

# Creative synergy

A portrait of New York City artist  
Martin Cohen



By Sandy Naiman

**M**artin Cohen's life changed forever one February night in 1981 when all of his favorite rock

stars came flying out of the sky, led by Peter Gabriel as the Antichrist, and King Tut rose out of his bed. Terrified, the then-22-year-old Cohen began hurling soda-pop bottles and telephones, shattering a 30-foot wall of

windows in his parents' Long Island home, along with—or so he thought—his dreams of being an artist.

Cohen was alone in the house at the time while his parents were vacationing in Florida. Police were summoned to

the residence after his destructive behavior set off a security alarm.

Now 47, Cohen reluctantly recalled this experience recently at the Bombay Express, one of dozens of trendy restaurants on Ninth Avenue in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen. The place is only a few blocks from the Fountain Gallery—which Cohen was instrumental in founding in 2000, and where he is a prominent artist.

Early in the dinner hour on a balmy spring afternoon, the restaurant is empty. Cohen is tall, gentle, and soft-spoken, a teddy bear of a man with clear blue eyes and thick, wavy light brown hair tinged with grey that curls around the collar of his

pale blue shirt. Initially, he seems tired after his shift as an internal messenger at Neuberger Berman, an East Side brokerage firm, but after ordering an appetizer platter, chicken biryani, and a Diet Coke, he unwinds and continues his story.

"I was hospitalized and I slept for days, but when I finally woke up and was discharged, they gave me no medication, no diagnosis, and no follow-up care. They just thought I was a kid doing drugs."

### An encounter with est

Martin's father, Isreal Cohen, recalls that a few weeks before his son's psychotic break, Martin had attended an est (Erhard Seminars Training) transformation program in Manhattan on a friend's recommendation.

"Marty came home flying. All he talked about was this program," Isreal says.

Est was a controversial self-help movement that burned through the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, promising to "strip people of the mental and emotional 'trappings'

imposed on them by the outside world and to teach them to accept themselves and take responsibility for their lives, rather than blaming others for what they are," according to a 1977 article by *New York Times* health writer Jane Brody. For many hours over a weekend, est trainees were forced to sit without eating, smoking, going to the bathroom, or leaving the room while an overbearing leader taunted them and battered their self-esteem. "Many were reduced to tears; others fainted or rolled on the floor; some vomited," Brody reported.

Often the most vulnerable and fragile individuals were drawn in by the est promise. Rather than self-acceptance, however, many est alumni ended up emotionally damaged. A 1977 *American Journal of Psychiatry* study reported that a number of est participants were devastated and developed permanent psychosis.

Isreal Cohen believes the night his son "almost destroyed the house," shortly after returning from his est weekend, "was the start of all Marty's problems." Before that, he says, "he was one of the sweetest guys you could meet, with a great bunch of friends."

### Development of an artist

The eldest of three children, Martin Cohen was born in Flushing, Queens. Later, as his father's health-care personnel and equipment business prospered, the family moved to the more affluent village of Roslyn on Long Island.

"He had a pretty normal upbringing and was a well-rounded kid who excelled at sports, but art was always a big part of his life," his father says. "He attended a school which championed artistic and creative children."

Martin Cohen says he has always found a sense of peace creating his art. "I used to feel safe when I was drawing or painting," he says. "Art was my escape, my sanctuary. It was something I needed to do, that needed to be expressed, that I had to explore. I even loved the smell and feel of the oil paint, the oil pastels—all the materials I used."

Throughout junior high and high school, Cohen studied life drawing. He became a protégé of the late Viggo Holm Madsen, a nationally known print-



Opposite: "Miles and Dizzy," 2005, oil on paper, 14" x 20".  
Above: "Indian Burial," 1996, oil on canvas, 72" x 54".  
Images courtesy of FOUNTAIN GALLERY.

maker and teacher who encouraged him to experiment with a variety of materials, techniques, and artistic styles.

Later, when Cohen was an undergraduate in the bachelor of fine arts program at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Purchase—despite his 1981 breakdown, he was able to return to college—art critic Irving Sandler introduced him to the work of the Abstract Expressionists, including Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, and encouraged him to delve into the abstract in his own painting.

For two years after graduating from Purchase in 1982, Cohen studied at The New York Studio School before enrolling in graduate school at the College of Fine Arts at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University. There, the contemporary artist Sam Gilliam took him under his wing and fostered his serious forays into Abstract Expressionism, now Cohen's defining artistic style.

After completing his master of fine arts degree at Carnegie Mellon in 1986, he moved back to New York to pursue his life as an artist.

### Brilliant and prolific

Cohen has meticulously catalogued every piece of art he has ever created, in dozens of large black art books stacked in his one-bedroom apartment-cum art studio: pen and ink reclining

#### SYNERGY:

a mutually  
advantageous  
condition in  
which the  
whole is  
greater than  
the sum of  
its parts.



