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Blurring the Boundary Between Art and Design

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ART REVIEW

NEW CANAAN, Conn. — Philip Johnson left behind a complicated legacy, which is entering an expansive new phase with exhibitions like the current one of Elaine Lustig Cohen's paintings from the 1960s and '70s at his 49-acre estate in New Canaan, Conn.

Johnson, journalism behooves me to say, embraced fascism in his youth: He published articles in right-wing magazines and attended Nazi rallies in Potsdam and Nuremberg before abandoning politics in 1940. And architecture wonks like to point out that his famous Glass House (1949) on the estate was largely copied from his mentor, Mies van der Rohe, who designed and built the pioneering steel-and-glass Farnsworth House (1945-51) in Plano, Ill.

But Johnson, who was the founding director of the architecture department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and had a huge influence on postwar American architecture, also acted much like a modern curator. He championed the artists Jasper Johns, Frank Stella and Andy Warhol (who brought the Velvet Underground to play on the Glass House grounds in the late '60s)

Elaine Lustig Cohen
The Glass House

and encouraged Ms. Lustig Cohen, who became an award-winning graphic designer as well as a painter.

In a recent interview with Artforum magazine, Ms. Lustig Cohen recounted that she had never designed anything before her husband, Alvin Lustig, died in 1955. He had been commissioned to create signage for the Seagram Building in Manhattan, and Ms. Lustig Cohen ended up doing the work — and eventually the catalogs for museums designed by Johnson, who died in 2005. Included in a display case here are examples of Ms. Lustig Cohen's design work, including the catalog for "Primary Structures," a landmark 1966 exhibition of Minimalist art at the Jewish Museum; a book about Johnson's architecture; and a 1965 brochure celebrating the Whitney Museum of American Art's new Marcel Breuer building. (The Whitney, of course, recently left that building, which is being rechristened by the Metropolitan Museum of Art as the Met Breuer.)

The 10 paintings on view in the underground gallery that Johnson created on his estate (he called it the kunstbunker) are very much in keeping with her design work. They are hard-edged, geometric and abstract, built of rectilinear forms that radiate from their centers, spilling occasionally onto the sides of the canvases. Ms. Lustig Cohen has said that her paintings were inspired by architecture, particularly buildings by Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler that she saw in Los Angeles. But they hark back, naturally, to pioneers of geometric abstraction like Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich and Aleksandr Rodchenko, and to '50s painters like Ellsworth Kelly.

"Elaine Lustig Cohen" continues through Oct. 19 at the Glass House, New Canaan, Conn. The show is included in tours of the Glass House, for which tickets must be purchased in advance; 866-811-4111, theglasshouse.org.

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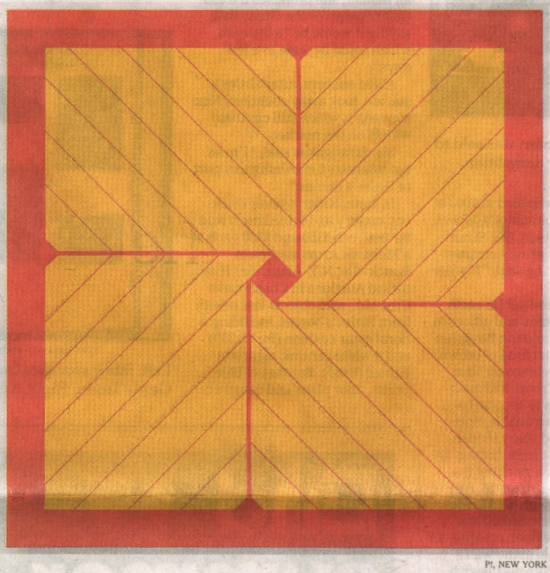

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An exhibition at Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Conn., features paintings by Elaine Lustig Cohen, including an untitled acrylic, left, from 1967. Also on view are examples of Ms. Lustig Cohen's design work, including the catalogs for museums designed by Johnson.

Only these are '60s and '70s paintings: rendered in acrylic, the cool, industrial, fast-drying medium of the day. Some '60s touchstones include painters like Kenneth Noland, Bridget Riley and, of course, Mr. Stella.

One of the defining aspects of Ms. Lustig Cohen's canvases is their palette. While Malevich used black, white and red, and Mondrian specialized in primary colors, Ms. Lustig Cohen reached for secondary hues like orange, green, pink and lavender. Later, a '70s palette took hold, with brown and orange dominating. (After the explosion of psychedelic color in the '60s, and with the United States in the grips of Vietnam and Watergate, more somber natural colors like avocado and brown ruled the '70s.) There is a pleasingly retro effect in both Ms. Lustig Cohen's compositions and their hues.

Are they great paintings? Admittedly, they are somewhat second-string. A laminated checklist at the gallery includes images of the Stella works that are customarily installed there, and one can immediately see the difference between painting qua painting — that is, painting that springs primarily from the vocabulary of painting — and canvases that suggest other disciplines and purposes: architecture's axonometric view, the attention-grabbing book cover or the recognizable corporate logo.

For Ms. Lustig Cohen, painting and graphic design are on a continuum, even if their processes differ, from paste-up to applying pigment on a canvas; drawing was the procedural link between the two. However, in the recent interview, Ms. Lustig Cohen said that early visitors to her studio tended to be writers — Donald Barthelme, Ralph Ellison and John Ashbery. The complex relationship between novels or short stories and their film adaptations might be an analogy for the relationship between painting and design.

It is a pleasure to see her work being revived, as is happening for many women active in the 1950s through the '80s. (Although Ms. Lustig Cohen considered herself an art outsider, she was the first woman to have a solo show at the Mary Boone Gallery, in the '80s, which suggests both the increased visibility women have had in recent decades, and their regrettable lack of historical — and market — traction.)

For the Glass House, exhibiting Ms. Lustig Cohen's paintings in this show, organized by Cole Akers, is a way of showing the variety of artists Johnson supported — but also, as any foundation based on a single person's life and work is mandated to do, a way to reconsider his life and achievements. Johnson's worldview was grounded in an aesthetic purity that echoes, at times with troubling overtones, his early political ideology. Ms. Lustig Cohen's paintings, which blur the boundaries of art and design, serve as helpful metaphors for thinking about and consciously grappling with his legacy rather than ignoring it.

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