

NANCY COHEN'S NEW WORK  
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I went to the studio of Jersey City artist Nancy Cohen to see her new sculpture and reliefs -- some of the best work I've seen in a while. It's very difficult to make successful colored sculpture because, often rather than the color looking like it's inherent to the materials, it looks like it's been arbitrarily applied to the surface. And even when color doesn't appear to lie on the surface, colored sculptures tend to lose their sense of weight. That's not necessarily a bad thing, people have been making great colored sculptures forever, and in fact, Jeff Koons exploits this weightless quality with his balloon sculptures, as does Joel Shapiro in his new work now at Pace Gallery.

But this phenomenon makes the interaction of color more difficult. In order to interact, color needs to be disembodied, to float freely, to breath -- something more natural to painting (see post below on "Soft Eyes"). But I think Cohen manages it by, among other things, using shiny, transparent and semi-opaque materials. The glossy sheen of the surfaces encourages unfocused contemplation, and, as a result, the work feels, to some extent, disembodied. (The only sculpture I can think of off hand that is at all similar is sixties California Cool School Sculpture, except they seem disembodied but don't take advantage of the color possibilities.) In addition, Cohen's play with the rapid movement of line keeps the eye moving rapidly over the surface, and in and out of space, adding to the disembodiment of the object.

Now, IMHO, here's what makes her works unique: they maintain their tactility and physicality even while appearing disembodied. Line is experienced as a physical thing -- a wire or string; and color is experienced as inherent to the object itself -- the materials ARE that color through and through, so they don't look applied to the surface, and the objects maintain their sense of weight. Cohen's work is a delicate balancing act: too physical and colors won't interact; too immaterial and the sculpture loses its weight and tactility. (This sometimes happens for me when I recognize an object in a sculpture -- a spoon or a spring or some other object. It's fun, and adds another level to the work, but this awakening takes me out of the experience -- it burst the bubble.) It might be helpful to compare Cohen's work to someone like Frank Stella. Cohen's work is obviously more intimate than Stella's (who I always thought of as an abstract Pop Artist). But more important, Stella's sculptural reliefs seem hollow and weightless, and the color gives the impression of being only on the surface. Stella uses color to distinguish one shape from another, and to create a liveliness bordering on chaos (which might be the point). He never really deals with the interaction of color.

His works are an assault of color, but he never deals with color per se. Cohen's work, on the other hand, has the illusionistic space, light and color interaction of painting but still maintains the tactility and weight of sculpture.