"Doors of Expression I," 2001, mixed media on wooden door, 72" x 36". Image courtesy of FOUNTAIN GALLERY.

nudes he drew at the age of 10; vibrant, pulsating oil pastel landscapes he did at 12; and delicately shaded architectural studies of wooden structures in pencil, created at age 14.

Other books contain a seemingly endless collection of his sly, satirical, witty collages—photo-montages in which he juxtaposes cutouts of hundreds of heads of self-important political figures with the bodies of other famous personalities, or gargoyles, “so I can make fun of people who take themselves too seriously,” he quips.

Page after page, his progress, his artistic development, his playing with style, his prodigious output, are brilliantly evident and dizzying.

His more recent paintings are intricately detailed, dynamic, splintered and shard-like mixed-media images on

huge canvases. These Abstract Expressionist works include a series of 30 “Doors of Expression” painted on six-and-a-half-foot-tall wooden doors he began working on in 1988. Several hang crowded together among his smaller canvases on every wall of his apartment, even in the windows, blocking almost all the natural light.

Cohen’s representational works include stunning portraits of his favorite pop musicians—Jim Morrison, Neil Young, Keith Richards and Mick Jagger, Madonna, George Harrison, Paul McCartney and John Lennon, Frank Zappa, and others.

### Synergy of art and illness

After 9/11, Cohen began trying to depict the horror of that day on nine door panels to create one sweeping 30-foot-long panorama called “Ground Zero.” He grew so upset and intense, so involved in this ambitious project, that he “got himself into trouble and had a psychotic break,” his psychiatrist, Ralph Aquila, MD, says (after receiving permission from Cohen to discuss his history). “He’s had one or two subsequent ones since, and usually around his artwork, but we’ve been able to prevent a lot.”

Cohen says he works most passionately when his illness is at its worst. He listens to jazz, rock, or classical music while “acting out” on paper and canvas instead of in real life. His mood swings and hallucinations and his art can be singularly synergistic—he feels that in combination, they can enhance his creativity and his work.

Despite the shock of his first psychotic episode while he was a student at SUNY Purchase, his artistic future was far from shattered. Admittedly a “mood-oriented artist,” he says the deaths of his mother and grandmother, as well as the suicide of a close high school friend, have influenced his art.

“My illness has informed my work and made me more willing to experiment. It was also therapeutic because it allowed me to express my suffering artistically.”

While Cohen regularly takes his medication now, there are times when

he becomes so wrapped up in his painting, so involved, that he can forget, says Aquila. “And because he’s very sensitive, in a couple of days he can get into trouble. But he’s never intentionally not taken his meds.”

Cohen’s father recalls that following his son’s first breakdown in 1981, the next 14 years “were very confusing and hard on Marty,” with different doctors diagnosing him variously with bipolar disorder or schizophrenia before eventually settling on schizoaffective disorder. Martin was repeatedly in and out of mental hospitals, where he was prescribed “heavy-duty chemicals” to ease his episodes of mania, depression, and psychosis. “He couldn’t handle the side effects, he’s so sensitive, and it was a very difficult time,” his father says.

But when he was well, Cohen’s energy was limitless. Between 1986 and 1992, he worked as a fine art installer for several art galleries and museums, while producing his own paintings and collages. In 1992, he acquired his own East Village gallery space and framing business—called Ten B.C.—through a friend of his father’s. There, living with his brother in an apartment above the gallery, he staged his first New York exhibition and practically sold out. After several successful group and solo exhibitions, his complex, energetically colorful mixed-media canvases and collages were starting to attract attention in Manhattan’s mega-competitive art world.

Yet he was constantly struggling financially, and although he was seeing a psychotherapist, Cohen says, the therapy wasn’t helpful. “I got sick of therapy and I wanted to work.”

Enter Esther Montanez.

### A life-changing meeting

It was 1995. Cohen needed to get a prescription filled, but the pharmacy wouldn’t process it, claiming something was wrong with his Medicaid. He left and was walking down the street when a woman stopped him and said, “You look upset. Can I help you?”

“I told her what had happened,” Cohen says, “and she said, ‘Come with me.’”

(Continued from page 28)

Esther Montanez took Cohen's arm and marched him right back into the pharmacy, where she said, "Hey, this is a good friend of mine. Give him his medication. He needs it." And they did.

Montanez was the director of special projects at Fountain House, a 59-year-old pioneering community-based and multifaceted mental health service called a Clubhouse run by and for people with mental illnesses. Cohen became a member of Fountain House and Montanez became his close friend and ally.

At the same time, Cohen came under the care of his current psychiatrist, Ralph Aquila, MD, at The Store Front practice, located minutes away from Fountain House.

