

# Larry Cohen: The View From Here

P E T E R F R A N K

**T**raditions don't die hard in California art, they simply have a hard time being born. And they have an even harder time being transplanted from elsewhere, which is ironic considering how many Californians are themselves transplants. The difficulty may lie in the fact that so many of those émigrés have settled here in order to leave traditions, memories, experiences and histories behind. It befalls native Californians as well as other Pacific Coast natives then, to establish artistic traditions in the Far West, whether Bay Area figuration (Diebenkorn an Oregonian, Bischoff born in Berkeley) or L.A. Light-and-Space (Irwin from Long Beach, McCracken and DeLap from the East Bay, Bell a Valley boy). Furthermore, it befalls natives to import traditions and refashion them to the notable exigencies of the California context.

Larry Cohen, for example, has known no home but Los Angeles. Yet he works in the great landscape tradition devised in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe—painterly, atmospheric, expressive more in its tone and composition than its incident—and he applies it with startling rigor and sensitivity to the terrains most familiar to him. I say “startling” because, in Cohen's hands, those vistas we take for granted, even disdain as banal or merely picturesque, reveal themselves as subtle, complex, even curious and thrilling.

Cohen continues the Euro-American landscape tradition by translating its sensibilities to his time and place. Poussin's brooding pastorals, Rembrandt's humid scumble, Corot's verdancy, even the pomp of Canaletto's water-city prospects are all beside the point when it comes to rendering the hills and bays, tile roofs and gridded streets of L.A. or San Francisco, all basking in a sub-tropical marine sunlight

and yet bustling with late-modern American energy. But Claude Lorrain's French countryside and the town views of Vermeer crucially instruct Cohen in the craft of seeing and rendering space, as do paintings of the Barbizon countryside, the Hudson River's wild banks and the hills and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century subdivisions of the Bay Area.

4 With their many elevated vantages, California's metropolitan areas can be surveyed grandly and even sensuously. While so many California artists wander in the wilderness or dote on the details of contemporary suburbia, Cohen avails himself of these striking vistas, where the view in even one direction takes in a wide variety of geological and social formations. Architectural critic and historian Rayner Banham analyzed Los Angeles as a locus of "four ecologies": Cohen depicts it as a constant, dramatic, but ultimately coherent transition between these ecologies; and he finds the same captivating sense of episode in San Francisco and environs.

Cohen is keenly aware of how the settled parts of San Francisco have an even density to them, less clumped and sporadic than the isolated dwellings of Malibu and less teeming than the areas surrounding Los Angeles's multiple downtowns. The effects of fog and low-lying clouds on Bay Area light engross him, not least because the same

conditions down south simply do not bring about those same effects. At the same time, Cohen is fascinated by the topographical similarities between the two cities, similarities belied by their very different social characters.

Are Cohen's panoramic views of California's great cities merely naïve celebrations of the cities' greatness? Devoid of people as his scenes are, do they simply sweep our social stresses under a rug of sub-tropical vegetation and late-modern stucco? No, because the paintings and their painter assume the viewer's knowledge of, even sensitivity to, the existence of such stresses. They suggest that there is an aspect of urban existence on our side of the Pacific Rim that is something other than catastrophic or prosaic, but is also an elaborate, engaging part of life. Just as the Parisian impressionists included factory smokestacks, with their array of social implications, in their depictions of the Seine upriver from Paris, Cohen paints in the skyscrapers and high-rises that interrupt the rolling greenswards of Presidio Heights and El Cerrito, Pacific Palisades and Century City, mapping out environments as debates between humanity and nature.

Cohen's is a latter-day impressionism, which recapitulates the most challenging aspects of that style—those aspects that thrust the complexities of modern life

in our faces rather than bury them in a garden. Cohen may regard these complexities from a distance, but it is not a safe distance; however lucidly composed his elements, however lambent his light, his views evince the problems of real estate and environment, and the issues of health and social tension they infer. Modern life, his pictures remind us, is the garden and the problems at once.

There is a strong landscape tradition—of relatively recent vintage, but still fixed as a tradition—in the northeast United States, a kind of matter-of-fact impressionism that regards rural and urban space as equally intriguing. The participants in this tradition are manifold, but they share a preoccupation with the dialectic they see operating between light and subject matter, paint and picture. Larry Cohen is in the vanguard of an emerging West Coast counterpart to this East Coast landscape school; an awakening realization among painters roaming the streets of San Diego, the shores of Santa Barbara and the meadows of Marin County that the spaces they inhabit and pass through are imbued with resonant visual nuance, with a poignancy born not only of human drama, but of purely optical effect. When that effect reaches us, it serves at once to remind us of urban vicissitude and to mitigate its

harshness. You could compare it to a walk in a city park—not an escape from the city, but an availing of the urban space's more benign factors.

Little-known to the art history books is the school of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century painters based in the south of France who approached their environment the same way their northern contemporaries did. Painters such as Paul Guigou rendered the open fields and distant mountains of the Massif and the Midi with the same sensuous facticity that Théodore Rousseau and Charles Daubigny applied to the Barbizon bosk. Later, the southerners' subject matter would be taken up by more fervent innovators such as Cézanne and van Gogh; but in glorying in Provence as it appeared to them, this informal Second Empire *École du Sud* averred that any and every landscape is a source of intricate, and infinite, sensation. In respectful contrast to today's East Coast Barbizonists, Larry Cohen is helping to re-establish a contemporary American version of Guigou's *École midiennne*. It's about time.

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