



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Interview with Jean Cohen

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Transcript

Preface

This interview is part of the *Dorothy Gees Seckler collection of sound recordings relating to art and artists, 1962-1976*. The following verbatim transcription was produced in 2015, with funding from Jamie S. Gorelick.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Jean Cohen in the Dunes near Provincetown on August 24, 1967.

We are talking about a series of paintings that Jean has been working on for the past year or so and our comments will be in relationship to the works being shown. In the case of this particular painting which was done, was it last year, Jean, or two?

JEAN COHEN: This was two years ago, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Two years ago. I understand from what we were talking about before that this was not a, that the procedure in this one was not typical of what has been happening in your more recent work, that instead of building from each work to the next, you were reacting against and so that in this case a painting dominated by yellows, pinks, oranges, very light radiant colors, it might have been logically a reaction from a darker painting that would have preceded it. And I did ask before how did you actually begin it? What would have been the first thing put down on the canvas?

JEAN COHEN: I would have nothing in mind to my knowledge and I would have used yellow. It's calligraphic. I would use a brush and yellow paint against the white canvas so I can lose it fast and at any point when I see something I like, deal with it. It's, in a sense, pulling it out of me and sometimes I'm lucky it happens real fast and that's not so lucky because then it's there but it has to be sustained. Other times you can keep putting paint on the canvas and nothing's happening.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you paint out and change a good bit or do you tend to leave it there, you know, and change very little?

JEAN COHEN: I don't know if I answer your question. This way it's more a process of building up and trying to figure out what's there and taking my cue from what's there to get me to the next step rather than, as many artists will do, destroying. I sort of find my way by structuring.

The opposite, as far as I can figure, putting on paint and finding the image in the paint, like painting out and there it is, painting it out and there it is and painting it out and eventually keeping it.

I try to pretty much if, again, I get a kind of—Well, if there's any kind of vital statement going from the start, I'm going to try to sustain it and build it up slowly, keeping the original image, which means you can't put, I can't put too much paint on a canvas and every touch has to be the right one, which means that most of the painting is non-painting. It's looking at it, in a sense taking my cue from the canvas, not being allowed to touch it till I know what it's saying to me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So that most of the time you'd be standing back here, quite a distance, the length of this house almost, looking at it rather than up close working on it?

JEAN COHEN: Right. My work focuses long range and it's, mostly the work is walking, just walking away to see what I've got, to give it the right touch when I can and then walking away again to see what I've got and not, I think it would be more pleasurable to be able to put paint on but apparently it's not my temperament.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you have, in the years, in the climactic years of Abstract Expressionism when there was so much emphasis on the painting as an enactment and a drama and a action painting and so on, were you at all affected by that outlook at that time or were you working pretty much in the same way?

JEAN COHEN: Well, this way I'm working now I don't think is that removed from action painting. I think its roots are certainly action painting and my training, although it took place, though the training included the beginnings of modern art, when I became a painter certainly the action painting was what was around and that was my big influence.

I think that if action painting meant anything, and I think it does, it will have left a legacy that is being built upon today and what's happening today, and God knows many facets are, little bits and pieces from here and there built onto what was our understanding then will come through, to my thinking, the mainstream from action painting, from the beginnings of modern art and, if I can say it quickly, Cubism and then a reaction against Cubism.

I can't believe that anything that was important one day becomes dead. It just isn't done with the same look but there's an evolution and I think I'm in the evolution and I think many of us are. I think, sadly, the evolution is not being shown in the galleries but, God knows, it's in all the studios and it will be in the galleries soon.

DOROTHY SECKLER: One reason I asked the question was because I think that many commentators on, or who think they are qualified to be commentators on Abstract Expressionism completely overlook the amount of time that the artist does spend in contemplating the work after some forms or strokes or fields of color are set down. This is almost never taken into consideration as part of the process. It's as if the artist once having begun this, you know, the action never stops and I know how untypical that actually is.

JEAN COHEN: Well, action painting was never about emoting and a lesser artist could deal with it that way and that's what's misleading, and the title action painting is misleading because I think some of the best hands, de Kooning's for instance, there was a hard, clear mind behind every stroke that looked emotional. There was a perfect coordination, and when you see someone who doesn't know their business, you know fast enough that that painting looks like a color splash and won't sustain itself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Right. Jean, we were just talking about this very small painting about a foot square which you had done several years ago.

