

It's Nice That

Painting friends in mid-conversation, Alex Bradley Cohen hides as much as he reveals

Words by Alif Ibrahim

In a series of works that was recently exhibited at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in New York, artist Alex Bradley Cohen paints an intimate and revelatory series of portraits that explores the inner self of both the painter and the sitter that arise from cherished conversations. Through a bold use of colour in large, flat blocks that contrasts the muted palette he chooses for his subjects, he paints his friends mid-conversation. The attention he gives to small details and everyday objects – Alex's glasses in *Self-Portrait*, chess boards mid-game, a laptop hanging over a sink and plenty of stray cups and mugs – further cements the feeling of intimacy in these paintings.



Alex Bradley Cohen, *Madeline Aguilar*, 2019.

"I'm from Chicago. It's also the place that I live and work. I believe that staying home and grounding myself and my work in one place has helped me garner a sense of intimacy and personal perspective that has helped inform and enrich the work," Alex tells It's Nice That. "I've always been interested in the inner logic of a painting. How a painting is made and presents itself."

In this manner, Alex is referring to how a painting resolves what it's trying to say – how it interacts with multiple concepts and actions to finally affirm its position. "I felt that there was something within the diversity of marks, gestures and ways of drawing that spoke to a world within myself that helped me grapple with and begin to understand my own complex subjectivity."

Alex's *Personal Space* sees a development in his painting style compared to the much more cubist works in *Flat Top* from 2017. Although a number of elements still remain that keep the paintings very much his – mixed perspectives, abstraction as a narrative device and his affinity for burnt orange – the new series comes accompanied by changes in composition and a deeper reflection in his use of colour.

"These works came out of conversations that I was having with friends. I found myself being moved by the depth of conversations that we were having and began documenting these moments on my phone,"

It's Nice That

Alex says. “The conversations began to become kind of revelatory and a kind of practice of world building where our unseen identities were explored and exchanged,” he continues.

This conversational process is evident in the paintings. His sitters, often facing the viewer head on, look like they’re in the middle of a conversation, deep in a story that they were telling. Alex points out a sitting with fellow artist Shai-Lee Horodi as a memorable one. “That painting depicts one moment but I could’ve made an easy 50 of her. We had some amazing beautiful conversations over the past two years that changed my worldview on many, many levels,” Alex says of *Shai-Lee Horodi*.

In the painting, Shai-Lee is placed just slightly off-centre, with her elbows leaning closely together on a dark green table. A mug and a spouted glass sit on the table, the wall separated into four quadrants of varying colours. Shai-Lee, depicted with small wrists and a crumpled dark bluish-green shirt, gestures as if she’s explaining a story. Depicted in the painting is the conversation that the painter had with his sitter, but the details of which are intentionally obscured – rather it’s also about the intangible interiority that is revealed through these intimate moments.

“I simply wanted to explore the interiority of both myself and others. I wanted to focus on what connected us rather than what separated us,” Alex says of the series. Using the language of Colour Field Painting, Alex tells us that the use of blocks of colours in *Personal Space* serves as a tool to obfuscate information.

Obscurity and secrecy, concepts that often have negative associations today, especially with regards to political processes and data privacy, can instead be seen as tools that take on the intentions of their user. For instance, American Artist’s *Dignity Images*, explores the concept of images that are intentionally withheld from social media circulation, freed from the persona of the self that they’re required to perform. On one hand, this is possible because the inherent significance of the image doesn’t require it to be shared or to be validated. On the other hand, by withholding them from circulation and keeping it a secret, it intensifies the connection between the image and the person.

Similarly, Alex’s use of colours functions in an analogous way. “I remember sitting back in my studio and asking myself: ‘why do I keep blocking out information?’ That there had to be something to my actions,” Alex says of using the language of Colour Field paintings.

“I realised what I was doing was withholding information. That I was making a kind of sacred or safe space for secret sharing between me and my subject. That the painting itself was evocative of a conversation that explored some internal or withheld space.” Through *Personal Space*, Alex puts forth a series in praise of withheld spaces and a return to one’s interiority.

ALEX BRADLEY COHEN: *Flat Top*

by Jane Cavalier

NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY | SEPTEMBER 7 – OCTOBER 8, 2017

In *Flat Top*, his exhibition of portraits at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, Alex Bradley Cohen paints his friends and acquaintances like gifts wrapped in the colorful paper of their domestic worlds. The exhibition title is a play on two simultaneous traditions: the modernist charge to flatten illusionistic space and the “flat top” hair cut popularized during the Def Jam era of hip hop. Compressing the interior worlds of his paintings and endowing them with the colors of a bright Coogi sweater, Cohen creates portraits that teeter on the verge of dutiful representation and exuberant abstraction. Tilting and flattening his subjects, he folds them into their environments to create intimate mixtures of the person and their surroundings.

