

PINCHAS COHEN GAN AN APPRECIATION

17.10 – 30.11.19

In the exciting days of the 1970s — days witnessing major social changes in America, days of new music and films followed by the notion of a sexual revolution and the demand to end the war in Vietnam — we saw the exploration of Women Rights, Gay Rights and finally the recognition of the African American community in the media. In the New York art scene there was suddenly a confluence of styles when Minimal and Pop art gave way to new artists; new ideas and new expressions in a neighborhood beginning to be filled with artists renovating lofts and new galleries in an area now designated as Soho. Some were commercial spaces; others, non-profit organizations that presented visual arts music and performance. In a relatively short period of time, Soho became a fixture of the New York art scene; in fact, it became its capital.

Among the various movements was an explosion on an international scale of figurative art. It was happening in studios in New York and in studios in Italy, France and Germany and in Israel. In fact, there were several Israeli artists who were working in New York. Among them was Pinchas Cohen Gan.

The Moroccan born artist was living in New York having arrived during the early 1970s to expand his already existing career as a working artist and to study at Columbia University. Though I never visited his studio — in those days I think he lived in a local hotel — he would come by the gallery, Max Protetch Gallery, at its then new headquarters on 57th street. I, in the fall of 1977, became gallery Director. Cohen Gan was part of an interesting stable which, when I joined, included Jackie Ferrara, Joel Fisher, Jan Groover, Will Insley, and David Reed. Each an individual in his or her own right, building their own vision of art through architectural interventions, drawing, photography, and painting. Nonetheless, foreign non-American artists were still rare amongst artists presented in New York and Cohen Gan was no exception. Yet Ferrara was a proponent of his work and he was the only international artist in the gallery in those years. Cohen Gan's first solo show was in 1976. It was accompanied by a catalog with an essay by Robert Pincus Witten. The late art historian Pincus Witten was a monthly commentator and reviewer for the now defunct Arts Magazine was a great admirer of Cohen Gan's work and one of the few critics in those years attune to artists from Israel.

Pincus Witten was also an exponent of Post Minimalism, a mélange of styles, approaches and attitudes that encompassed installations and performance in the work of artists such as Barry Le Va, Jene Highstein and Vito Acconci. Cohen Gan liked these artists and was continuously expanding his ideas in series after series. He had a boundless energy and boundless imagination. Collectors came and bought his work but not museums nor critics, and this both Pinchas and I found distressful.

The spring of 1977 Pinchas had been featured in A Painting Show at the recently opened alternative museum, P.S. 1. The show included Nicholas Africano, Neil Jenny and Robert Moskowitz who shared Cohen Gan's interest in representational forms alongside the more abstract group including Mary Heilmann, Jake Berthot and Pat Steir. In the same year, he was

featured in the show MAP at MoMA alongside Jasper Johns, Robert Morris and Robert Smithson.

For Cohen Gan the human figure was simply an abstract element and a unit that when placed in a pictorial field would demonstrate an activity. He called these "Figurative Circuits;" the human figure interactive within the world and those relationships to the world whether with others, objects or simply with space, could be explained as a mathematical formula. Cohen Gan was a kind of cross between the imaginative worlds of, say, Marc Chagall, and the numeric and conceptual thinking of Mario Merz. In effect the work is quite minimal, less is more is his philosophy, and this practice found its way into works on paper, paintings on cotton sheets with attachments or paper cut outs ...

Cohen Gan saw in any and all materials the possibilities of a creative enterprise much like his Arte Povera contemporaries filled however with brilliant coloration skills owing to his North African roots. He would collage, he would tear paper, and he would cut, paste, and find any way to explicate the notion of man in the world, a man-made world by the way. He diligently worked in series, each work a permutation of the previous piece. The notion of systems was active everywhere in music (Philip Glass); dance (Trisha Brown), and art (Sol LeWitt).

Cohen Gan became increasingly frustrated in New York. The lack of attention from critics and curators caused him to eventually leave and return to Israel. His last solo show was in 1982 at the San Francisco Art Institute with an essay by curator Mark Rosenthal. Contemporary art in those years was still considered a relatively odd and idiosyncratic area of interest. A small but growing circle of collectors and dealers only came into their own in the decade of the 80s when the corporate world discovered the art world.

Now with this exhibition it is possible to see where he went and how he developed on the course of several decades. Cohen Gan was never at a loss for ideas and he took his language and found ways to reinvent the figure in many ways. The series of works on paper drawn on envelopes from the early 1990s was surely the next step in the evolution of ideas from circuit to a somewhat dream state. Dark and brooding, these drawings look like apparitions and have a connection to somewhat eccentric artists like Sigmar Polke and Jiri Georg Dokoupil.

Collage was always a factor in Cohen Gan's work. Cut out, pasted, glued and attached elements for the painting field to operate as a thought field as the object attached having dimensionality and therefore gravitas. In his review of the show Artforum reviewer Jeff Perrone commented on what he felt was Cohen Gan's childlike spirit. While it does suggest a lack of gravitas in the work, there is an element of truth here, pointing to Cohen Gan's reliance on imaging as opposed to observing. Not neo Expressionist as was the tendency then almost worldwide, but still diagrammatic.

Above all, Cohen Gan is a humanist, an anomaly in a world that is more and more ruled and regulated by technology and technologists. But we need artists. Moreover, even though many artists whose characters much like those in a Samuel Becket play are trapped by their own vulnerable humanity. Cohen Gan's nameless, sexless actors are living in uncertainty, not identified and defined by Renaissance space but instead by a notated mathematic formula. This code identifies them in some yet to be disclosed system and define their function and meaning.

Givon Art Gallery

As the images and symbols sent out decades ago on the Voyager satellite the hope was to communicate both our humanity and the science that binds us.

The next decade sees larger works, large canvases worked the usual way with plywood attachments and collaged elements; the figure is a presence exploring the field, a traveler in a way, maybe even a nomad. It is not for nothing that the artist had been in the MAP show previously since these large canvases have the look of fields or areas of land. For an Israeli the questions of land and borders is certainly an important one, a topic that must be addressed daily. There is something didactic at work here. Later using a very informal template Cohen Gan fashions the figure cut in wood and built then on the surface of wood supports. The painting becomes a wood relief. In a different world this might be considered a reliquary of sorts. Here it is a kind of placard asking the viewer to decode the message. For me they suggest the artist's work in his studio; the figure connected by a three-dimensional circuit to painted canvases.

All in all Cohen Gan redefines painting. For him it is an area of exploration defined less by tradition than by an opened questioning of traditions. Here he joins the ranks of a wide field of artists who pushed the limits of painting in a variety of directions: the post Minimal squad consisting of artists like Lynda Benglis, Jonathan Borofsky, and Richard Tuttle.

Nowadays, as the art world begins to reexamine and reassess the past few decades of movements and developments, Cohen Gan should be on a list of artists to be studied and promoted to a wider, international audience. His is a language that addresses everyone, "propositions" as he might explain them; works that serve as windows onto the world.

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October 2019

Sharon Springs, NY