

## LOOKING THROUGH JEANE COHEN

George Liebert

Looking at Jeane Cohen's paintings puts me in mind of these lines by Robert Duncan:

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow,  
As if it were a scene made up by the mind,  
That is not mine, but is a made place,  
That is mine, it is so near to the heart...

We've all been there, walked through the woods, crossed a meadow, looked out over the water and lost ourselves in reflection. Found ourselves is more apt.

Painting is a language for initiates. It assumes we are interested and have cultivated enough of an understanding of its history and possibilities to understand the message conveyed. In this regard it is an elitist medium; assuming we have had the time, training, and interest to form said understanding. A painter like a poet is understood not only by how she is unique, but also by how the dead artists preceding her

inform her work; and by extension how her contribution to the art form deepens and changes our understanding of them. T.S. Elliott says as much in the essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, 1919.

To see Cohen's work is to experience the tradition of landscape painting afresh, her contributions to this silent voice many. It helps me to think of her work in terms of jazz improvisation.

I imagine John Coltrane standing on the stage at the Village Vanguard around 1961 playing twelve sets a week. Everybody expects, and desires, him to play *My Favorite Things*. We've all had the Julie Andrews version imprinted in our collective brain. Most of us are familiar with Trane's recordings of it. And that's the point: to see how he and his crew will take it apart, and reassemble it, today, revealing new possibilities in what we thought we knew, making the familiar new, yet again.

Indeed, what Jeane Cohen does with her continuously innovative impressions of the landscape is in my mind what John Coltrane did to jazz standards, reinventing fresh each and every time, and using our familiarity to inform his difference.

In the same way, Cohen takes apart our remembrance of the landscape's forms and reassembles them again and again, revealing each time a new personal order that could not have been anticipated by either artist or viewer. Cohen's powerful work changes what can be noticed on one's daily walk through the woods, revealing something new and offering fresh insight into the essence of what is most familiar.

In the true spirit of give and take, Cohen's paintings also echo the visual voice of the dead from Willem de Kooning to Theodore Rousseau. Choosing to take history as her friend, Cohen's recharging of aged voices will forever change the way we see those works by expanding the syntax with her contemporary mode.

Cohen has practiced landscape painting as a source for endless invention to fluency. It brings to mind the work of another avid interpreter, Joan Mitchell, who makes different choices of each and every aspect to be encountered. Like our own central nervous systems, every moment and every angle are personal, even while we navigate the commons.

Cohen often works close to home. And while not Rousseau's noble oaks of Barbizon, the Skokie Lagoons and scraps

of city parks offer vistas enough to expand her painter's voice. Blake's reminder "To see a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower" seems also to have struck a deep nerve in Cohen. Her work reminds us to slow down, take a longer moment and to reflect on the myriad variations of natural order that surround us.

At a moment when hundred-year floods and fires have become commonplace, nature is threatened and, as some contend, painting is dead, Jeane Cohen's work reminds us of what is at stake—past, present and future.

In closing I return again to Duncan:

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