The Store Front is a one-stop shop for Fountain House members. Aquila, who directs the St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital Center's Residential Community Services, specializes in treating people with serious and persistent mental illnesses, 60 percent of whom have been homeless. People in this population often have many more medical illnesses than the general population, so The Store Front emphasizes treating the whole person.

Aquila calls The Store Front's multi-prong approach—which, in addition to psychotherapy, relies on such programs as A.A. and Weight Watchers, as well as caseworkers to communicate a message of hope and provide practical support—"the rehabilitation alliance."

"I try to see Marty every seven to 10 days just to make sure everything is okay. I work with his two key caseworkers so he doesn't start to doubt himself," Aquila says.

## Battling self-stigma

"One of Marty's problems right now is self-stigma. Our main objective is to get him to do his art and work as a teacher, but the main obstacle to that is self-stigma. He doesn't believe in himself and the fact that he can do it, so it's a constant struggle around those issues. He's a great guy, a great teacher, and he has a lot to share with a lot of people."

Aquila and the Fountain House



In "Portrait of Esther" (2006, oil on canvas, 72" x 54", by John Glass & Martin Cohen), Martin focused on making the face look more like his friend and champion, Esther Montanez. Photo: MARCIA MOOSNICK for the *Digest*.

caseworkers meet with Cohen on a regular basis to emphasize his strengths, communicate with each other, and try to stay on top of any potential problems. As a team, they encourage him to be successful.

"During the time that I've been working with him, Marty's become a much deeper and more perceptive artist," says Aquila. "His capacity to do his artwork and teach, and the knowledge he brings to his art, have dramatically improved over the years."

And according to Isreal Cohen,

Aquila has done more for his son than anyone else ever has.

"He talks to him on his level and they've developed a friendship," Cohen's father says. "Also, he makes sure that Marty takes his meds. I know he loves my son."

## More than a gallery. A movement.

Once settled into the Fountain House community, Martin Cohen embraced one of Montanez's innovations—the Artist of the Month Club—and along



"White Triangle," 1990, oil and collage on canvas, 60" x 45".



"Blue Window," 1995, oil on canvas, 72" x 54".



"Red Geometric Landscape," 2005, oil on paper, 32" x 24".

with other Clubhouse members began displaying his art around the Clubhouse's elegant Georgian Colonial headquarters on West 47th Street.

"Esther was a whirlwind, a powerhouse," Cohen says. "One day she came to me with the idea of opening an art gallery at the Fountain House Thrift Shop (at the corner of 48th and Ninth Avenue), and she asked me to help."

The initial idea came from Fountain House executive director Kenn Dudek, who regularly visits many of the more than 300 international Clubhouses that sprang from the Fountain House model. When he saw beautiful paintings by a member displayed in a Scandinavian Clubhouse, he suggested that Fountain House open its own gallery.

A number of talented members, including Cohen, jumped at the chance to run a Manhattan gallery for Fountain House artists. Montanez, "with her usual flair," Dudek recalls, engaged a large group of members, volunteers, and recruits she grabbed off the street. "She was famous for that," he says.

Today, two of Cohen's Abstract Expressionist works, called "Esther's Wings," hang at Fountain House opposite a striking portrait of Montanez that he and another Fountain Gallery artist painted. One of these "Wings" is in memory of Cohen's grandmother, also

named Esther, and the other honors Montanez, who championed him and his art. A driving force behind Fountain House for more than 40 years, Esther Montanez died in 2005 at age 70.

Fountain Gallery opened in June 2000 as a nonprofit co-operative run for and by Fountain House artists living with mental illnesses. Beginning with a coterie of six artists, today close to 40 painters, sculptors, and photographers not only contribute to New York's art scene but are challenging and changing common myths and misperceptions about people with mental illnesses, in keeping with the Fountain Gallery motto: "More than a gallery. A movement."

### Blooming recognition

Cohen's work is included in several important corporate collections, among them that of the Estée Lauder Companies Inc., which is overseen by curator Elizabeth Szanzer Kujawski. Kujawski is also responsible for Ronald S. Lauder's personal art collection, described by Glenn Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art, in a recent *New Yorker* article as "the finest collection of modern art assembled by an individual in the world today."

"Marty is a very good artist in his use of color and application of materials," Kujawski says. "His paintings are striking and very beautiful."

Last fall, the Estée Lauder Companies Inc. sponsored a solo show of Cohen's art at Vivian Horan Fine Art on East 67th Street. It was a departure for Cohen, outside the nurturing fold of the Fountain Gallery, but the opening was packed and his paintings looked spectacular on the walls of the elegant second floor townhouse gallery. "It was a great evening and a great opportunity for me," he says.

That was Cohen's most recent solo exhibition; several of his pieces were part of a group show at the Fountain Gallery May 3 to June 30 called "Transitions."

Right now, Cohen is actively looking for teaching opportunities, but he is also buying new materials, oil paints, and canvases, and conceptualizing the next phase of his creative vision. **SZ**

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