JEAN COHEN: I did that about four years ago and it was an oddball. There always have been odd paintings and oftentimes I like them but they're, it was just something I personally liked that I didn't follow through on because it wasn't happening and, as I perhaps have said, I wasn't going to force anything. Now, all of the work I'm doing looks very like what this is about and that's why I brought it up this summer and more and more the summer's work is this painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you describe a tiny extent what it has in common with what you're doing now, the way the—

JEAN COHEN: It's a simpler image. It's a close-up image. It's a bigger image. This little painting has a large scale to it, wouldn't you say?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

JEAN COHEN: And all the work I'm doing, no matter whether it's large or small, has a large scale to it. I would say that's been in the wind for a while. It's always been an area I've been interested in but somehow wasn't dealing with though it happened, usually the work, the contemporary work in art that I loved usually sufficed to deal with what I didn't have to do. I would deal with the other end of it.

It was never challenging to me to love somebody's work and think I want to do that too. It was enough that they did it and I was glad they did it and I could go to the opposite end. But now more and more these that have crept up on me now and then, this is more with my work and it's, I think my first love is now in my work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: To come back to the specific quality of this one, you have a dominant mass of one color with variations within it, planes within it actually, which carries you throughout the field of the painting with other areas, at the top light, the bottom medium and darker in color, which give it a kind of boundary, smaller bounding shape. Would that be characteristic of your recent work too or had you some other quality in mind?

JEAN COHEN: Not necessarily. This was an image that happened and more and more my images aren't happening. They happened once and then I'm working out of my own work, so that's when I say it's preconceived. It is to that extent. I have decided on the image I will work with and I had no idea when I did this what it would look like, nor do I have any idea what any painting is going to look like. I have some idea, which is more than I had before, and I don't necessarily consider that better or worse. It's just another way of working.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Now that you do work with a more preconceived, would you say a preconceived figuration or shapes or, preconceived, what is preconceived to some extent? A kind of shape, a kind of color, a kind of rhythm—

JEAN COHEN: Not the color. The shape, the image, and you hit on an image that you like and you feel you can explore and keep dealing with it in many different ways until you get bored silly with that and then you have to deal with, then you have to find another, as far as I'm concerned, I have to find another image.

Like about now, I've pretty much explored as far as I want to go with the two or three images I've been working with. I may have to dip back into my other way of working, which is pulling it out of me till I come up with something else I'd like to do.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, we're now looking at a painting which I know you consider, well, not less important but what was your word for it?

JEAN COHEN: Limited.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Limited and—well, I liked the statement you made about it before about

how, what you could do with it and what you couldn't do with it.

JEAN COHEN: Well, I feel that the potential is built right into the work from the start. Certainly for me it is and I'll admit such. At one time it was a challenge to feel that if it were a bad start I'm going to push that and get it into something I can deal with, but that's dealing with paint again and that's another kind of, I really see it as another kind of temperament, like finding the image in the paint.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, and why do—

JEAN COHEN: Mine's more direct, like it's there or it isn't and I think if it isn't I'm not going to fight it, like lose that canvas. It's not that great a loss and start again.

Now, since I believe that how far I can go with the painting is right there immediately, this painting which worked out quickly and right I think is, I like it for what it is and I don't think it's any more than what it is. It deals with refinements, fine points between two shapes, how they relate, and that's it as far as I could see, not much more.

If I wanted to work this painting, I think the only way I could deal with it is to start, not destroy this but begin again with perhaps this idea and maybe I can take it from there but I see no point in making more of a statement than it is or stopping short of a statement when it calls for considerably more depth than this would.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Fine.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Jean, this is a painting which you've done very recently. Would you describe it please?

JEAN COHEN: There are three shapes and an orange background, which doesn't always stay back there, and there are three colors, though I think it looks like more colors. Does it to you?

DOROTHY SECKLER: No.

JEAN COHEN: It's green, yellow, orange.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, it looks like three colors to me.

JEAN COHEN: And there has to be an interaction between all of the shapes and I hope it's active enough so that it doesn't feel necessarily and forever like three shapes in orange, green and yellow.

Why do I feel there's more colors than three? Oh, because I find that the green on the bottom is, feels yellower than the green on top, that the orange changes as it hits the yellow, feels—

DOROTHY SECKLER: It hits in a very different way certainly.

JEAN COHEN: Feels very different as it hits the top of the green.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And the squeeze and the orange between the two shapes seems to affect it in some way too, that little narrow.

JEAN COHEN: For me this is a relatively hard-edge painting and that's not what I'm after. When I hit a strong dark to light, it always looks hard edge. If one went up to it, the edge isn't hard. It's quite

soft. And when my values are closer, of course I don't get that.

So also in dealing with dark and light the image is very much more revealed and it had better be right, every inch of it. That is to say the relationships have got to be right and I think they are in this. I show you this now because it picks up on some of the work I've shown you and it will lead into what's happening, which I don't think is that drastically removed but, nevertheless, is removed from this.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This, then, was one of the group that were more preconceived. You knew when you went to it the kind of shape you'd be dealing with.

