

# Photofile

*Through the Looking Glass*

by Ginnie Gardiner

“The passions that motivate you may change, but it is your work in life that is the ultimate seduction.”  
- Pablo Picasso

One of the first qualities noticed in New York artist Elaine Lustig Cohen's collage work is the special relationship between the photographic and architectonic elements and their resolution. Her training in the Bauhaus tradition is apparent and combines with an innate Baroque sensibility in her brush work. The continuous dialog between geometric space and the figural images with depth reminds the viewer how much back and forth between photography and painting there has been in the past century. I recently spent an afternoon interviewing Elaine about her interests and influences over the many years of her accomplished career as an artist who has also been involved with graphic design, interior design and photography. Her artistic output has included abstract painting, assemblage, collage and photomontage.

An elegant, worldly woman, Elaine maintains a modest, almost self-deprecatory attitude about all her achievements and passions, but her intelligence and talent are immediately obvious. As we sit talking in the living room of her townhouse, which also houses her New York studio, her art is all around us, and is interspersed with a breathtaking array of perfectly placed paintings, objects, and artist books. This setting also provides a wonderful springboard for any number of rich anecdotes and stories. She has exhibited widely over the past thirty years, among others, the now legendary John Bernard Meyers, Mary Boone, the Modernism Gallery in San Francisco, and currently with the Julie Saul Gallery in New York. She also established and managed *Ex Libris* with her second husband, Arthur Cohen. It was a rare bookstore specializing in the European avant-garde, and it became a fixture in the world of printed matter during its many years of active operation. That same love of design and visual thinking that shaped the collection of *Ex Libris*, has also shaped the eloquent, playful and always elegant pieces that the artists has created over the past several years.

On some levels I relate Elaine's style of thinking to that of the eclectic and scholarly mix served up by Colin Rowe; a Courtauld Institute-trained architecture professor who lectured at Cornell University in the early 70's while I was a student there. Among many other topics, he discussed the nature of transparency as phenomenal or literal, especially phenomenal transparency--a concept that explained the effects of layered, frontalized space in both modern architecture and cubist painting. He made comparisons between artists such as Braque and Picasso, Delauney and Mohol Nagy, as they grappled with the phenomenon of layering transparent and opaque planes, and commented on their influence on the design and architecture of le Corbusier and Mies Van der Rohe. In his slide presentations Rowe displayed images side by side that related in a gestalt sense, forming a consistent set of ideas with genuine lyric coherence.

While I was discussing these observations with Elaine, and commenting on these parallels that come to mind in gazing at her collages and photomontages hanging on the walls and laid out around the perimeter of her studio, Elaine gave me a book; *Design Fundamentals*, [Robert Gillman Scott, 1951, McGraw Hill Company]. Robert Gillman Scott was her first design teacher while a young student at the

Newcomb School of Tulane in New Orleans in the 1940's. The course he taught emphasized how to visualize space, and her training there was essentially a basic Bauhaus design class. In his preface to the book, Scott acknowledges that Gyorgy Kepes' book "The Language of Vision" first put him on the track of using the facts of perception as an organizing principle. Eventually Scott ended up at Yale, but he based his classes on that course at Newcomb College. Elaine also learned design fundamentals from her first husband, Alvin Lustig, an innovative designer whose influence was wide ranging during the 1940's. "He expanded the whole idea about how you think about something you are doing," Elaine tells me as she explains how an Alvin Lustig design began its existence. "He would make the most preliminary tiny sketches, approximately 2 inches by 2 inches, what I called his 'thinking sketches'. I learned to think about the visual world that way."

One of the most fascinating things I find in Elaine's work is how knowledgeable she is about the content in her work and the ease with which she incorporates figural Baroque elements into a formalist, architectonic design composition. "I didn't always feel this way. The element of play and of finding something, which has always been a part of my collage work, was not an element in my earlier paintings, which were entirely abstract. In my earlier design work, even though I incorporated found objects and found pieces of paper, they were not as playful and as involved with photography as my work now. I don't know whether that's because I've gotten older and I feel more relaxed about it or I feel more secure. My paintings were much more structural, and certainly came out of the constructionist tradition. The collages manage to bring together everything I knew about all my ideas." It is in the collages of Elaine Lustig Cohen that the full signature of the artist becomes apparent. Through this medium, the coalescence of her many interests and wide-ranging careers resolve into works of high humor, irony and emotion, weaving a tapestry of ephemera into highly constructed, architectonic compositions.

They are also a commentary on the phenomenon of time. "Everything or at least most of the things I've started on with collage have begun with accidents of timing. They started with the photographic combination with collage."

One of the artist's first forays into this area began with finding postcards of women in the early part of the century that were sent to people and had writing on the image side. Elaine explains "the writing was on them because you couldn't put your messages on the address side of the card. I discovered that women and men would always send these photographs of women that were either anonymous or famous beauties or involves the theatre. And people would write their messages on these photographs. This fascinated me, first because the images were always women, and secondly, I felt that I could write on postcards, so that I was having a conversation with the person who was in the postcard and who wrote on the postcard. There is a conversational element on two levels, with the content and with the materials. This discovery started me on my first series of collages, which were all postcard size; and all photographic." This type of conversational element was a concept Colin Rowe alluded to in his lectures, that of conversation being a conversation in another sense, as in a conversation factor which translates information from one system to another—a way of relating one time period to another. "My second group of collages was almost entirely about this 'women photographic element;' I had never done anything realistic before this. I had used photographs in my design work earlier but never used them in paintings. In my earlier design work, which was never out of de Stijl, constructivism, or the Swiss tradition, I was using photographs and type and color that really nobody was interested in doing at the time; this was in the 50's. I was really using a lot of photography at the time, but I never picked up on that when I became a painter."

“I rejected it and then I came back to it. When I came to it I used a lot of different materials. I did a design for a cover of the book *God’s Own Junkyard*, which was a commentary about how the cities and highways were coming together. Miles and miles of really terrible signs and it was merging together. In that book jacket I silk-screened one image on top of another. I was almost collaging, but it was a different subject matter and I was collaging in a different way. But it was obviously a part of the way that I thought.”

“With artists, it’s really about play. Whether I take the photograph myself or find a photograph or postcard and start to play with *it*, *it* is just another element in the build or structure of the piece. It is not a photograph first. It is a tonal element; there is a cinematic quality. I think a lot of my work is autobiographical, so instead of writing I do some things that are about my life. I think at a certain point in my life I became comfortable with being a painter and a designer. And once I was comfortable with that I could make my way through all of the areas without separating them, which I think is my strength. I used to think it was my weakness.”

In this sense of visual autobiography, Elaine Lustig Cohen’s photomontages complete an odyssey that informs and seduces the eye as it explores the heart of the 20th Century modernist design theories. Degas used photography in the 19th Century to explore how to paint might better relate to this new way of seeing. Picasso used photographs and photography both as a method of securing reference for his nocturnal marathons of sketching, and as a talisman to capture the images of the world around him as a personal memory and worldly representation of himself. The principals of the Bauhaus and modernist design used photography as a capable abstract and graphic tool whose dynamics reflected what they saw as the new mechanical universe of the 20th Century man had come to inhabit as his own creation. Elaine Lustig Cohen’s oeuvre brings a valuable sensibility to this progression. It is at once art that is about photography and photography about art. It describes the collision between time and sensibility and the harmonies its skillful placement can create.

*Ginne Gardiner is a New York City artist who uses her photographs and multi-media montage/collages as studies for large scale oil paintings. Her representations include Pavel Zoubok, Inc., New York and Flanders Contemporary Art, Minneapolis.*