

## Lynne Cohen: Space Invader

Various locations, Montreal & Venice Spring 2011

by Bryne McLaughlin



Lynne Cohen *Untitled* 2011 Courtesy Olga Korper Gallery and Art45

Since the early 1970s, Montreal-based photographer [Lynne Cohen](#) has reimagined the way we see everyday spaces. From uninhabited living rooms, spas and offices to empty laboratories and barren workplace corridors, Cohen's work frames an off-hours view of daily life loaded with sterile silences and subtle eccentricities. It's a perspective on human existence that strikes an uneasy balance between the eerie and the ridiculous. Earlier this May, Cohen edged out Vancouver artist [Roy Arden](#) and Toronto artist [Robin Collyer](#) to take home the inaugural [Scotiabank Photography Award](#), a \$50,000 prize to be given annually to a senior Canadian artist; it includes a major exhibition at the next [CONTACT photography festival](#) and an internationally distributed monograph produced by German publisher Steidl. Cohen's work has also recently been featured in concurrent solo shows at [Olga Korper Gallery](#) in Toronto (closed June 1) and [Art45](#) in Montreal (continuing to June 11), and is included in the international group exhibition "[Real Venice](#)," which opens this week as part of the Italian Pavilion's program at the Venice Biennale. *Canadian Art's* managing editor Bryne McLaughlin caught up with Cohen by telephone last week to talk about her latest photos and the inner workings behind her unique take on the oddities of real life.

**Bryne McLaughlin:** It's been a whirlwind month for you with the announcement of the Scotiabank Photography Award coinciding with exhibitions of new and recent work in Toronto, Montreal and, starting this week, in Venice. I had a chance to see the show at Olga Korper Gallery and what struck me right off was not only the wide range of sites pictured—a spa, an office building lobby, a laboratory corridor, a dance hall, etc.—but also the varying scale of the images, in particular the three large works that were interspersed through the show. I understand this is the first time you've shown works at that size in Canada?

Lynne Cohen: Right. In 2010, I did a large-scale commissioned piece for the Neuflyze OBC bank's head office in France. At first I wasn't sure how this would work but it was incredible how it looked when I saw it. So I suggested to Olga that we add a few new pieces at that size in the show.



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**BM: Monumentally scaled images have had a huge impact on contemporary photography over the past 20 years, especially with the work of German artists like [Andreas Gursky](#), [Thomas Struth](#), [Thomas Ruff](#) or [Candida Höfer](#). What is it about a larger format that does and does not make sense to you?**

LC: Well, it's even more real than real; I mean, you feel that you can just walk right into the pictures. For me, it's like you're there. These prints are made from 8-by-10-inch negatives and there's no pixelation. So they're like picture windows and I'm astounded how it holds. At the Neuflyze OBC bank, the image installation really reads like a profound infiltration. You don't know where the picture starts and stops, and I love that.

One of my dealers in Germany jokes that they wanted to show a German photographer who wasn't German. That ended up being me. The thing that always bugs me is artists who print their work large and then let the process turn into printmaking. I was a printmaker in a previous life and if it wasn't for photography I probably would have stayed a printmaker. But if I started again I would do something completely different. In fact, I have never aspired to make prints oversize. I like to mix it up. It's never been a formula. I mean the [Camouflage](#) pictures are still printed at 11 by 14 inches. So I guess for me, a mixing that is non-formulaic is a nice principle to run on.

**BM: So it's a question of tipping the balance?**

LC: Yes, and I really love that. I would have never done the whole show at Olga's big. It wouldn't be photographic, at least to my eye.

**BM: At Art45 you are showing many of the same works, but none at a large scale. What's the strategy behind that?**

LC: Well, it's a much smaller space. With my veto, the dealers pick or reconfigure the pieces they show. But the last photos that I make are always the ones that I give. That way the works have no baggage, no

dialectical conversation set in advance. So even though the images at Art45 are the same images that I showed in Toronto, it's a different conversation. I don't work in series. I don't normally print different sizes. But in this case, I think there is a reason for showing the same work. For me, it's always a new conversation, a new kind of dialectic—even though I'm not supposed to use that word anymore, it's old-fashioned. I like to think that you end up in a third place.



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**BM: With all of these variables in mind, do you see your exhibitions as installations?**

LC: I make the pieces individually, so no. Someone who reviewed my work in the *Village Voice* in the 1980s suggested the photos were all set up in my studio. That was kind of nice in one way; in another way the reviewer had fallen in the trap. Welcome to Duchamp. In fact my images are mostly found. I don't do any staging. But if you set one picture against another, it can register a totally different temperature. I love that. I talk about pictures contaminating each other. I love the idea of infiltration and contamination in the way that you end up somewhere that you never intended to be. And who would have known anyway? With the shows at Olga Korper and Art45, many people might not realize right away that these are the same pictures. But that's okay; it really is a different conversation. That can depend on anything from how high you hang the pictures to the different spaces they're shown in: Olga's space shows that contamination in a different way than the Art45 space. Again, I sort of leave it to the dealers, with a veto on my part. I make a huge amount of work, more than I would ever print or think of finishing. So I kind of leave it to them to configure, unless it's not edgy enough and then I'll infiltrate to upset the balance.

