

Directors' Digressions: The Art of Janie Cohen and Sara Katz

by Cynthia Close

Directors' Digressions, the title of an engaging and insightful exhibition at the Amy Tarrant Gallery in the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts in Burlington, suggests that the artwork represented here by Janie Cohen and Sara Katz is an aside, not the main act in the lives of these two talented women. Both names are familiar to those of us engaged in the arts in Vermont, in large part due to their prominent positions as leaders in their respective institutions: Janie Cohen, director of UVM's Fleming Museum of Art, and Sara Katz, assistant director of Burlington City Arts.

The artist persona of Katz has been very visible in her dual role as artist and arts administrator. Although her position at Burlington City Arts is full-time, she has managed to produce a serious body of work that would make any artist proud. She is represented by Edgewater Gallery in Middlebury.

On the other hand, we know Janie Cohen as a brilliant scholar, curator, and art historian. Her groundbreaking exhibition at the Fleming Museum, *Staring Back: The Creation and Legacy of Picasso's Demoiselles d'Avignon*, along with her monograph on Picasso was met with wide acclaim. Astonishingly, it was the first exhibition about Picasso to appear in Vermont. Cohen has worked at the Fleming for many years, starting as chief curator in 1991.

Resolved and Raw

When John Killacky, director of the Flynn Center, came up with the idea for this exhibition, Katz was comfortable with the exposure of her work in her role as an artist and was prepared with a body of paintings that could be shown and sold.

Katz grew up on a vegetable farm/greenhouse nursery in Cabot, Vermont, and received her undergraduate degree at Skidmore College. She found her focus in painting when she spent a semester in Paris, and her work has been widely exhibited throughout New England.

Katz's paintings are robust, self-assured abstracted landscapes made of rich swaths of paint. Large open passages of sky, as in the diptych *Harbor Fog* (2016), seemed full of life, light, and air. No easy task as any artist can tell you. Katz's connection to place via her agricultural background is evident. Her use of color and shape are reminiscent of the American painter Richard Diebenkorn, who died in Berkeley, California, in 1993.

Katz, in her website, states that the painting process for her "is a constant debate that wavers between resolved and infuriating." After spreading broad swaths of color with a large brush, she progresses to mark making, using graphite and colored pencils with a ruler to define shapes. For Katz, the creation process is a balance of resolving and defining shapes while leaving some parts of the painting raw and therefore vigorous.

Stitching Connections

Cohen has trained many fine curators who have worked for her and then gone on to lead other institutions. Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, now curator of collections at the Dayton Art Institute in Ohio, was among those who Cohen mentored. Of her experience working with Cohen, DeGalan says, “Her mind is constantly working to connect things and form ideas around art in all its guises ... It really served as a driver for me to expand my thinking, and I am forever grateful for that experience.” This quote provides a clue to understanding the motivations underpinning Cohen’s work with textiles, a medium we tend to associate with craft rather than fine art. That work, included in *Directors’ Digressions*, challenges the viewer to think about what represents “art” to them. Unlike Katz, Cohen is reluctant to assume the title artist. She has been a passionate collector of textiles, pieces of cloth that have a history, for as long as she can remember. She told me it might have all started in her childhood when she had a strong attachment to her security blanket. She literally chewed it to shreds to the point where her parents cut it up into eight pieces and doled it out to her a scrap at a time, hoping to make it last. Cohen calls this story of her early attachment to a well-used piece of cloth her “creation myth.”

She started gathering pieces of cloth in college, just interesting snippets, not consciously “collecting,” and making things, such as wall hangings and soft sculpture. At that time, in the late 1970s, it was becoming acceptable for artists to work with fabric. But the things Cohen made were just for herself, or she’d give them as gifts to friends and family. It wasn’t until the late 1980s or early 1990s when she started to consciously collect textiles, primarily old fabric, some of it Japanese.

That cultural influence is evident in four pieces included in this exhibition: *House Band* (2007), which uses a Japanese apron; *Renunciation* (2002), which also incorporates a fragment from a Japanese apron; *Floating World* (2015), with a piece of vintage Japanese Katazome, a method of dyeing fabric; and *Divine Wind* (2015–2016), with some vintage Japanese kimono fabric. None of these pieces, or other works by Cohen, are for sale. The delicate intimacy of her wall hangings, all hand sewn, invite the viewer in for a closer look. *Testimony* (2008–2016), made of cloth, thread, and ink on paper, includes a handwritten note scribed well over 140 years ago: “Abigail Thompson Jones’ last sewing. Age 76 years 4 mos. She had been a beautiful sewer but was struck with death when these stitches were made. My mother’s last stitches Dec. 28, 1876 died the same day in the eve at 20 min of 11 pm. Cherished by a loving daughter and granddaughter.” Cohen has a very holistic approach and sees the making of the work as part of her creative practice. She imagines that she will continue this work as long as her eyesight allows. She sews in a room that used to be the parlor in her 1880s home. It is a place where she goes to relax and let her mind travel, perhaps “to connect things and form ideas around art in all its guises.”

Integrated Work

While the work exhibited in the modest space of the Amy Tarrant Gallery could not be more different, it is individually and collectively so strong, so representative of the women who made it, that the show manages a certain equilibrium, like yin and yang.

Ultimately, it seemed evident to this viewer, whether it was paintings produced in an artist's studio or cloth sewn at home, that this work is integrated and integral to the professional lives of the two creative women who make it, Janie Cohen and Sara Katz. As Katz told me, she "brings her artist self with her": she is a "whole person," whether in the office at the BCA or in her studio at home.

Artwork in the show, which opened on September 10, will be on display through November 26. The Edgewater Gallery will be showing additional work by Sara Katz from November 1 to December 31. Janie Cohen has some exciting shows planned for the Fleming Museum in the spring of 2017. Two of these exhibitions will draw from the museum's extensive Asian collection; another will feature the photography of Catherine Jansen, a fascinating artist who also makes interesting use of textiles.