

# POA

Portrait of an Artist

by Eileen Kennedy

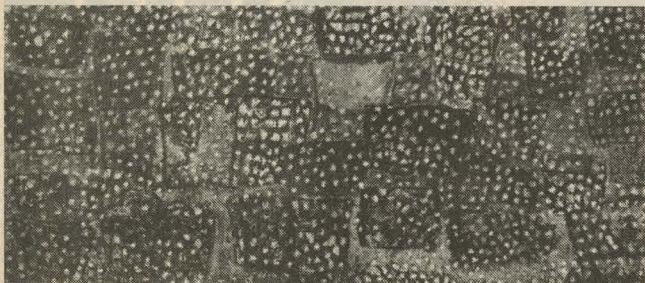


## Barbara Cohen

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At Barbara Cohen's home, her garden overlooks the sea—wild blowing tall stemmed sunflowers with burnt red faces, pale small budded pink roses, green tomatoes, all waiting for some hot summer sun. All of this gets tossed by the winds that paint white caps on the sea beyond in rhythms and patterns that repeat and return day after day—patterns echoed by the marks left in the ground by Cohen's repeated acts of raking, sweeping and digging into the earth.

Cohen as painter more than re-interprets what appears on the surface of our three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional surface, she perceives essential underlying rhythm-forms, "marks" visibly left by the activities of life, and in an alchemy of her artistic imagination, she creates large abstracted canvases that reflect her vision of "the order in the chaos." Arguably, if Einstein had been a painter, he might have had a lot in common with Cohen. At the core of Cohen's work, like its organizing matrix, are marks that continually and subtly evolve and create an overriding contained movement that combines with her long-time



Untitled 7'x16', 2000

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"obsession" with containers. Distilled into their most elemental iconic shapes from already simplistic forms—nomadic dwellings to cradles and caskets—these nuanced forms, "stamped on and then painted into," travel across the entire pictorial plane in a pattern Cohen refers to as "my rhythm."

Often working in relatively large formats (her standard size is 46" x 60") Cohen delights in her exhibition of new works opening at the Schoolhouse's spacious Silas Kenyon Gallery this weekend:

**"I do a lot of work at one time. Kinesthetically, it's my style...I can't just paint," Cohen points out. Included in this show are sculpture and possibly some "very small drawings on old Parisian grid paper," that all reveal the "tension, rhythm, and movement found in all of Cohen's work.**

"It's hard to show large paintings in Provincetown because of the small spaces, smaller environments." Attracted as well to "painting in my hand, to painting small," Cohen "always wanted to paint big. I was looking at Kline, Motherwell, Frank, deKooning... I like openness. I like vastness. These paintings allow me to have that..."

"I've been working two or three years on this work. Originally, the stamping came out of grieving over a death, something meditative. The stamping became my mood, that rhythm of any particular day. I wanted to work large to see if the work would hold itself for a large format—paintwise, structurewise—if it would hold its (artistic) interest for me. The shapes started as a bucket. Now the bucket has become a more abstracted form, more about paint and surface."

Besides these large paintings that are "much more serious, where I do my internal and aesthetic work, Cohen is popularly known for her "Art in Your Face" painted on the spot Polaroid portraits and her book *Dog in Dunes*. "Just the two sides of me," she explains, adding, "when I first came to Provincetown [in 1993], this is how people knew me. I'm a bit of a loner; this was a way to communicate with people" and, of course, a means of supporting herself, as well. "I worked in a lot of different areas to support myself: Victorian restoration in California," (where she spent most of her 20's), "I've waitressed...then in 1989 I got two grants," and she made a vow to "never work at something not creative again..."

"I do a lot of work at one time. Kinesthetically, it's my style...I can't just paint," Cohen points out. Included in this show are sculpture and possibly some "very small drawings on old Parisian grid paper," that all reveal the "tension, rhythm, and movement found in all of Cohen's work."

As if to make her point, Cohen moves from her kitchen into her garden where she begins to capture the rhythm of her day.

Barbara Cohen's New Work opens at the Schoolhouse Center, 494 Commercial Street this weekend through August 24th. Opening Reception is Friday, August 11th from 7 - 10 PM. Call 487-4800 for details.