JEAN COHEN: To some extent I did, yes.

[Side conversation.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you, in this case, have worked in the large areas of color or would they have been surrounded to any extent by a bounding shape? How do you established the very subtle relationships, you know, in weight and spreading or containing and so on?

JEAN COHEN: Well, in a sense it was originally drawn. I mean, I worked those shapes as they were bounded by line and that's my yellow line which I can get rid of fast. And then if they must expand, they will in the color if it isn't quite that perfect because certainly things will change the minute you deal with color and change it from line to color.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, there's considerable variation, of course, too, and the green has a kind of fluctuating, almost brush-stroke pattern to it. The long, oval shape at the top has, you know, considerable variation.

JEAN COHEN: There's also something, too, which has been happening and I think it's all right. I'm not sure it is but I like it. I mean, when I think about it I'm not sure it is, but I like the way it looks and that's dealing with the look of what's three dimensional or in volume like a big green shape and then the orange which is relatively flat but—

DOROTHY SECKLER: The background orange.

JEAN COHEN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, which isn't meant to be entirely a background but to be an ambiguous field of color.

JEAN COHEN: Yes. Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Which is established mainly by edges, would you say, or by what, or by proportions? I mean, how do you feel about, how do you go about getting it not to be a simple background?

JEAN COHEN: Well, you deal with it. When any shapes come close enough to one another, then you've really got to deal with it, and if you can keep what's happening between two shapes as lively as the two shapes, you're not going to have a background which, again, would have to do with the dimension of how close or how far they are.

For instance, if the green were a little higher, I have a feeling I'd be left with a background, if it

started a little higher. Also I think there's an equilibrium between those shapes. Some are floating away but other shapes pull them down and ground them so there's a contradiction which somehow works out in the end.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, that's what I thought you had intended. Fine.

[Audio break.]

JEAN COHEN: I'd like you to look at this painting. It isn't finished but in a sense it is. The only thing I have to work on is the surface and it will look the same way only it's going to, well, look more right. I show you this painting now because, as far as I'm concerned, it follows as far as I want to go in this direction.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, a large, expansive, oval shape.

JEAN COHEN: Yes, but also there's a kind of a, you know, everything is relative and this is the way it looks to my work. I don't think this is, in a sense, pure as paintings can look pure but for my work it's about as, well, I don't like to use the word sterile but it almost becomes that and, like, I don't want to go an inch more this way. I like it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It has reduced to an extreme with the two parts. You assume, of course, that those two huge shapes are a small segment of a shape that goes far outside the bounds of the canvas, particularly the one on the right. The one on the left you have a bit of an orange at the top which seems to bring it in again more. And the joining in the center, is that to be left where it's just a slight bridge between the two?

JEAN COHEN: It will be left.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It has a very radiant kind of color, of course, this one and the other one too. I mean, that is a kind of pulsating light, orange, yellows that—

JEAN COHEN: Well, in all my color, I try to establish the identity of that very color I'm using. In other words, if I'm using a yellow that's green, I want very much for that yellow to look green and if I'm using another yellow with it, as I have in here, that's orange, I want that yellow to look orange and not a painting about two yellows but a painting about orange and green that's done in two yellows. And it glows. I think it's got to just by the nature of it being the color it is and I think that's what's most important about this painting, that it glows.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, it has an effulgent kind of expansive color.

JEAN COHEN: I think it's a confined painting and it's dealing with a very simple, limited means and, as I say, to continue in that direction is not what interests me. It sort of surprised me that the logical went here but now that it's done I'm not surprised but I'm going to backtrack and I do.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How many paintings or what period of time would this series have occupied, the ones with this kind of color and this kind of shape?

JEAN COHEN: I'd say in the last year and a half it's been moving in this direction. I'd also say that the reaction I talked about before, now if it does not happen in imagery it does in color because though I've always considered, still do, that colors seems to be the last area that the artists have dealt with in this day and age and there's where much of it, the exploration of anything contemporary lies.

Most of my paintings in the last year and a half have been dark and light and not vibrant in color, though that's what I love. And so now, perhaps, being here on the Dunes and the kind of light I have here makes the difference.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So these more or less coincide with your coming to the Dunes, these orange-yellow ones?

JEAN COHEN: I would say that every summer my palette certainly lightens up and glows more.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you very much influenced by Matisse in your formative years as a painter?

JEAN COHEN: I have always loved Matisse and I think he's perhaps one of my favorite artists but I don't think I ever looked like Matisse or wanted to.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Who were your, when you were first finding your way into, you know, modern painting, who would have been the guiding exemplars that influenced you the most?