In *Liz Harney* (2017), Harney sits curled up in a large green chair with her hands raised to her brow, eyes gazing ahead in a moment of stunned realization. Cohen paints Harney’s face, hands, and environment in blocks of color, which he accentuates with thin and jaunty brushstrokes. The tilted floor rises up to meet the swirling arrangement of flat green planes comprising the chair, and Harney’s face bursts with surprise through the abstract patchwork that surrounds her. Cohen’s spirited pivots from abstraction to representation buzz with the mental machinations of their sitter. Concealing and elaborating, compressing and revealing, Cohen nestles his subjects into their environments in deliberate and delicate ways; we are drawn into the physical and mental spaces they occupy.

Cohen uses abstraction like a narrative device; his pictures work through the duality of representation and abstraction to create moments of proximity with and distance from their subjects. In *La Keesha Leek* (2017), Cohen mixes cubistic perspectives to emphasize the emotionally reserved appearance of his subject. Seated at a table with one arm folded against her body and another tucked beneath her chin, Leek gazes out from the scene with a look of pensive



Alex Bradley Cohen, *Liz Harney*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 47 × 35 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery.

consternation. Leek pulls away from the picture plane, appearing withdrawn in comparison with the table, which tilts precariously toward the viewer. Cohen's unsettling mixing and matching of perspectives creates a surreal space in which Leek appears as an enigmatic fixture. Cohen adds another layer of affect to the scene when he flattens and entwines Leek's legs with the supports of her chair. The delicate braiding of these forms forces a pause in the swirling space of the portrait, its careful and intimate construction offering a moment of close meditation on the painting's mysterious subject.

Like his peers Henry Taylor or Derrick Adams (whose portrait is included in this show), Cohen's use of abstraction is deceptively simple in appearance and strikingly complex in affect. What distinguishes Cohen's portraits from so many of his peers is precisely the careful, even tender quality of his abstractions. Cohen forgoes the thrusting, expressionistic brushstrokes employed by Taylor for a more rigorously structured interplay of forms. Take, for instance, the bottle of water in the foreground of Paul Anthony Smith (2017), which Cohen paints with the poetic sensitivity of a Giorgio Morandi still-life. He orients the composition and Smith's gaze, around this detail, as if to highlight the multiple levels of reality converging in this image. Another distinguishing aspect of Cohen's practice is his meticulous treatment of light, for instance in the shadow that passes across Smith's face, tenderly grounding the work in a specific, if unknowable time and place. Cohen also paints Smith's face and hands in a prismatic patchwork of colors, with each of his fingers a different skin-colored shade. Existing in dialogue with his meticulous treatment of light, these surreal and light-hearted details catch viewers off-guard, as if to bring them further into the folds of the portrait.

Many of the portraits in Flat Top follow a similar formula: the subject, seated at mid-distance from the picture plane, is nestled into a colorful, elaborately patterned, and spatially tilted room. Yet each painting comes across as utterly discrete, luminously bound up with the personality of its sitter. This is due, in part, to the way Cohen embeds quirky abstractions into his portraits to reward close viewing with humor. The artist has said, "I'm interested in narrative artists, personal artists, artists that give away a piece of themselves and their place in the world through their art."



Alex Bradley Cohen, *La Keisha Leek*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery.



Alex Bradley Cohen, *Paul Anthony Smith*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 39 x 32 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery.

In *Jesse* (2017), he paints the sitter with green eyebrows and sets him against a surreal backdrop that combines the geometry and primary colors of De Stijl with a more whimsical landscape scene of a little house on the prairie. In *Sean McElroy* (2017), the subject's hands melt into his chair, while his rose-colored foot protrudes cartoonishly into the space of the viewer. In *Raven* (2017), Cohen gives his subject a tranquil setting in the warm light of her living room, only to seat her next to a flat, green, and utterly unidentifiable trapezoidal plane. And in *Derrick Adams* (2017), Adams is shown mid-speech, seated with his arms crossed on a chair with peach-colored wheels that match the color of his socks. Cohen's carefully orchestrated abstractions playfully undermine our visual assumptions by offering notes of whimsy and surrealism in the nooks and crannies of his paintings. These imaginative details create opportunities to enter into the playful, groovy, and at times raucous relation of Cohen to his subjects.

CONTRIBUTOR

Jane Cavalier

JANE CAVALIER is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.



