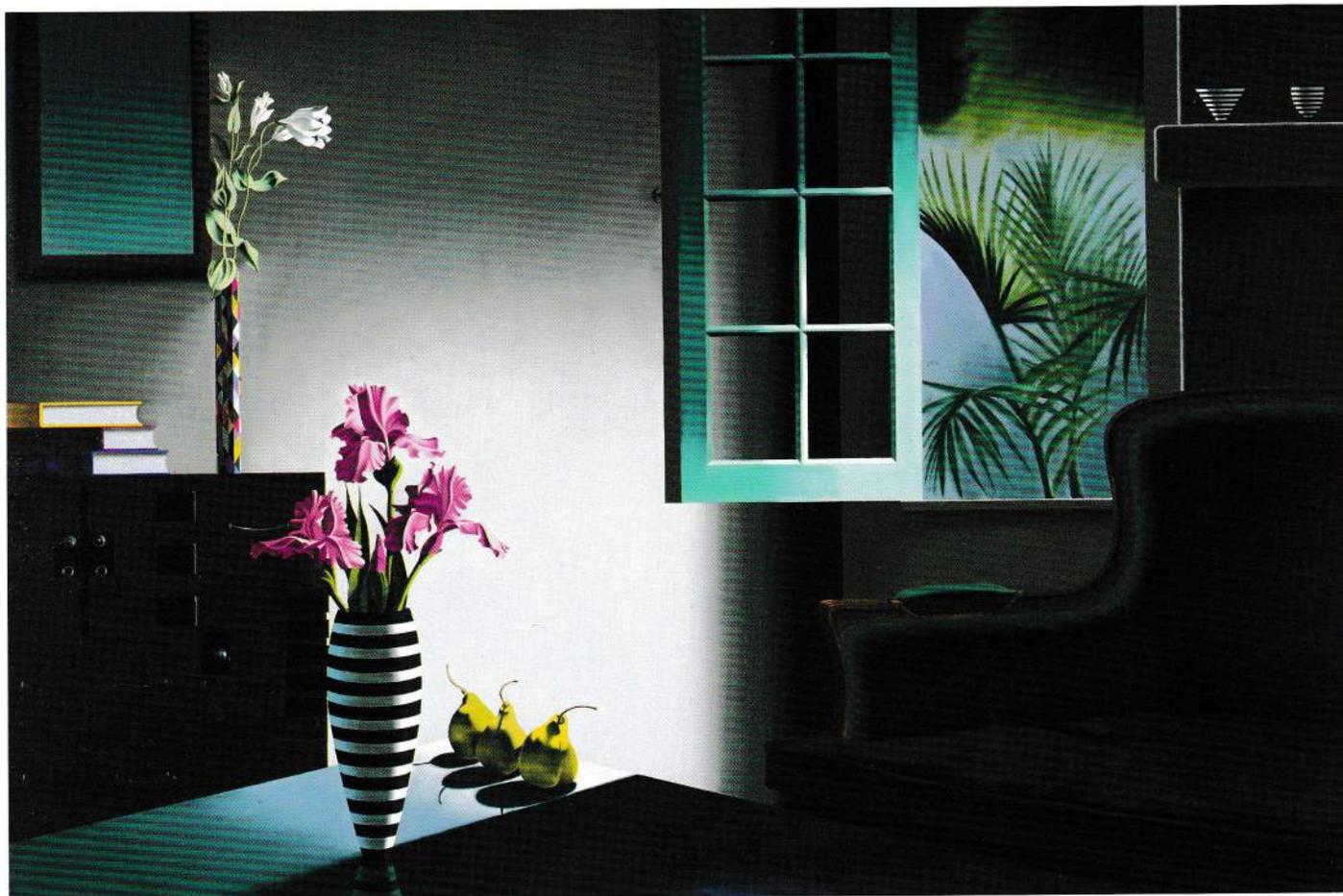
particularly Magritte, Ernst, early Dali, and de Chirico. He still regards Surrealism as an influence on his work, albeit in an unconscious, nonprogrammatic way.

One of the greatest influences on his education as an artist, however, came through his friendship with Paul Wonner, one of the visiting artists at Santa Barbara. Wonner and Cohen subsequently became friends and students together, auditing a course in Indian paintings at the University of California, Berkeley, and often visiting exhibitions together. Their intergenerational relationship was based on respect, not academic requirements, and Cohen reflects that "as a young painter, this was as good an influence as I could have had."

Cohen subsequently moved to Berkeley where he lived for two years. His apartment was tiny, and he was forced to work on a table, making drawings in graphite, then working back into them in gouache and casein. The subject was usually figurative, often portraits of his girlfriend at the time, set within the apartment interior. His study of Indian miniature paintings had taught him "order, compartmentalization, and love of surface decoration and spatial ambiguities, without the normal restrictions of Western art." Periodically he would return to Los Angeles to earn money painting houses; he finally moved back in 1977. Cohen also grew tired of working in such a small format. He began to paint larger works on canvas and to develop the imagery for which he is best known; the figure disappeared, although a human presence remains.