JEAN COHEN: Well, it was a very hit and miss and—Well, I can say in the very beginning it was representational art and I had spent my summers in Maine and I discovered that, for instance, Marsden Hartley was certainly being quite realistic in what he saw and that amazed me. Maine Coast looked like Marsden Hartley and I didn't think anything could look like those paintings.

And then more and more I had less and less patience with putting down what I saw and loved. For instance, I was seeing the same landscape year in and year out and I couldn't love it anymore. I couldn't see it really. And then I was, at the time, becoming aware of what was happening in New York and that was Abstract Expressionism and the break between starting with the subject matter, dealing with what's seen and having it in front of you and taking off on that or dealing with nothing in a sense was a tremendous break but I wasn't going to wait for that moment of inspiration with the subject matter, like I wasn't going to paint subject matter dead.

I felt that either, and I feel today, that either you love what you see or you have explored subject matter so that, perhaps, you can take it beyond Picasso's exploration and I don't think anybody has explored subject matter beyond the point he has.

Now I'm talking about subject matter and not anything else Picasso has necessarily done but just what he has said. In his work, what do we do about that object? Let's see. I don't think anybody's dealt with the object since him in any new way and I'm not prepared to. It doesn't interest me for one thing but I think it's tremendously challenging and I don't see anything happening. I'm not talking about where the work is good, bad or indifferent but I don't see that there's any original thinking or even challenging in this area.

And once again, I don't feel challenged by it either but since I lost my love for it and I, and nor had I come far enough to deal with it, I think that I had to figure that how in the world do you paint when you don't care about painting what you see because you're not that interested in it? I just wasn't going to set up, for instance, a dead still life and feel dead about it and paint it because I was in the habit of painting. So once again, it became, it started as non-representational and I've stayed with that since.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you were, in the beginning when you came under the influence of Abstract Expressionism, what kind of things were you doing then? Were you working much more with the kind of brush stroke virtuosity of—

JEAN COHEN: No, never that. It was always an image. A shape took precedent over handling, and before I'd even known Gorky's work, people said I looked like Gorky and when I think back now, I can see why because it's, again, it's image I care about. It's not virtuosity and I don't think the abstract expressionists who we think of as giants were simply virtuosos but—

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, but some had a feeling for the expression of energy as a part of it.

JEAN COHEN: Their image would lie in their handling and I make my image. That's a big difference. In a sense the brush is separate from what you see. With them you can't separate brush work from the impact or image of it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This problem of the background and something being on a background, did you solve that differently at various stages?

JEAN COHEN: I don't think so. You see, I haven't answered your question completely and it would make it clear to you. As a student, I was trained at the Bauhaus and, after all, in a way it would seem what could be more opposite from Abstract Expressionism than Bauhaus thinking.

But on the other hand, the two extremes can come together with the control of the Bauhaus and the freeing of the, I really don't know how to say it, of the psychological that the Abstract Expressionism can give you. Consequently, I use that word again, image, because I care about it, pulling forth a vital image and, therefore, sustaining it in a sense when I think of the know-how, the consciousness that the Bauhaus dealt with so in a way they needn't be that opposed, though in the look of them they're very opposed.

I can see, I mean, I dealt with how they came together. As far as I'm concerned, one deals with formal elements and one deals with Expressionism and it needn't be never the twain shall meet. They can both strengthen each other, not contradict each other. This painting that I'm showing you, as opposed to the last yellow one as a matter of fact, I think perhaps why I backtracked from the last yellow one is it begins to be a purely abstract painting and going beyond that it would certainly be. I think it's very hard to paint a purely abstract painting, one that you don't associate with, one that you don't leave the painting and dream a little bit yourself in your own experience.

I think that though this is certainly non-representational, and once again, I care about how I'm dealing with color, I think of a double portrait. I didn't mean it to be. I like the paintings most where I can lend my imagination to it.

I think it's very difficult—not really. Not really. If one knows in advance what they're doing, it isn't so difficult to paint an abstract painting and, in a sense, leave the viewer and I like to be my own viewer. I mean, I like to be a viewer after I've done my work to my work. If you can control a statement from beginning to end and, therefore, it's simply a matter of executing it, you can leave the viewer out of it and that's what I object to, the direction in which the other was going. Here—

DOROTHY SECKLER: The other—

JEAN COHEN: The yellow one.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, the last, yes.

JEAN COHEN: I like it, but I think one more step beyond that and it is what it is forevermore and there's not going to be any lending of itself to you and I think this lends itself a great deal.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And in this case you have—Would you like to describe it a little bit because I think it's a very interesting variation from the others.

JEAN COHEN: I think it's, well, you look into two rounds which are almost square. On either side of the painting, they're yellow, they're yellow-orange. And then these two squarish rounds are surrounded by two oranges but the two oranges come together at the center which make two shapes into one and so—

[END TAPE.]