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Art in Review

Elaine Lustig Cohen

The Geometry of Seeing

Pavel Zoubok Gallery
 533 West 23rd Street, Chelsea
 Through Dec. 21
Julie Saul Gallery
 535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
 Through Jan. 12

If you don't know Elaine Lustig Cohen's name, probably it's because she was never a single-minded careerist. Ms. Lustig Cohen, now 80, had a successful career as a graphic designer before turning to painting in the mid-1960s. Her first solo gallery show was in 1970, and in 1979 she was the first woman to have a one-person exhibition at Mary Boone Gallery. From 1972 to 1998 she operated the Upper East Side bookstore and gallery Ex Libris.

This two-gallery retrospective of works dating from 1965 to the present reveals a history of restless, playful variation founded on a finely tuned formalist sensibility. It includes geometric school-of-Mondrian paintings and lively Cubist compositions of jumbled triangular and rhomboid shapes. Functional wooden boxes have exterior surfaces covered by bands and blocks of color, and a

sewing kit she designed could be mistaken for the work of a Jazz Age Art Deco master.

Ms. Lustig Cohen has wedded abstraction and eroticism by painting geometric lines and shapes over vintage nude photographs, and she has created tightly compacted, vividly colored collages from scraps of election posters torn off walls in Majorca, Spain, where she lives part time.

Lately Ms. Lustig Cohen has been designing alphabets. One example has fine, perfectly rounded white letters and numbers, each occupying a square of a red-and-black checkerboard. A spirit of sensual grace and Modernist optimism infuses all of this work. Don't call her a postmodernist; she's a neo-Classicist.

KEN JOHNSON