FROM POETRY MAGAZINE

September 2016 Cover Artist: Alexander Cohen

BY FRED SASAKI



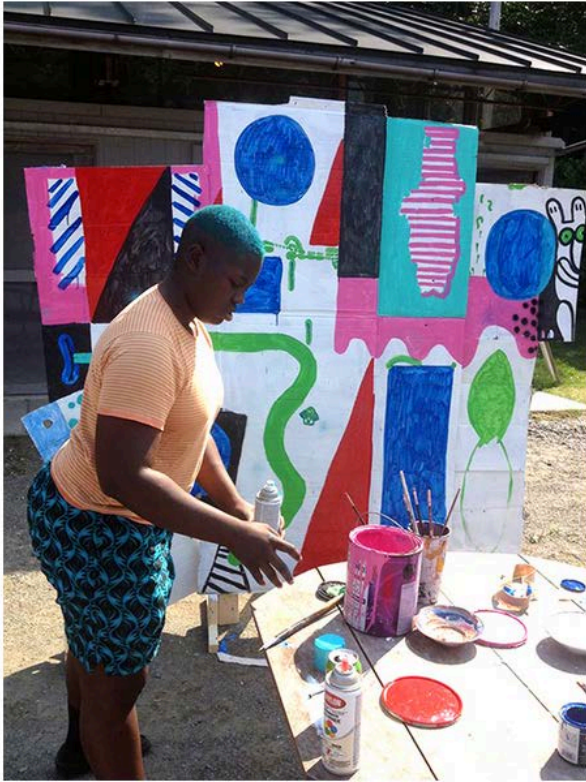
"Ashley Teamer," 2015

This month *Poetry* magazine got a little help from our friends at [ACRE](#) (Artists' Cooperative Residency and Exhibitions). Development Director [Dana Bassett](#), formerly of Poetry Foundation, sent us work by ACRE artists, per request, and we fell in love with [Alexander Cohen's](#) *Ashley Teamer* immediately. I wrote to Cohen for more about Teamer herself (you can see her incredible work [here](#)), and his work in general. He says:

Ashley Teamer is a queen. A gentle conscious soul. Polite. Engaged. Interested. I met Ashley in 2014 at [Skowhegan](#). We collaborated once on a mural. It was great. This portrait of Ashley is actually my first sitter! I made it in 2015 at another residency me and Ashley attended in Wisconsin called ACRE. I asked Ashley to sit for me. Her energy quickly put me at ease and I was able to depict her. I was able to engage with her physicality as well as her aura. I was able to concentrate on my drawing, engage in conversation, and continue excavating her on paper through line color and shape.

And what about Alex? He says:

Alex Bradley Cohen. Lost youth turned old soul. Makes psychological pictorial embodiments of the human soul. Mind Body Spirit. Alex isn't interested in replicating his sitter's physical image but rather their aura. He doesn't really care what you look like, he is interested in what you beez like. Alex's collection of sitters investigate other aspects of being human; alive eccentric energy, eclectic energy, combining color shape and force to construct humans. These are one's thoughts and ideas. Physicality is lamen to Alex's eye, he responds to energy and intention. His sitters are reflections, they have limbs, eyes, body parts, their shapes reflect human things, but what they get at is the energy and force of the natural existence. Alex is into the people who come in and out of his life. They are his muses. Is this how God wanted us to be seen? Red eye blue nose pink ear green lips orange fingers purple legs maroon feet? How many shades of green is in one tree? They don't make black or white colored pencils to enable me to make these portraits. These figures are colorful. Unique. Individual. Wholesome. I use the whole box of pencils.



Ashley Teamer, 2015

Here are a few more of Cohen's sitters. If you get on his [Instagram](#), you'll be treated to text about them, too!



Alex Bradley Cohen's Community-Culled Portraiture

Painting from the subjects that surround him, Alex creates portraits of his family and longtime friends— bright works that highlight his relationships in both the past and present. His paintings often take on an autobiographical quality, tracing personal stories from childhood memories to getting his GED. Alex often places himself within a work's scene, painting multiple versions to represent different aspects of his psyche. Although deeply engaged with painting, he is also an active installation artist, desiring the balance of community-engaged art to his solitary studio time.

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I\W: Why are you drawn to producing floor installations? Does this gesture reference something specific?
ABC: The floor pieces are a way for me to play. I'm interested in creating interactive spaces and installations that involve movement or touch. These are safe spaces for me to exist in, spaces of one's own. There's a social element to them that I'm interested in, something that painting in the studio doesn't offer. Painting is therapeutic on a one-on-one level— it's the activity of self-reflection, but I think creating installations or working on the floor develops a space for some sort of self-reflection. When creating installations I feel like I am more involved with something else besides just myself, because painting can be a very self-obsessive act. So it's always nice to involve myself in other ways when interacting and communicating with the world around me. I think for the most part my art is both a personal conversation as well as a public or popular culture one.



