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Elaine Lustig Cohen



*Elaine Lustig Cohen is an artist, graphic designer, and AIGA medalist known for her spectacular book covers, exhibition catalogues, and collaborations with architects such as Philip Johnson and Richard Meier. Here, she talks about the intersection between design and architecture in her paintings on the occasion of a show of her early work that is on view at Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, through September 28, 2015.*

**MY ABSTRACTION NEVER CAME FROM NARRATIVE;** it came from architecture. Even though I had many friends who were writers, I was never particularly drawn to narrative. When I finished my first paintings on view in the show, such as *Centered Rhyme*, I would look at them and there was always something more I wanted to explore, hence the repetition of shapes such as the diamond, the hexagon, and the parallelogram. There was a morphology to working in series like that. Part of my process did carry over to design, but none of my early design work was painted. Since in the early days of design we pasted up the images, they were manipulations of photographs, colors, and fonts. What did carry over to my paintings from the graphic work was in the sketching, because to do anything that hard-edged I had to do a sketch when I planned the paintings.

For me, painting is a combination of the flat plane and the color. When I sit and look at things, it is always about the interaction of the planes. When I was doing graphic design in the postwar period, architecture was going to save the world! We were all going to be good in life because of the space we lived it in. It's a wonderful dream, but that was the mind-set of the time. On Alvin Lustig's shelf, when I married him, were books by Piet Mondrian, Sigfried Giedion, László Moholy-Nagy, and Lewis Mumford. Postwar expression for me was not about individualism or the freedom of a Jackson Pollock; it was about cultural renewal in an architectonic expression.

Architecture was always a part of my informal training as an artist. When Alvin and I lived in Los Angeles, we did not go to museums. There were no museums there in those days, but during 1948 and 1949, Arts & Architecture magazine commissioned young architects to design the Case Study Houses in Los Angeles. We spent our weekends driving around and looking at Richard Neutra and Rudolf Schindler. That was the entertainment. We were friends with the Eameses; Alvin knew the Arensbergs, and we would go to their home to view art. From the very beginning, art for me was about this interplay with architecture.

My solo design career lasted from around 1957 to the mid-1960s, which is a short history compared with how long I have been painting, but it all started when Philip Johnson called me and said, “Get on with it! Do it.” He had hired Alvin to do the signage for the Seagram Building, but when Alvin died he had not designed anything yet. Two weeks or so later, I got the call that would lead to ongoing collaborations with Philip. I had never designed anything on my own in my life, but I did every piece: the 375 address outside, the Brasserie sign, firehose connections, switches, even things that wouldn’t be seen. It helped me survive for three years. I did all the catalogues for every museum he designed, every piece that had lettering on it. Philip was very fast and always had three ideas for every one idea you showed him, but if I stuck to my guns he would always go with my instincts.

When I started having people over to my studio, they were mainly writers—Donald Barthelme, Ralph Ellison, and John Ashbery—but there were artists too, such as Helen Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell. Everyone was supportive, but I was still an outsider. That is the way history is written. I am still interested in painting, typography, collage, watercolor, and the computer; I still do everything. There is no line for me. You are lucky to be creative and be able to do it.

— As told to Andrianna Campbell