

to involve them in finding the solutions to the dilemmas they face.⁸ Listening to and learning from students are essential to the humble attitude that physicians, as educators and mentors, must (and are beginning to) adopt. Or, as a young Karl Marx once wrote, “the educator must himself be educated.”

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Elementary Watson

The double helix of the mind
The winding staircase to the unknown
Chasing the appearance
Touching operon
Being foiled by inhibitor
Falling back down the abyss
Face white, teeth clenched
Grasping at the railing of a dream

William Hay

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Lifeworks

Empirical evidence

For the past thirty years, artist Lynne Cohen has presented a unique and consistent vision of the world through her photographs. Based in Ottawa since 1973, the American-born Cohen has established an inter-

national reputation for her large-format photographs of public and institutional interiors: halls, offices, classrooms, laboratories, meeting rooms, spas, military installations — utilitarian spaces we occupy in daily life with-

out a second thought. Cohen directs her clear-eyed gaze on these banal environments and exposes them as being loaded with unexpected meaning.

Organized by the National Gallery of Canada in collaboration with the Musée de L'Élysée in Lausanne, Switzerland, *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* has been thoughtfully mounted by curator Ann Thomas with much input from the artist. The meticulous attention to the arrangement of the sixty-nine photographs on display evokes the care with which they have been executed. The result is an impressive show with a great deal of integrity. The entire NGC Prints, Drawings and Photography gallery is devoted to this comprehensive retrospective of Cohen's work until May 12, 2002.

Cohen's art, like that of her predecessor, Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) originates in a fascination with ready-made art in everyday environments. Initially working as a sculptor, Cohen first attempted to reproduce samples of found art in the studio. However, she felt this practice resulted in too much artistic imposition on the work. Experimenting with an 8 × 10 view



Courtesy PPOW New York. Reproduction © Lynne Cohen

Lynne Cohen, *Model Living Room*, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 111 cm × 129 cm

camera, which has the capacity to capture texture and volume in extraordinary detail, she discovered she could communicate her observations about the spaces we inhabit with the necessary degree of precision. Photography's authority as a medium of documentation has allowed Cohen to present her view of the world as empirical evidence.

Yet Cohen's photographs are not documentary records; they are not about the specific details of an identifiable place, even though they are presented as such. The impact of Cohen's work derives from her ability to persuade us, her audience, to accept her images as truthful documents while convincing us that what we are looking at cannot possibly be so. *Model Living Room* (1976), an early piece, already exhibits the characteristic elements of Cohen's work. The scene appears to be a photographic record of some sort of showroom advertisement, or of a sculpture installation, maybe even one created by the artist herself. But nothing is what it appears to be: a man and woman sitting across from each other, reading in the living room, are merely silhouettes cut from Plexiglass, sup-

ported not by upholstered chairs, but by chains anchored to the ceiling. On the wall behind them is a framed collection of claw-like branches, which variously could be a window, a mirror or a piece of art. Its purpose is unclear. The ambiguous mirror/window motif is repeated in a reflection on the male figure's "newspaper." Adding to the confusion, instead of a coffee table, a massive, dark potted fern is incongruously placed between the couple in the centre of the image, conjuring up notions of an alien invader, maybe one that feeds on plastic coffee tables — such is the power of suggestion in a Lynne Cohen photograph. Even while we question its authenticity and wonder about the fate of the couple's "model-living-room" furniture we accept this simulated domestic scene because of Cohen's skill at persuasion.

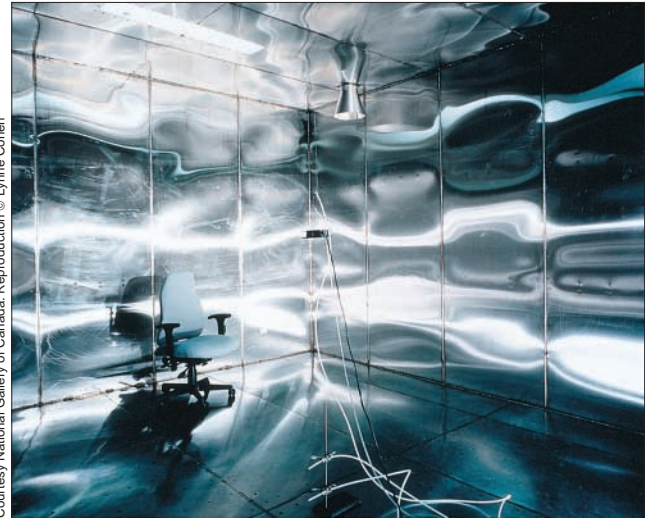
Through the continual use of both contextual and visual self-contradictions, Cohen conjures up, seemingly without effort, a sense of disequilibrium in the viewer. In more recent images such as *Spa* (1994) and *Laboratory* (1999), she also reduces her content to a minimum, thereby heightening the sense of mystery and dislocation characteristic of her work. This approach serves

to further the impression that we are all collectively hovering increasingly closer to some irrational central core of being.

In the end, Cohen, like a magician, asks us to suspend our disbelief as we view her photographs. That we willingly accept this proposition, even though we are unsettled by it, is a testament to her mastery of sleight of hand and, by extension, to our own vulnerability to the power of suggestion.

It is at this point that *No Man's Land* becomes a cautionary tale about unquestioningly accepting the concept of neutral territory. After all, the wrong turn into no man's land will lead you to a mine. A truncated, hand-lettered sign in *War Game* (1987) hung behind a simultaneously nondescript and ominous pile of sandbags warns both player and viewer to "Play at your own —". The last word is obscured. Lynne Cohen challenges us to fill in that blank space, jolting us into that moment of awareness in which we realize there may be more than one way to complete that unfinished phrase.

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Lynne Cohen, *Laboratory*, 1999. Dye coupler print, 122.5 cm × 158.2 cm



Lynne Cohen, *Spa*, 1994. Gelatin silver print, 110.5 cm × 128.5 cm