

The Museum of Modern Art

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK COHEN
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Wall Label

Viola: What country, friends, is this?

Captain: This is Illyria, Lady.

-- William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, I, ii, 1-2

Some photographers -- Edward Weston was one -- view the physical world as a repository of forms which, when shorn of context, adumbrate a cosmos. A bed of kelp, a shell or a rock contains within itself forms corresponding to the kind of superior geometry that structures the universe. Similar to our own, this photographic universe is beautiful but cold. Being perfect it is only tangentially human. Unpeopled, it is not, properly speaking, a world.

Other photographers, Jacques Lartigue, for example, transmute the stuff of this physical world into an impalpable world of their own design. Like William Faulkner - who molded his imagined Yoknapatawpha County from the raw red clay of the real Oxford, Mississippi - these photographers inform physical reality with a gesture closer to fable or myth than to geometry. They betray a longing for what was or might be rather than a knowing of what eternally is. They are romantic, irreverent, intuitive, and technically innovative.

Mark Cohen's photographs share in this sensibility. They were made during off-hours in and around Wilkes-Barre, a flood-prone coal-mining town in eastern Pennsylvania, where he has lived most of his life. Cohen's achievement has been to create from the "fact" of a Wilkes-Barre the "reality" of an Illyria - a new world existing solely in the tonalities of these photographic pictures. Illumined by twin suns, it is furnished with quiet gardens and peopled with beautiful maidens and entranced princes. It is blessed with dogs. Quite simply, this is a world of natural goodness, bounty, mystery and noble aspiration.

(more)

Cohen's work - though it is generous and never insists - transcends all attempts to define it in terms of narrative. His photographs remain lyrically and overtly mysterious. Edward Weston's camera carved forms out of space. Cohen's carves events out of time. And events, shorn of context, adumbrate not a universe, but an enigma.

Dennis Longwell
Assistant Curator

Mark Cohen, who is twenty-nine years old, is a commercial photographer specializing in children's portraits, wedding albums, and advertising brochures. He began photographing seriously in 1965 and was first exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in the exhibition "Recent Acquisitions," in 1970. He was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1971-72. Cohen teaches photography at King's College and Wilkes College, both in his native city, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. He is married and has two sons.

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