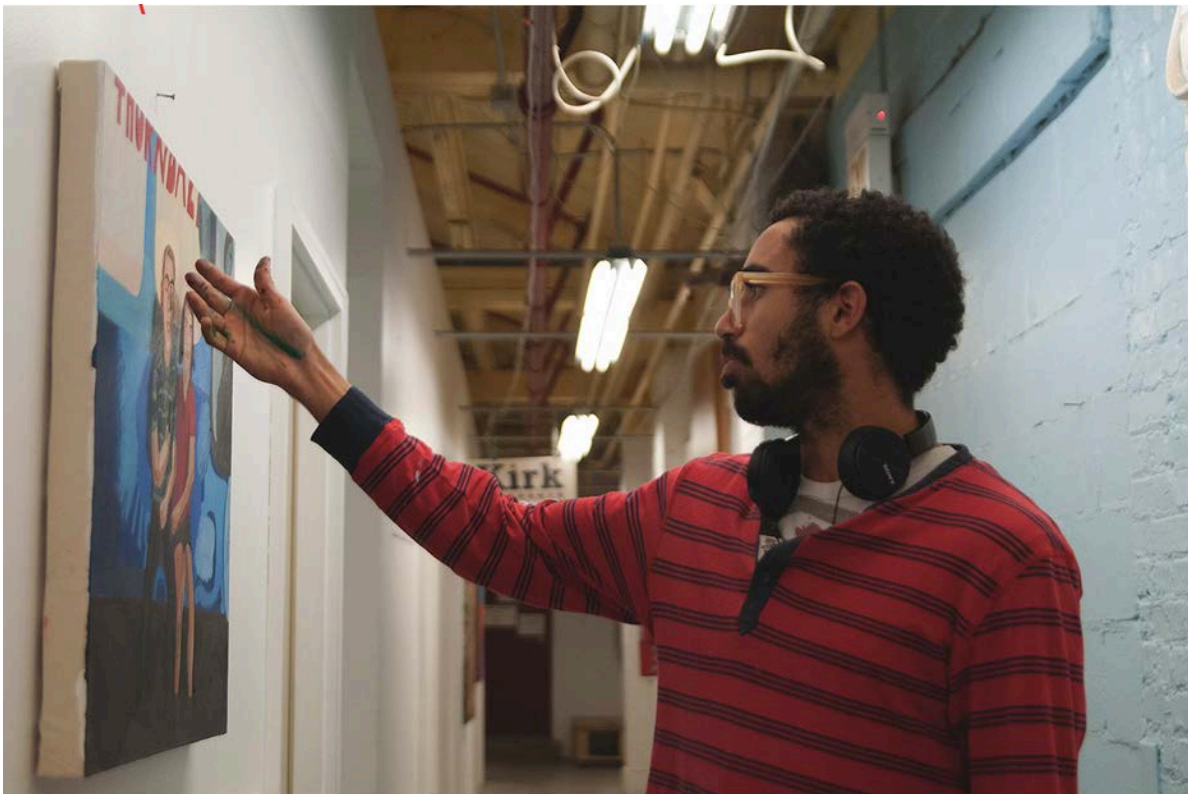
What about portraiture attracts you to that mode of making?

Portraiture for me is about people and about community. I paint the people that I love and that inspire me. I think even when my work isn't figurative and blends more into abstraction, it's still about people. It just might move from the physical to the spiritual or emotional. I'm really interested in the emotional and mental states of myself and the city. There's something therapeutic about it for me. It gives me a sense of self and space. I'm interested in artists that do that. When I saw the Matisse show at the Art Institute, it blew my mind. That was when I really wanted to paint people and tell stories of time, space, and culture, especially the people and things that I had been around my whole life. In my paintings some of the same people and subjects matters repeat themselves. I think I am suffering from solastalgia. It's trippy because I haven't actually left Chicago or my home or my neighborhood, but I am growing and maturing and things are changing around me in weird ways. Somethings are exactly the same and somethings are so different. Watching neighborhood change and the people you grew up around being pushed out of your neighborhood is sad and heartbreaking. The people that are doing it don't even care. This sense of community and place is so deeply embedded inside of me. I'm so much a product of my past, and friendships that I've had. It's this idea of a collective memory and how all your life experiences make you who you are. I have no regrets ever. However, I am constantly being challenged by past mistakes and experiences.

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You are often a subject in your work. Why do you choose to place yourself in your paintings so frequently?

I exist within the work sometimes more than once. In one particular work at Carrie Secrist of my mom yelling at me, I was both at the table and in the background of the painting. These are the physical and emotional/mental states that I exist in. I exist physically in the world and emotionally within my mind and body. It's important for me to depict these things in the paintings. They place me somewhere in the world. They give me identity. I think the work is extremely autobiographical, the paintings show different stories from my life. I have one piece about getting my GED. I could barely sit for the whole four or five hours of the test. I painted my mom and my dad into the work next to me, looking down on me as I worked. These types of paintings give me a sense of self. I'm constantly confused and being interrupted by life. Living in the city is chaos, and when you are young and totally involved with the city you begin to adapt some of that instability. I think what being in the studio and painting does is stabilize me. It takes mental concentration. It takes my mind off of everything else that is happening in my life and around me.



