GEOPOLITICS AND THE BEAUTIFUL
ANNE SWARTZ

Nancy Cohen achieves a delicate balance between celebration and critique in her large installation Hackensack Dreaming of 2013-15. She revels in natural beauty and fecundity as she also comments on reckless environmental disregard. With this amalgamation, Cohen fills the gallery space with numerous images and forms recalling Mill Creek Marsh, a wetlands section of the Hackensack River. The topic of Cohen’s installation is an area of New Jersey that is over-built. Principally, it is an environment of interlacing highways with massive big box stores offset by the Manhattan skyline in the distance.

This portion of the New Jersey Meadowlands is lowlands, situated between the Palisades cliffs and the Watchung Mountains. Cohen’s work recalls these specific surrounds while considering the environment and our relationship with it. The installation’s unifying blue palette dominates the viewer’s experience with the composite profusion of manipulated paper and crafted objects. The hue has the effect of beautifying a fantasy of nature. The charming blues belie the complexities in this section of the Hackensack River. The polluted ecosphere sits astride the estuary with remnants of its life as a cedar forest.

A large drawing accompanies the two-part sculpted multimedia domain. Located at the center of the installation, the drawing commands the viewer’s attention upon entering the gallery. The drawing complements the aggregated sections and extends Cohen’s exploration of transformed nature. Beyond its alluring appearance, the installation critiques the encircling metropolis pressing in on this persistent, but transformed, natural site. She focuses on the dissonance between the built environment and the constancy of nature. The waterways and the meadowlands endure even as the city continues to bloat.

Each side of Hackensack Dreaming is a multimedia burst of glass, handmade paper, rubber, and monofilament. The components synthesize into a dramatic, cacophony. The two large side portions parenthetically surround the viewer who ambulates through the center. The sides are similar in scope, but not exact duplicates in elements or size. And they vary in shape based upon the requirements of each exhibition space. The single large drawing measures ten feet by eight feet. For the opposing north and south walls of the gallery, Cohen situates interlacing pastiched sheets of textured handmade paper onto which she incorporates natural river forms and adds sculpted flora and fauna.
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The installation sides range in tints and shades of predominant blue. Some pieces lean towards pale blue while others are more robustly saturated. While blue can tend towards the darker end of the color value scale, which typically possesses visual gravity, here the blues are more visually lightweight. Cohen accomplishes this quality by focusing on the gentle beryl to azure end of the spectrum instead of the comparatively demanding indigo to cobalt section. Intensely saturated blue water only occurs occasionally in nature because bacteria usually makes water less blue. Perhaps one of the strongest examples of the blue intensity of sterile water is seen at the Grand Prismatic Spring in Yellowstone National Park, where the super-heat of the water’s center eliminates any bacteria. As the water cools towards the edges, the bacteria create brilliant colors like a rainbow (thus its name). Cohen visually contrasts the beauty of this fragile yet durable water ecosystem with the incorporation of a red rectangular billboard form and circular shapes the artist explains are contiguous images of the nearby water treatment plants. Further, Cohen’s installation functions metaphorically for our shared experience with the Hackensack River, a place of local import, or as the artist describes “think Jimmy Hoffa, not the Adirondacks.”

There is no central focal point in the composition of each of the walls. The rectilinear sheets extend both vertically and horizontally. The line created where the wall and floor meet has the impact of a horizon line. That actual line becomes a seen form, anchoring the whole array of objects and renderings. Extending out from the wall are occasional and intermittent sculptural elements which echo river fauna and flora. Together, the skeletal molded forms and the dense matter read like fossils. More sculptural elements hang from the ceiling, similarly arranged in asymmetrical compositions.

The overall impression is quite airy because of the transparency and translucency of Cohen’s materials, the suspended sculpted pieces and the arranged ones on the floor. On the floor, a thin layer of blue paper pulp swirls to look like dust. Cohen poured and painted it on the floor. She allows interruptions and gaps where the floor is evident through the spread— a way she coalesces an to this elaborate accumulation without regularizing and binding the overall appearance. The chasms in the swirls and curves of the sand-like pulp sit on a few sheets of
handmade paper trailing back to the wall to which they are connected. Natural sculptural elements diversely populate the pulp and handmade paper. Even though the paper is thickly textured and heavily worked in areas, the light weight of the paper actually defies the suggestion of bulk.