**BM: What about the “Real Venice” exhibition, which includes works by [Philip-Lorca diCorcia](#), [Nan Goldin](#), Candida Höfer and fellow Canadian Robert Walker, among other A-list international artists, and is being presented by the organization [Venice in Peril](#) as part of the biennale?**

LC: “Real Venice” is an exhibition organized by Elena Foster, the wife of Norman Foster, for Venice in Peril, a group that helps preserve the art and architecture of Venice. We were invited and asked to give the first edition of whatever work we produced. Candida Höfer, who is a friend, convinced me to do it. For me it was a dream project; my way was paid and I got to do what I love doing, though it was the most complicated project I've ever done. It was easier to photograph under communism than it is in Italy. In fact, it's a miracle I got anything, but in the end I made pictures that I quite like, some of which were included in the Toronto and Montreal exhibitions.



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**BM: How much research do you do when looking for a potential site to photograph? Does a location just tweak when you see it?**

LC: I do a lot of research. I write letters, send emails. In the early days I'd go to the library and look through journals, scientific magazines and whatnot. Now there's the Internet, but there you never know whether what you're seeing is virtual or real, and I always underline when I contact people that I need real spaces, not virtual ones. In the early work I might see things from the window of the car, but later there was no more window peeping, which has become dangerous anyway. When you set up a view camera and lighting equipment, you become a circus act. Then it really becomes a performance piece. Often, I might have the inkling that there's something there so I just sit down and start to hallucinate. If you slow down in a living space long enough, things find you. Now I work a little bit more behind closed doors, but I'm also mixing it again with a little window peeping.

**BM: Has there been a change in your work over the years?**

LC: Well, anyone who thinks there have been no changes in the work...well I really don't know. People who don't see these works as a little funny, maybe they should have a drink or something, have a couple! This is the real world. There is truth in these images, at least I certainly hope so. I choose to work in the First World; I never work in the so-called Second or Third Worlds. My heart is in the Third World, but I don't make work there, I wouldn't know how. For me it's the hilarious parts of the First World—the layers of social class and privilege—that tell the truth. And I'm interested in spaces that are a little off, in how they can look on and off at the same time.

My works are always filled with contradictions. They depict all of these readymade installations, and you'd think this image couldn't be true; it has to have been made by an artist with a wry sensibility and black humour.



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**BM: It's important to point out again that your photos are not staged.**

LC: They're not staged, but they sure could be, couldn't they? You think they must be. I think the only thing you might say, the reflective part, is that while they're not staged, if you put a frame around something and take a chunk of the world out of context you are framing it in another way. You're getting rid of the noise. Something else is happening. It isn't staged, but there is also something about it that is very much staged.

**BM: Is there a narrative implied in your pictures?**

LC: Well, yes. I once wrote about my work as being loaded with storytelling. Even if you know the work, it's still always incredibly complicated. And why does it have to make sense? The images are pieces of a narrative puzzle that could be about anything. It's totally absurd. Absurd, but it does tell a story. So the work goes back and forth; it is narrative and it isn't.



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**BM: So not specific narratives, but the suggestions of many possible narratives?**

LC: Yes, there is a story, but what story exactly is impossible to decipher. I mean I could tell you what actually happens in a lot of these spaces, but it still doesn't make sense. I come from modernism, not post-modernism. It's not my fault; it's an accident of birth.

**BM: Even though you never include people in your photos, human presence is suggested by traces of activity—an office foyer couch recently vacated or just about to be sat in, the scuffed floor of a dance hall, boots and coats lining a laboratory hallway. It's as if these spaces are not empty but between occupation.**

LC: Exactly, which is why I've always loved the title of one of my books, [Occupied Territory](#), which by the way is often misfiled in the Middle Eastern section of libraries. Some people say to me, "How come there are no people in your pictures?" My answer to that is "Where would I put them?"

**BM: In the pictures you've been showing in Toronto and Montreal, there seems to be a lot of intentional framing; the perspectives seem to draw or push viewers into the sites you've photographed.**

LC: Probably a lot of that happened subliminally for me. If you work with a view camera, you're working with a camera obscura and a grid. When I'm under that black curtain, I'm in my studio. I'm gone. Everything else is obliterated. So it's intuitive but it's also probably a result of the tools. There's a picture from Venice at Art45 with three "dancing" white chairs. It looks like these chairs are going to fly off the frame. The top and bottom of the framing are completely equal, but the pictures are falling off the wall and the chairs are sliding. I get seasick anyway, but it's surprising how little it takes to make you nauseated. I'm interested in how you make the viewer unstable. If you can make the viewer physically unstable, you might be able to affect him or her psychologically as well.

**BM: I also saw a lot of doorways, or entry and exit points, in the pictures too. These are almost claustrophobic spaces in their framing as the ceilings and floors seem to squeeze the viewer into the picture. Do these doorways hint at a way out?**

LC: Well, I think in many of the pictures, this is a fake exit. I do have claustrophobic edges both physically and ideologically. I can always figure out how to get into these spaces, but I'm never quite sure how to get out.



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