# COHEN GROWS TO NEW LEVEL OF ABSTRACTION

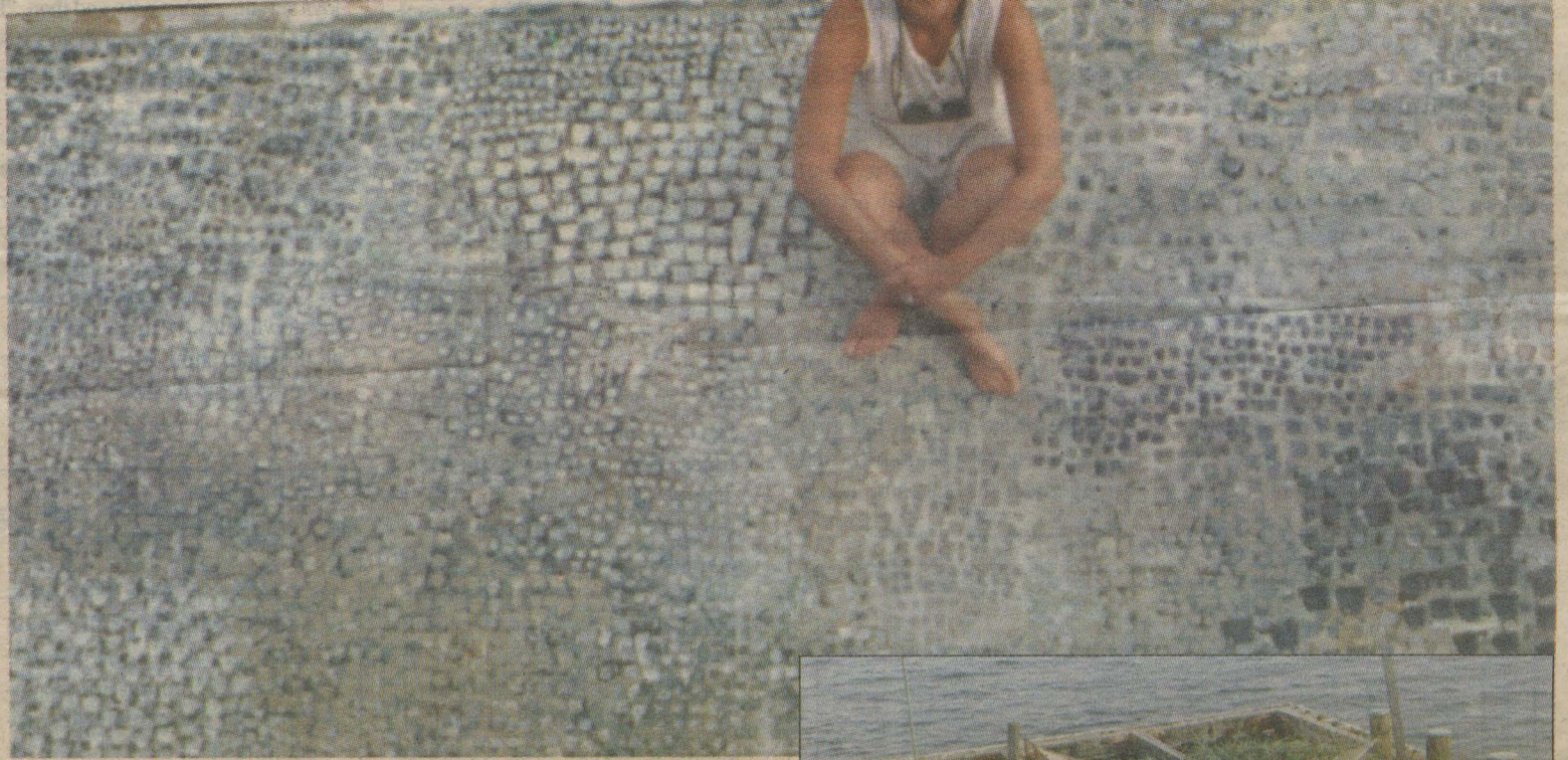
By Sue Harrison  
 BANNER STAFF

Looking at the show card, one would never have a sense of the size of Barbara Cohen's new abstracts, with their repeated motifs of bucket shapes paired with circles in dark colors. They look interesting but once you see them in their full seven-by-16-foot glory, they really begin to take off.