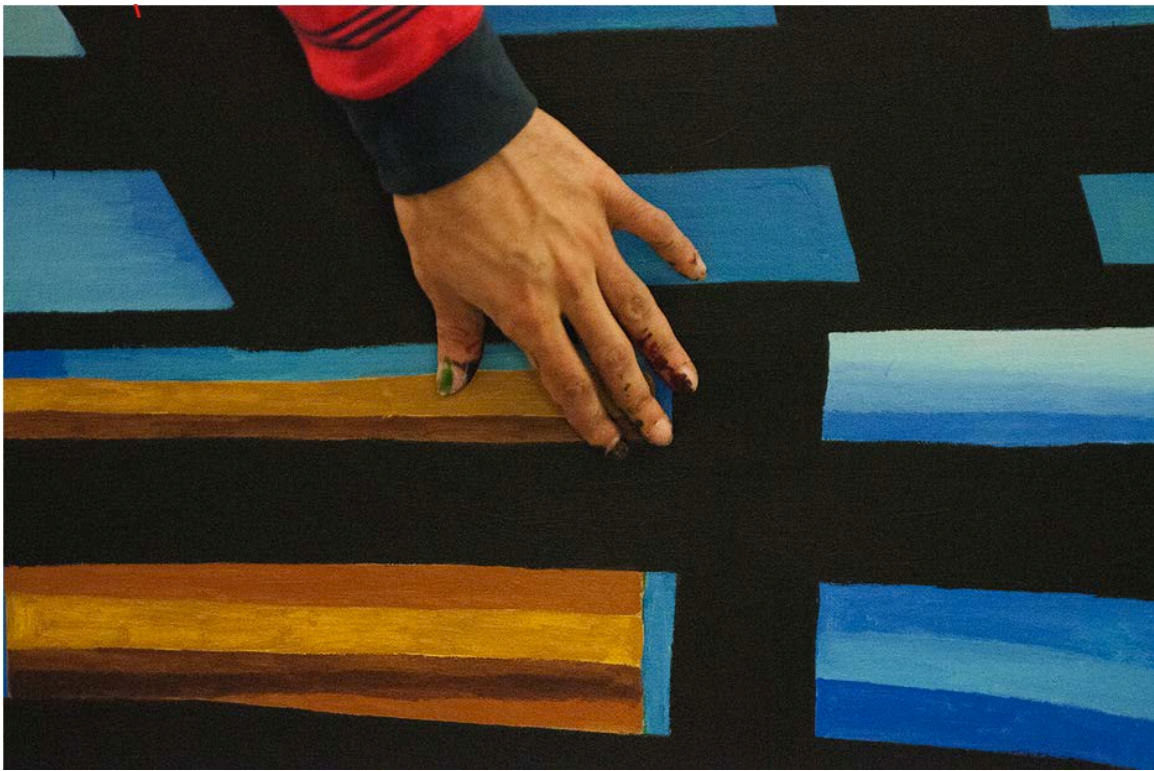
Does working from memory tend to be easier for you?



Sometimes. There's something more emotional and intuitive about the process, but sometimes it can be daunting because I have no framework to base the image off of because it doesn't actually exist in reality—only in my mind. There's a challenge and a joy to it. More often than not the paintings that come from my mind are a lot darker than when I'm painting people or things from photographs. When I am painting people from life they become positive and bright, but then if I am painting something from my mind or past it becomes darker because I am then dealing with myself. Even if I am dealing with a positive memory it comes out a bit dark or tweaked.

What made you realize you wanted to be painter?

I think I always believed I was an artist or an innovator of some sorts. I actually think I began as a performance artist in my youth. This got me into a lot of trouble in school. When it comes to painting specifically, I think it was just a life process. It was the medium that felt most fluid to me. My mom used to paint, so she always had acrylic paint laying around so when my brain began to move I would indulge in her paint and create. It really wasn't until I met [Alberto Aguilar](#) in community college that the realization came into existence that making paintings was what I wanted to do.



Can you talk about you and Alberto Aguilar's collaborative relationship?

I met him when I was young, back in 2009 so we have been working together for about 7 years now. I see myself as primarily a painter, but then with him we do performance and make videos, sound pieces, drawings, installations, and paintings. Our creative relationship is endless. We do all of these other things outside my typical practice which helps me stay loose in the studio. Having that balance and playfulness outside of the studio is very positive for me. Alberto and I have a friendship that is super unique and fun, we seem to now get away with a lot of things. We were doing these things always, but now people seem to be taking them more seriously...

