

VISIONARY ART

The Art of Martin Cohen

A few years ago, Martin Cohen was near a lumberyard and spotted something that would later become part of his body of work.

"They had these amazing hollow doors," said Mr. Cohen, who is a prolific painter of abstract art. "They're great structures. They're better than any canvas." He ended up acquiring the doors and making them part of an ongoing series.

Mr. Cohen, 46, has studied under several respected artists, including Sam Gilliam, Clayton Pond, and the late Viggo Holm Madsen.

He was formally trained at the State University of New York at Purchase. While at college, Mr. Cohen said he experimented with LSD and marijuana. After graduating, Mr. Cohen—who has been told that he has a combination of bipolar disorder and schizophrenia—said he had his first emotional break. Despite these challenges, Mr. Cohen participated in a graduate program at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

He credits a program called The Storefront, operated by St. Luke's–Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York, with being a key component in his ongoing recovery and his ability to continue with his art.

The Storefront offers its patients psychiatric and primary care, education about medications, wellness programs, and counseling services, including 12-step programs.

Mr. Cohen has had shows at the Fountain Gallery, the artists' cooperative in New York City. He also has exhibited at several group shows, and has sold paintings to corporate clients.

—Deeanna Franklin



Dreamscape, 1995



Windows II, 2004

The Artist's Reflections

I've been interested in art since I was a little kid. My father was a big influence on me. He used to paint in our basement. When I was 3 or 4 years old, I used to watch him. He just gave me all of his old canvases to paint over. I studied with my first art teacher near our house on Long Island. My first early influences were Picasso, van Gogh, and Cézanne. I started experimenting with painting and drawing. When I was in junior high and high school, I was sent to C.W. Post College to do figure drawing. As time went on, my parents became more supportive of this being a career for me.

I applied to a lot of colleges, and my teacher at the time, Clayton Pond, did a show at Carnegie Mellon, and I helped him install the show. I really liked Carnegie Mellon, but I went to SUNY Purchase because I wanted to be closer to home, and they gave me almost a full scholarship. I was a painting major with a minor in printmaking. I never actually wanted to be one of these mass-producing printmakers for my own work. I have to admit I was experimenting with drugs in those days, too. I graduated in 1982.

I wasn't diagnosed until I got out of Purchase. Basically what it came down to was a lot of events that happened, followed by a mixture of some of my drug background. I did LSD, and I smoked a lot of pot in college. At that time, I don't think it had a big effect on my psychiatric background. I think it had more to do with the deaths in my family. I had an emotional break. My grandmother passed away first, suddenly, from cancer. It totally shook me. She was one of the closest people in my life.

My first breakdown was right after I finished at Purchase. I had the breakdown on a visit to the college after I graduated. Right after graduation, I went back to my parents' house, and I went to the Studio School of New York for about 3 years. I started having hallucinatory episodes in 1983. I started destroying my parents' house and acting out all sorts of hallucinatory dream-type things. Each time I've had these episodes, which I've had a whole bunch, I call them these long dreamscape kind of episodes. A few things happen; I don't sleep for a couple of days, and my eating patterns are weird. I wasn't on any medication that first time. That first episode lasted about half a week and it was horrific. I created a whole different environment in my parents' house while they were in Florida. I broke all of the windows; I was thinking that embryonic forms were growing in the glass. Still to this day, I think it was triggered by a mixture of emotional things and some of the hallucinatory drugs I was taking. I've had about 12 breakdowns, and you could say that they all overlap into one tremendous thing. It's like Pandora's box breaking open. Most of my hospitalizations have been for a month. The last breakdown I had was 4 years ago.

I went to Carnegie Mellon for graduate school. My parents were skeptical about this. I moved to Pittsburgh, and I was doing fine for the first 2 years, but I started dabbling with cocaine. It stopped me from sleeping. One of my teachers was [the visiting artist] Sam Gilliam. I did some of my biggest work with Sam. But by the end of the second year, I had a breakdown. I wasn't put on medication permanently even after my first breakdown. After I

got out of Carnegie Mellon, I did some odd jobs, but my father was also helping me. I'm on disability now, since I joined Fountain House. I've been with them since 1996. Because I wasn't working on a regular job with health benefits or anything like that, I had to find another option. The only option was to apply for Medicaid.

I feel a little trapped today being in the disability system. I've never been a person who had to rely on the government or anything like that. But after settling back in New York, I went over to a place called Post-Graduate [the Post Graduate Center for Mental Health]. I ended up doing a lot of therapy groups, and it was coming to a dead end after a couple of years because I thought I needed to get more motivated in the work area again. I had a period where I was recuperating again from a breakdown, and I thought "enough of this just sitting around talking about problems all the time." That's when the talk about Fountain House came up.

No matter what happened, my art work was always a constant thing, no matter how screwed up the outside life was. It think it's because of my art training. I always set up my spaces the way I really wanted, so I could just come home and work. A lot of people are amazed when they come to see my drawings and paintings. They say, "How were you able to do so much when you had all of these other things going on?" I'll sit at my table in my house and work. It's just a second-nature thing. Recently, I ended up having the worst period ever, where I stopped doing art for almost 10 months. But I guess that had to happen, because the pressures and the stress were so heavy. I needed to take a break. I look back and think it had to happen for a reason, right?

I live in Manhattan now. I turned my apartment into a studio and a gallery. I'm looking at about 50 paintings right now. I'm working on a whole series now of mixed-media stuff that is really great. I'm really excited about it, and I want to get a show on it. I haven't come up with a name for it yet. But it's very urban. It's based on New York City, and it has a lot of architectural structure. It's pretty complex work. I'm using oil paint, found objects, and all kinds of stuff. I'm using a lot of collage again. The texture is getting thicker, too.

"Dreamscape" was based on an illustration thing I was planning based on the nightlife of New York. It has a kind of feeling of compartments. I like to do pieces that look like you're looking at separate rooms. In the new pieces it looks like there are compartments, and it's broken up into separate rooms. Sam Gilliam and I came up with an idea that's called "intervals of space"; the art is broken up into framing elements vs. textural vs. flat areas. That's the abstract work. "Studies for Skull" was done in 1996. A friend of mine brought back some [cattle] skulls from Texas and gave me a couple. I used the skull structure as a basis for abstraction. No matter how abstract I get, I always feel like I have some kind of connection to real life stuff. "Windows II" is dated 2004. I have a real interest in windows and doors, because I paint on them all the time. When my father remodeled his house, he gave me a bunch of doors.

As told to Deeanna Franklin by Martin Cohen.