

Some Thoughts on Ruti Helbitz Cohen's Work

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Ruti Helbitz Cohen's work operates in a graduated manner. In order to capture its unique qualities, one must first address each of its layers individually. The initial experience that arises during one's encounter with this body of work directs one's thoughts to masquerading, to a masked ball – a time and place that preclude the possibility of a stable identity; a time and place in which one (unchanging, recognizable) identity is removed in order to don another identity (ephemeral, imaginary, creative, artificial, fantasmic, theatrical). The arena in which Helbitz Cohen's ball takes place is a stage set representing a stage set. It presents identity as a fiction, a process of acquisition, a performance (as opposed to the deterministic perception of identity as an innate essence). Taken to an extreme, Helbitz Cohen's action in relation to the concepts of identity and selfhood represents a stance according to which the "self" is not an origin that precedes and enables experience, but rather a product of experience. It is itself a stance, and as such may vacillate and transform itself in accordance with changing circumstances. Subjective identity thus does not exist in a manner detached from concrete experience; nor can it be related to in terms of a developmental process that enables the "self" to overcome the events and practices that influence it and

to "continue on its path." Rather, identity must be repeatedly reexamined in relation to these events and practices as they take place.

In order to try and understand the experience shaped by the model of selfhood offered in Helbitz Cohen's work, one must turn to focus on the materials of which it is composed and on the manner in which they are treated. Helbitz Cohen's "masks" are made of paper – layered and painted parchment paper strips and cuttings. Created through the use of a mixed technique, these are both works on paper and works in paper. Helbitz Cohen removes painting from its support, while transforming the support into the painterly material itself. The painting becomes a kind of slough, which points to a process of constant renewal; at the same time, it bespeaks a loss of functional abilities, and is imbued with the quality of dead tissue that has perhaps been shed due to some form of infection. The marks imprinted on the paper were born of a process of deformation, while simultaneously constituting the final – albeit fragile – result of a formative process. The movement between these two poles – the deformed and the carefully sculpted – is organized as a ritual action – a séance or an exorcism. Helbitz Cohen humanizes the material by means of a thematic of death and loss, and the environment surrounding her figures is suspended in a space between sublimation and de-sublimation. The paper these works are composed of appears both poisonous and porous; nevertheless, it conjures up a hermetic totality. As the work transitions from two dimensions to three dimensions and back again, it radiates a secretive quality – alluding to a form of existence that contains both visible and invisible aspects, and which is structured around an

unresolved, non-dialectic relationship between the façade and what lies beneath it.

Helbitz Cohen's paper cuttings reveal themselves to have been processed in accordance with a certain plan, image or vision; at the same time, it seems that she underscores her inability to control the material with which and upon which she works. She uses the paper to rehabilitate an expressive form of action, a process of manual labor that seems all but obsolete. At the same time, this emphasis on the manual may also be read as an effect of immediacy, as a form of role playing in the context of which Helbitz Cohen consciously engages in an immediate, seemingly unskilled manual action (alluding to occupational therapy practices, to the creation of a child or a sick adult). Her choice of material dictates a seemingly traumatic model of experience, and involves surprising, unexpected and at times even uncalled-for results.

The qualities produced by the material manipulation of the paper are affiliated with the themes addressed in Helbitz Cohen's work. She examines the instability of identity and selfhood by means of a material – parchment paper – that serves to cover, package and preserve other materials in everyday life. The allusion to the daily uses of this material direct us towards a horizon pregnant with psychological meaning. At the same time, this allusion may also be considered to be a game, a joke almost, concerning the psychological dimension of art. Although one cannot decide the question of intentionality, the fragile, vulnerable and unstable quality of this form of painting – devoid of both a support and of substance – allows it to be associated with symptoms of speculation and

remembering, of hallucinations, nightmares or fantasies. Each one of these symptoms has the power to bring to life an entire world, yet also to sentence it to death.