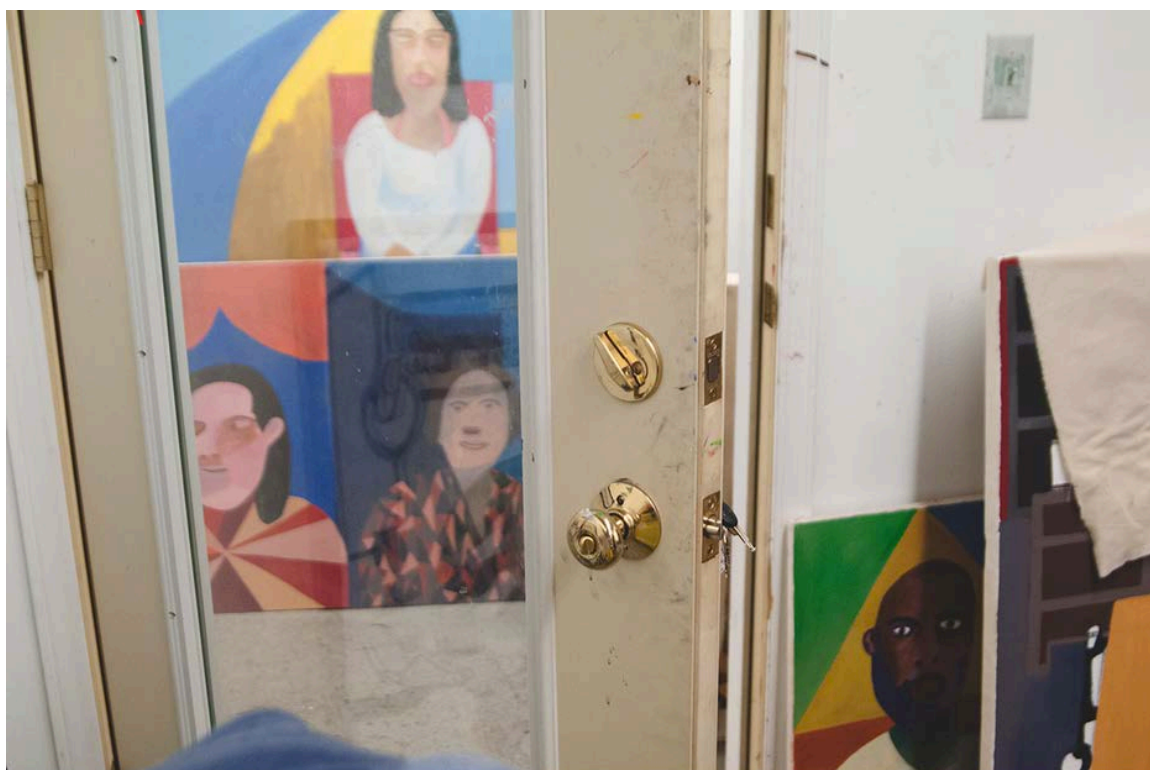
Is your ceramic work a way to expand some of your scenes within your paintings out from the canvas, or are they coming from a completely different headspace?

When I started to think about art as something I could do, it seemed like a lot of fun to make ceramics. I took a ceramics class when I was at Harold Washington. I wanted to make sculptures that existed inside the installations I was making. I transferred to SAIC, and I don't think the ceramics developed in the same way the painting did. The ceramics still stayed in the same environment as the installations, which I don't think will ever really change for me. I haven't figured out how to have my paintings exist

within those spaces. For now they seem quite separate, but I am interested in re-investigating my ceramic work and excited to see how they will exist with my new figurative paintings.

Do you consider your specific mind space when you are producing work for a show?

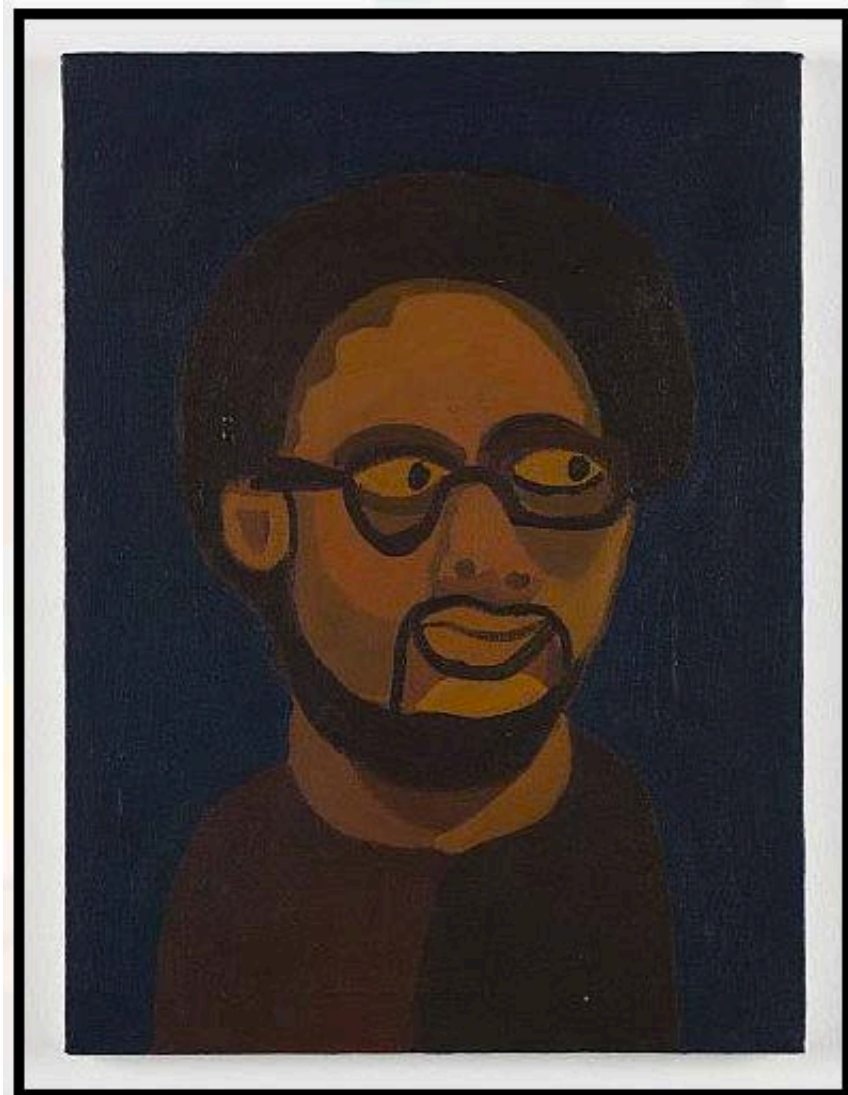
I think I do now. I think because it is a story or narrative or paragraph or chapter or some sort of section. I like to bounce off different things from my past or present. When producing a new body of work there is something that I'm trying to tap into. I try not to set specific guidelines because I want the work to drift both conceptually and aesthetically. I don't want to control my art in the same way that I don't want the art to control me. Sometimes both of these things happen and it becomes a struggle. This is when I hit the streets and go skating, ride my bike, or write a poem—to hit the restart button.