On display on a gallery wall they will be impressive, but not more so than when first seen after coming around the corner and up on the deck of Cohen's East End home, where each unrolled canvas takes up the entire floor area. To really see them, one has to climb the stairs and peer down from the upper deck. Some of the canvases are so large she's had to rent a studio in Somerville to have room to finish them.

Cohen will show a cross section of her work including the large paintings, smaller paintings, drawings and assemblages at a show at the Schoolhouse Center beginning with a reception from 7 to 10 p.m. on Friday and running through Aug. 24.

Cohen's work has been on a trail that with a little explanation becomes easy to follow. Her very early work was based on nomadic dwellings, tents, huts and some were done in pale, thin colors on very large canvases. After beginning to spend time in Provincetown, Cohen was influenced by the boats in the harbor and began to paint and



Barbara Cohen sits on one of her canvases to give a sense of scale to the large work.

create caskets and cradles. Slowly, she seemed to be amassing the exterior shells everyone carries through life from the cradle that rocks us into being to the casket in which we slide into oblivion; between those, the rudimentary shelters that keep the elements at bay.

Her attraction to the bucket shape began when Cohen spent time in Vietnam, prompted by the large buckets men, women and children used to carry goods to market

and home. Buckets, a very simplified way of signifying the ability to carry and share life's bounty, began to take a front seat in her bus full of imagery.

When her beloved dog Gabe, a black lab who shared her life for years, died, she thought of his large bucket, always full of water, a symbol of the constant way she cared for him. For a while, the bucket became dominant as a theme as she **continued on page 38**



Cohen takes a break in the garden, her first, she says, and a labor of love that's found its way into her artwork.

**Cohen** continued from page 37 worked through her grief over the loss of her old pal. With that abating, the buckets have begun to take a more truly abstract meaning. Using their familiar shape and power, she began to manipulate them for the pure energy they create as a repeated pattern.

"I have an interest in tension and create it with paint and shapes," she says. Plus, working on the large canvases, each day's energy leads her to a different arrangement of shapes and colors even though the basics remain the same.

"Every day I have a different feeling and that creates movement, kind of a slow-fast pattern," she says. "I'd like to suspend the viewer in a swing and have them go over the painting with that slow, soft movement because that's how it looks to me."

Her first "buckets" had not been buckets at all but rather Vietnamese bucket-shaped corks, which she describes as white and pithy and unlike any other cork in the world. Starting with a dozen she brought back from overseas,

she soon called on a friend to send her thousands. She has strung them across canvases like marching soldiers, bunched them together, encrusted them with wax, painted on them and now has cut them in half to use as stamps depicting their unique bucket shape. As the intensity of her work increased, so too did the need for larger buckets. She made the next set of buckets by carving the shape out of split potatoes and using those as stamps. Later still she began to paint the outline of even larger buckets freehand enclosing spaces filled with circles and color.

While she worked on the large canvases, she took breaks and would draw on grid paper she got in Paris, repeating on a small scale the section of large work she had just completed. Each of those grid drawings stands as a completely separate work and will be on display at the show. She also broke up her efforts with smaller canvases and assemblages.

Cohen also planted her first real garden, a less-than-formal arrangement that takes up about

half of her small yard on the bay. To enhance the sand she added huge amounts of seaweed from the shore behind her and a lot of horse manure last fall. By spring she had the goods — the seeds she planted all thrived. Like a good gardener she's put in her time on preparation, and in caring for her plants has discovered a series of repetitious actions in the gardening that she's adding into her work. Specifically, she thinks of the raking, weeding and planting and feels them as parallel scraping lines, wavy brush lines and seed-like flecks. She's used the set of symbols in her work and has taken an older series of wax encrusted sugar cubes and begun to add the totemic symbols to them.

"It's a body thing, kinesthetic," she says.

To Cohen, spending the time in the garden as a way to find a direction on the canvas is not unusual.

"Ninety-five percent of painting is waiting," she says. "Sometimes I don't paint for six months. The better I take care of myself through those long moments of waiting for it to happen, the easier the process becomes. I'm getting older and the waiting is getting easier. Gardening helps."

So she waits and uses repeated symbols that have lost their initial meaning through sheer repetition and moves toward some unknown destination.

Taking a Zen stand, she says, "It all comes down to chop wood, carry water. At the risk of being corny, I'm just trying to get my work down to its simplicity."