The large drawing perpendicular to the installations reads like diagrams for the two-dimensional and low-relief paper images and the sculpted units in the larger installation sections. The lines connecting the natural renderings link the individual parts into the greater whole, much as the human organs are connected by the veins and arteries, tethered by the musculature. The translucency of the paper recalls the partially transparent surfaces in the sculptured elements of the installation. A dialogue is created between them, even though the scale is markedly different between the two. The images in the wall drawing appear small in comparison to the overall installation. The subjects in the drawing evoke less of an appealing, sweeping panorama because they read as almost monochromatic with the major color schemes veering towards blander earth tones.

Within her oeuvre, Cohen explores abstracted notions of the body and nature, while always investigating humanity’s impact on nature and our relationship with it. The idea of creating an alluring vista recalls the art of French Impressionist Claude Monet who exhaustively returned to the same pond in Giverny, in his extensive and immersive series of Water Lilies, begun in 1897 and continued until 1917. In contrast to Monet’s heavy-handed approach to his compositions—he planned and planted a scheme for his water gardens to realize exactly the image in his mind’s eye. In contrast, Cohen does not alter or interact with the natural organization of this place of her inspiration. The focus on the environment has been au courant since the mid-1960s when Americans artists became increasingly disenchanted with the gallery scene and moved out into natural spaces, such as Mary Miss, or brought it into art world interiors, like Robert Smithson, or engaged with sustainability, as Agnes Denes.

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Cohen’s use of nature extends her earlier explorations into lived experience, its complexities, and its simultaneous fragility and endurance. Ever since her childhood in Queens and Westchester to her present life in Jersey City, Cohen has been mesmerized by the interplay between people and the environment. She says: “I have a very intuitive connection to the water and water-related forms but it has been the past twenty years in Jersey City—living in such an industrial mess surrounded by rivers has had me thinking about the connections between our local waterways, the environmental and industrial history of our area and our day to day lives.”

While Cohen’s reverence for this locale of the Hackensack recalls the many artists fascinated by waterways who persistently return to study sections of a single river, she is neither rendering
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A carefully observed marsh nor detailing a recording of a waterway. Instead, Cohen meditates on the collision between geopolitics and the biosphere through her representation of rivers and water and phenomena. She has termed these juxtapositions “wacky.” Her interest is in using the so-called “rhetoric of the landscape,” as labeled by sociologist James S. Duncan, or its cultural signification. She recognizes that humans have manipulated this site into a shadow of its former self. She’s using her study of this site as a way to delve into the web of social, political, and economic relations, as Duncan recounts as critical to understanding landscape as a site of signification and conceptualizing an interpretative frame for it. In her statement and remarks about this installation and the drawing, Cohen focuses on the ardent fascination she has developed over the past three years in looking at the banal area of the Hackensack River near Secaucus, New Jersey.
She describes the area of the river she studies as an "isolated puddle of the organic in a deluge of the human-made," bracketed by the metropolitan visual discordance mixed with the excessive aural noise from the highways and its dense human overpopulation. In this locale, Cohen realized the jutting forms dotting the river’s surface are stumps, remnants of a cedar forest destroyed by settler colonists centuries ago. About the stumps, she wrote: “The stump forms are inexplicable, magical, sculptural. They seem to embody fragility, perseverance, and a caught moment. Conceptual ideas I have been moving around in my work for years were suddenly presented to me beside the New Jersey Turnpike.” These fragments interest and engage Cohen the most.

The surviving traces like the stumps dramatically reference our moment alongside the environment in the Anthropocene, the contemporary age characterized by human-induced changes in the environment. In Hackensack Dreaming and in the related drawings, Cohen gives form for what French architect François Roche described as: “[n]ow nature is just a world garden, a domesticated garden.” Cohen includes referents to the social and political practices shaping the landscape with the inclusion of the billboard as a referent to the consumerism located near this physical site and to the water treatment plant which addresses the refuse that has made the river toxic, or what Cohen calls “the stand-in for the non-organic ‘real’ New Jersey.” Cohen acknowledges the ultimately reckless human impact on the Hackensack.

3. Ibid.
4. All remarks are taken from my conversations with the artist. Interview with the Artist, Artist’s Studio, Jersey City, New Jersey, October 1, 2014 and E-mail to the author, February 10, 2015. The artist’s statement is available on the artist’s website, (“Hackensack Dreaming [Artist’s Statement]” accessed February 12, 2015, http://www.nancymcohen.com/pageInstallations/95.html)