Artist of the Week: Alex Bradley Cohen

Alex Bradley Cohen (b. 1989, United States) lives and works in Chicago, IL. Cohen is an alumnus of The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. He is recipient of the 2014 James Nelson Raymond Fellowship. Recent exhibitions include The Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA and The Elmhurst Art Museum, Elmhurst, IL. His work was featured on the cover of *New American Paintings* (issue 113, 2014).



Self-Portrait 2015, acrylic on canvas

Tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do. I am an artist. I make things. I make and create things through self-expression. My art comes from a personal and self-reflective place. Art for me is about living, existing, experiencing things, and digesting them through creative pathways.

My creative life involves painting, drawing, skating with my friends, making clay sculptures, creating installations, making videos with friends, and writing poetry. I'm influenced by personal experiences, intimate situations, things on the street, things that I see, and things that I hear. I'm a very emotional person and I'm easily affected by the things that I'm around. So I try and spend a lot of time calm and peaceful. My youth was a little bit more wild. But now I'm good. Really good.



Mother and Child The Disobedient Son 2015, acrylic on canvas

What are some recent, upcoming or current projects you are working on? I had a two person show at Carrie Secrist with Kelly Lloyd up through July 25th. It was like a mash-up of two shows. I didn't know Kelly previous to doing the show. But she's really great. The paintings in that show are more on the emotionally low side. It wasn't too intentional but it's what came from working in a really small studio with no windows. haha. All the paintings came from last winter.

I also have two upcoming shows that I'm really excited about. One here in Chicago in September at Roots and Culture. It's a two person show with Steve Ruiz. I still haven't met him. That show is going to be more self-reflective from a more fearful and neurotic state. It's kind of like a statement on the current political and social climate, but it's still pretty personal and narrative. The other upcoming show that I have is in San Francisco at The Luggage Gallery this fall. They will be two entirely different shows showcasing two different bodies of work. The show at Roots and Culture is going to be a very therapeutic show. My San Francisco show is not as much as a psychological or emotional release. It's pretty traditional in a sense, there are new portraits of friends on un-stretched canvas. They just drape on the wall. To me they are really fresh and light. I'm also excited about them because they are environmentally friendly, which is so rad. I also plan on learning how to play the piano this winter. I want to make a musical poetry album. I have ten poems from the past 6 years that I'm really excited about. I also envision them turning into videos.



Sarah Workneh 2014, acrylic on canvas

What is one of the bigger challenges you and/or other artists are struggling with these days and how do you see it developing? Administrative influence and the overwhelming energy of the internet. The internet is overwhelming and distracting. There are so many images and links to click on. It's hard to just focus on one thing. At least it's really hard for me. Cause there's always another link to another article or image. It's hard to digest it all.

How did your interest in art begin? I think I've always been interested in art since I was a child. I never wanted to be an artist. It was never a dream, thought, or motivation. But the creativity always existed. My interest as a child came from my mother and because in 4th grade I was sent to a therapeutic day school for kids with emotional and behavior disorders. It was a very nurturing, intimate, and individualistic environment. It was a rough time, and school, and they always encouraged creativity as a way of self-expression. Sometimes it's really hard to digest the world, but through images and writing I can deal with very complex issues that I can't always talk about. Art helps me open up to the world. I'm a very introverted person when I don't feel comfortable. Comfort is very important for me to be creative. My art isn't about chance or risk. It's about comfort and living, and dealing with experiences from the everyday.

