



NEW CANAAN, CONN.

ELAINE LUSTIG COHEN

Glass House

ON VIEW THROUGH SEPT. 28

It is more than likely that you have seen Elaine Lustig Cohen's designs for buildings, interiors, books or exhibitions. Stopping on a street corner, you might have lingered over a stack of *New Directions* paperbacks whose California-hued Constructivist covers caught your eye. If you have studied Minimalism, you might recall the image of a vivid red line snaking through a large P on the cover of the Jewish Museum's 1966 "Primary Structures" catalogue. Strolling through Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson's Seagram Building, you might have noticed the blunt font used on the signage. These are just a few of the projects Cohen realized within the two decades of her design career. Cohen collaborated with Johnson for almost a decade and is now the subject of an exhibition at his Glass House. Rather than illustrate the obvious, the show celebrates a lesser-known part of Cohen's creative activities—her dynamic geometric abstractions on canvas. Nine of these paintings, made between 1966 and 1976, are on view.

Cohen began painting after closing her design studio in the early '60s. She worked in a hard-edge manner, and remarked that one could differentiate the designer's focus on finding solutions from the painter's attraction to unearthing problems. In one of the most alluring works in the show, *Centered Rhyme* (1967), truncated chevrons move toward the center of the canvas. Banded with lavender, mustard yellow, Pepto-Bismol pink and flat gray, they never meet at a point, but instead form a small diamond of exposed canvas at the center. A recurring motif in Cohen's abstractions, the diamond produces an off-centeredness in her compositions, a loss of balance, a problem—defined by an interplay of incomplete lines, non-primary colors and breaks in the puzzle-like arrangements.

Cohen's paintings suggest an affiliation with post-painterly abstraction, an anti-expressionist idiom whose name Clement Greenberg coined and whose distinguishing characteristics include rectilinear and brightly colored mark-making. Greenberg introduced the term in a 1964 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that featured Frank Stella, so we take Stella for granted as a member of the style's vanguard. Cohen's paintings conjure Stella's contemporaneous work; but rather than seeming imitative, their structural motifs clearly stem from her 1950s work as a designer. In fact, Stella's line, initially the width of a stretcher bar, can be seen as evolving alongside the visual syntax of commercial graphic design of the 1950s.

Cohen's canvases reveal the possibility of other accounts of hard-edge abstraction in the latter half of the 20th century—narratives that have more cross-fertilization between art and design than is generally acknowledged. Driving home this point are design materials exhibited in the vestibule of the gallery, including Cohen's 1957 brochure for the Seagram Building, her map of New Canaan from the late 1950s and various books and pamphlets made for the Jewish Museum, New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in the 1960s.

The paintings are arranged for visual effect and all but one are on loan from Cohen's own collection. They bear the compositional virtuosity of an experienced artist, a fluid collagist with an understanding of color's expressiveness. They hold the room but do not resolve it as design would; rather, they upend space and continue to intrigue.

—Andrianna Campbell