Cohen constructs his work from a complex of observed and invented details. The observations often take place in and around his own home, not far from his studio. Cohen notes that "though the paintings may be invented, I draw from real life to get that sense of form and observation that I wouldn't have if I had invented the whole composition." He will sketch the play of sunlight washing across walls and furniture and record specific details from the ordinary life around him, such commonplace

*Untitled, Interior with Louis XV
Chair and Harlequin Vase, 1990*
Oil on canvas
48 x 72
Collection of the Persis
Corporation, Honolulu



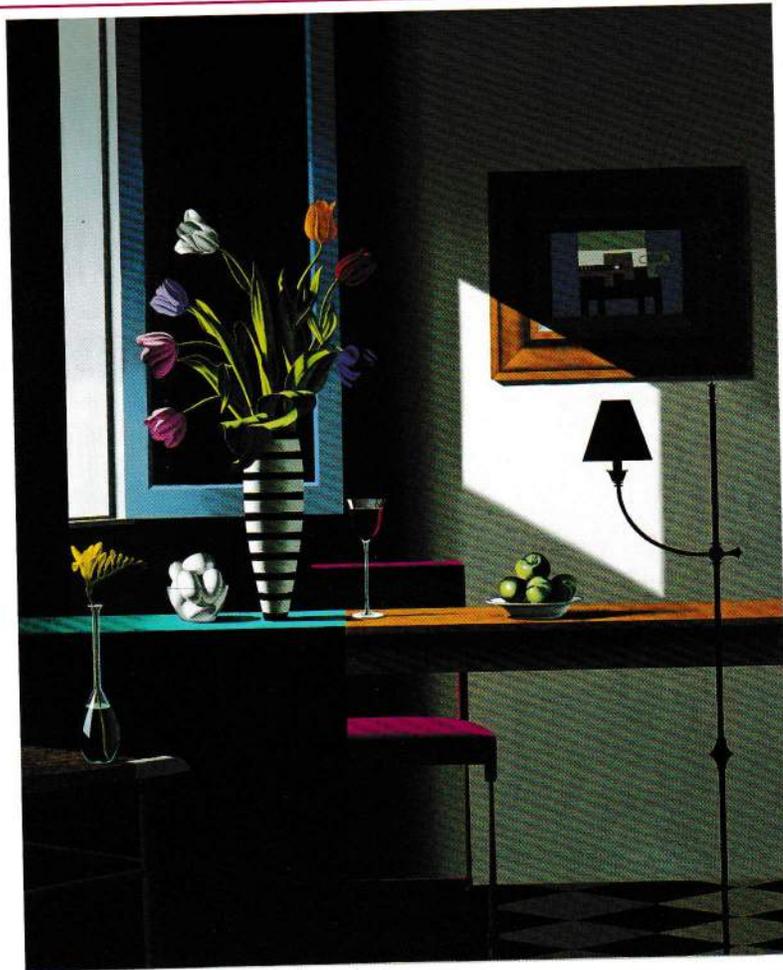
objects as a floor lamp, fruit, eggs, and, most specifically, flowers, often from his garden. He occasionally uses photographs to record a very specific detail, but finds that they “do not capture what I need to capture in the drawings”: the subtle discontinuities and irregularities of form that mark the hand of the artist. Cohen takes his drawings into the studio where he synthesizes them into a composition, creating the space in which the various objects are placed. From this structure he creates a color study in pastel which serves as a maquette for the final painting.

Cohen acknowledges that his paintings start from a specific event or condition, “something that I am moved by on some intuitive level, and I create the spaces, shapes, and mood around that condition. Sometimes this comes from music or something else nonvisual . . . but this is what gets me going into the work. Ultimately the painting goes through a process of change, and I end up with something far from where I started.” Cohen’s spaces reflect both his love of seventeenth-century Dutch painting and the more recent Surrealism, most specifically René Magritte’s strange dislocations of space. *Untitled, Interior with Table in Front of Foggy Landscape: Peach Rose in Blue Bottle* (1992) offers an example of these spatial discontinuities. The white doorknob, which should be closer to the viewer than the flower, is in line with the bloom and much larger than life. The logic of the paintings works internally, but would defy construction in three dimensions. Cohen’s interiors have been aptly compared to stage sets, which for emphasis often force perspective or alter it in some other way.

Flowers animate these paintings, bringing life to what would otherwise be very austere, cool, almost abstract geometric constructs. Flowers also offer a different cycle of time – a faster counterpoint to the unchanging rectilinearity of architecture and furniture. The time of flowers and the time of day swing in a rapid movement, and one critic has observed that “by implication time becomes an important narrative force, and

Untitled, Interior with Table in Front of Foggy Landscape: Peach Rose in Blue Bottle, 1992
Oil on canvas
36 x 36
Courtesy of John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco
(On view in Charleston, Memphis)





*Interior with Black Silhouetted
Lamp, 1993*
Oil on canvas
80 x 60
Collection of The Capital Group
Companies, Inc., New York

one is invited to imagine what has gone before or will follow in the momentarily unpeopled space.”¹ Flowers supply the life in the sunlight, and they provide an organic gestural balance to the angular hierarchy of the paintings. Cohen says that “I’ve always gravitated towards the classical sense of beauty that flowers offer. We live with them and I’m very attracted to them. I really enjoy drawing them. There’s a complexity to drawing a flower that just doesn’t exist in drawing furniture.” The flower is the analogue for life in these paintings, often taking on quasi-human gestures and motions, bowing, waving, and leaning over. The iconography of flowers, however, is less important than their careful placement in the composition. Cohen works as precisely as a ballet master in blocking out their place on his canvases.

Curiously, a sense of worldly place is also to be found within these interiors which seem at first glance to be so uninflected. It is warm, but not so harsh that the interiors are sealed against the heat. The windows and doors always stand open; the landscape beyond, when seen, is often partially obscured by haze. It is an interpretation of the easy climate of Los Angeles, the trees softened by a *sfumato* of desert dust, chemicals, and ocean mist. Cohen always has been intrigued by the influences of an artist’s environment on his work. “Look at Matisse. His paintings could never have been painted in Holland.” Neither could Cohen’s, for the sun in Holland, elsewhere too, does not shine with quite the same glow as it does in Los Angeles.

Notes

1. Cecelia Bullard, “Appearance and Reality: Paintings by Bruce Cohen,” *Bruce Cohen: New Paintings 1990-91* (New York: Ruth Siegel Gallery, 1991), n.p.