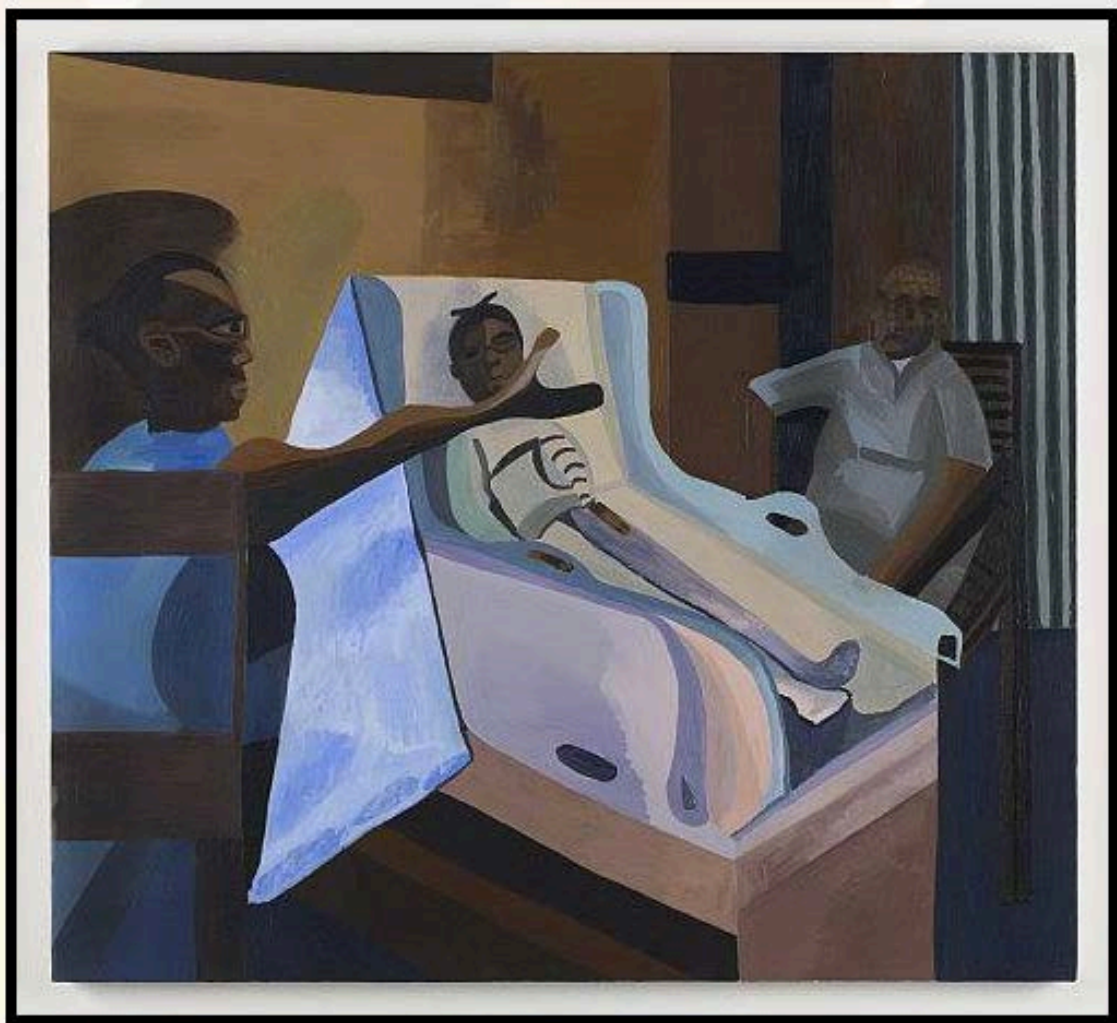


Teeth Anxiety 2014 acrylic on canvas

If you had to explain your work to a stranger, what would you say? I would say, "hah, I don't know I make portraits of my friends, and abstract things." That's it.

What artists are you interested in right now? I'm interested in narrative artists, personal artists, artists that give away a piece of themselves and their place in the world through their art. Alberto Aguilar, Aaron Fowler, Lauren Halsey, Robert Hodge, and Yoshie Sakai. That's a very small list of some really great friends.

What's your favorite thing about your city? That I can exist in it. My whole life is here. I understand it enough to feel comfortable but not have it be boring. There's not a totally hype city. It's a really accepting city. A place to be yourself and drift, and try out new things.



The Hospital 2015, acrylic on canvas

What was the last exhibition you saw that stuck out to you? I saw a Ralph Fasanella painting show at the Folk Art Museum in New York that really stuck out to me. It felt extremely honest like I could touch him through the paintings. That's important to me as an artist. To be touched.

What do you do when you're not working on art? Probably thinking about art. hah. I'm an extremely compulsive person and self-obsessed. It's not cool. I'm working on it. Trying to find balance so I'm not so self-obsessed. I do work a lot too. I work at all the stadiums in Chicago. I sell souvenirs. I've been doing that since I was 17, I'm 25. So for a very long time. I've also been reading a lot. I like riding my bike and skateboarding too. Peaceful things.



I cant get jiggy with this 2014, acrylic on canvas

If you hadn't become an artist what do you think you'd be doing? I honestly have no idea. Before going to community college and meeting Alberto Aguilar I had no focus at all. So I honestly have no idea. It would probably be very self-destructive and dark.