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Brian D. Cohen Gallery Note
Mitchell Giddings Fine Arts

BRIAN D. COHEN: A RETROSPECTIVE

Printmaking is Brian D. Cohen's language, a language he speaks using the century-old techniques and tools of the Renaissance to communicate in a world where images now appear, flicker and evaporate, along with our attention. His unflinching focus memorializes objects, natural phenomena, and ideas—a steel bridge, a wild tree, an angel—but rarely a human form. These images of objects are also Cohen's conversation with history. He renders obsolete methods of transportation with a reverence for an industrial past, capturing the architectural and engineering artistry of a biplane, ships, zeppelins, steam locomotives, and steel bridges in his art, which itself is made with the antique process of etching, acid, and ink.

These etchings show us the beauty of triangles and the curves they support, whether inside a zeppelin or in the arch of a bridge. They also show movement: a zeppelin floats in front of the triangles of the Eiffel Tower, and a locomotive races past a station. While these images honor the industrial age, they do so with an ominous ambiguity, as if a massive locomotive overtaking a smaller one is the harbinger of a future dominated by ever bigger and more powerful machines. But Cohen also counters the palpable peril of a train steaming into a dark tunnel with images that honor connection in the beauty of bridges that stretch across rivers for easy commerce. This beauty approaches the sublime in *Angel in the Bridge,* where the artist invites the viewer onto the George Washington Bridge, whose towers evoke the stained glass of a cathedral.

Cohen doesn't only converse with history; he also collaborates with it. His work is inspired by poets, musicians and artists of the past, and executed with book artists of the present, including type casters, letterpress printers, papermakers, and bookbinders. *The Fool's Journey*, his contemporary take on the Tarot deck, includes hand-lettered calligraphy. *The Fool's Journey* harkens back to the Tarot's fifteenth-century origin as a visual guide depicting the transcendent states of human development, best described as the spiritual cycle of life. Cohen's images evoke Renaissance cosmography—the order of the world—in pictures of the elements updated for a twenty-first sensibility attuned to physics and abstraction.

His book *Pierrot Lunaire* is a massive enterprise of translation, adaptation, and reinterpretation of a work first conceived as a cycle of fifty poems written in French by the Belgian poet Albert Giraud and published 1884, translated into German by Otto Erich Hartleben in 1892, and most famously adapted by Austrian-American composer Arnold Schoenberg, who set twenty-one of the poems to music for instruments and voice in 1912.

Each of the 21 pages of Cohen's *Pierrot Lunaire* includes one poem in the original French, a German translation, and a translation from French to English by Cohen himself. Each language has been assigned a different font, and two images of the same plate appear on each page, one in intaglio and one in relief—an inversion that echoes the rhyme scheme of the rondel, as well as the many reversals of fortune suffered by the moonstruck Pierrot.

"The book is a house," Cohen says. "It contains and describes a world, and creates its own space; it is touched, held and opened with intimate pleasure in the hands and time of the viewer."[1] Nowhere is this more evident than in *The Bird Book*, an illustrated alphabet with Cohen's relief etchings (a technique developed by the great eighteenth-century poet and printmaker William Blake), with poems by Holiday Eames. The plates are hand colored, the birds luminous in their natural habitat, and the accompanying couplets rhymed. The last reads, "Two Zebra Finches cuddle in their den/ 'Daddy,' he says, 'read it to me again.'" The "intimate pleasure" of this book could only be amplified by reading it to a child nestled in one's lap.

Cohen's broadsides are collaborative efforts with connections to history. Typically, broadsides published ballads, sensational news, and the printed equivalent of political sound bites for centuries, until telecommunication made broadsides obsolete. Cohen's work in this form aligns with the current resurgence of broadsides as a method of publishing poetry as fine art. Cohen adds images to accompany—but not illustrate—poems, often those of Vermont Poet Laureate, Chard deNord. Cohen and deNord have been publishing books and broadsides of side-by-side prints and poems for over thirty years in what Cohen describes as "a kind of synergistic peripheral vision for each other's imagery."[2]

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[1] Brian D. Cohen: Etchings and Books, (Bridge Press, Westminster Station, Vermont, 2001) p. 74).

[2] Sura Levine, "Interview with Brian D. Cohen," Retrospective, (Bridge Press, Kennebunk ME) p. 196.

The etchings of animals—solitary beasts that occupy the entire plate—require that we view the images with the same intense focus as the artist, demanding we question what we see. There is an elephant in the room: what of it? Similarly, the emblems—ordinary objects—in their clarity and solitariness become profoundly metaphoric and spiritual: A candle flame floats in the dark, an emblem of both fragility that could be extinguished with a puff of air, and one of hope whose small point of light allows insight. Cohen's view of a tree is atypical: no rhapsody of leaves, but one of a trunk sinking into the earth. The water he captures in ink of a bend in a river appears to be flowing, reminding us of the miracle of water. Even the few depictions of human life are emblematic, as in *Heart*, rendered in anatomical detail; or the faceless, cloaked form in *Martyr*.

Cohen has an acute sense of place. He scratches many of his landscapes on site in drypoint, capturing an immediate impression, as in *Afternoon Landscape*, or *The Beehive*, on Mount Desert Island. Others are etchings made in the studio, allowing for more texture and nuance, as in *River*, where the water is squeezed between furry, forested riverbanks. More recently, Cohen has turned to watercolor in a narrow, horizontal format, capturing the light of the world, often as the sun sets.

In his new watercolors and in his austere, black and white images, Cohen invites the viewer to slow down, and in slowing down, begin to see. We, the viewers, are the humans who complete the pictures that speak to our humanity and the nature of existence. Cohen's work helps us to see the beauty of the mechanical world, the endurance of the natural one, and a way to contemplate the contradictions and complexities of human existence that both challenge us and give us comfort and hope.