

ALEX BRADLEY COHEN: *Flat Top*

by Jane Cavalier

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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 Leek pulls away from the picture plane, appearing withdrawn in comparison with the table, which tilts precariously toward the viewer.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.

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