## SEEING DOUBLE

## THE INTER-TEXT OF SOREL COHEN

## Through

the perception of meaning-production, the semiological association of images in works of art has acquired a consensus for its critical consideration as text. The works of Bakhtin, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva and others make it possible to understand that these considerations of text are not confined to the literary model, but cut across all genres of discursive practice in response to an infinite variety of experience. The properties of a given text, however, can no longer be seen to originate with the procession of rhetorical genius, or to be solely attributed to a particular author.

Writers/ artists are now seen more as guests, sharing the text with a host of contributors within the realm of a particular discourse. It has been said that we now inhabit a community of texts of various forms, in which it follows that textuality is a function of our experiential habitat.

If art can be seen as a site from which meaning can be derived, then it has the capacity to alter accepted notions of meaning and their traditional conjunction with particular images. Associations of visual images structured by commercial artists in advertising are invested by media-power with an aura of ubiquitous presence, forming a large and influential part of our everyday visual landscape. Photography and photo-based modes of reproduction are aptly employed in appropriating, manipulating and disseminating these omnipresent signs of the times. Artistic integrity resists the insidious hegemony of imperial image-manipulation, which erodes cultural and social freedom through the priv-

ileging and promotion of a prescribed meaning, derived from a directed view of a given image. Fine art practice strives to apprehend and keep open those elusive sites from whence new meaning is distilled from experience and brought freshly to consciousness in the artist's work.

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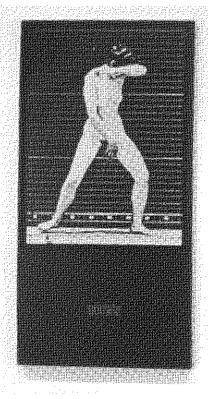
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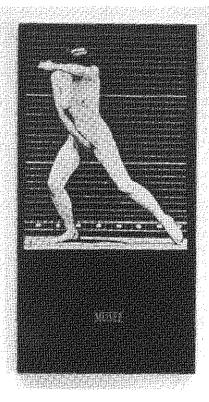
The questions which unfold in Sorel Cohen's new works have their roots in a concern for issues of gender in the world of repre-

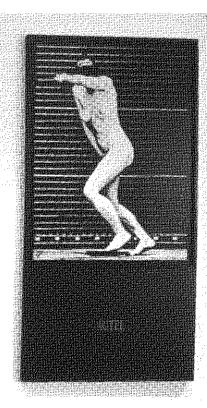
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sentation. They initially became manifest through a self-conscious regard for her own condition as a woman, in the *context* of everyday life in her native Montréal. It was this concern with the implicit textuality of representation, and its focus on the domestic activities commonly performed by women, which motivated and informed Cohen's early works from the grassroots level of feminist concern, and imbued them with the *puissance* characteristic of her continuous fine art project.

For more than a dozen years, Cohen's photo-based artworks have been the focus of a growing public interest, generated through the intrigue of her compelling yet disturbing works. In an extensive program comprising scores of group and solo exhibitions, Cohen's images have been recognized by a wide variety of publics in Canada, the United States and Europe. In the spring of 1991 her work was seen in fresh light in a solo exhibition at Wynick/Tuck Gallery in Toronto, and in survey exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Hamilton and in New York at the 49th Parallel gallery, on West Broadway.

The conceptual seeds of Cohen's recent works were largely germinated and developed during a period of residence in the Canada Council's Paris Studio, during the autumn of 1989. It wouldn't surprise anyone familiar with the artist's prior agenda that the host of historical representations of women in painting housed by Paris museums would be a big draw for Cohen. The Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay proved to be favorite haunts and allowed her to carry out the anticipated research of selected works in the most privileged of settings. Since Cohen's return from France, North Americans have been witness to a strong, new body of her work that confirms its own maturity. Cohen

focuses the primary aspects of her research on the controversy surrounding Manet's *Olympia*, and this appears as no accident, when illuminated by a brief reconnaissance of her career.

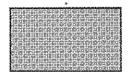
Cohen's early video *Houseworks* (1976) documented her bed-making activity through each consecutive day of an entire week, as a textual study in itself. Apart from direct personal interlocution with her audience, Cohen sees another text harboured in the conundrum of *playing* the video *work*. This not only disseminates the image but collapses the conscious distance between those who anonymously share, in their separate lives, the dehumanizing burdens of such routine role-baggage as that with which women have traditionally been saddled.

In an attempt to address the gaps in her prior domestic studies, Cohen produced a series of images using a still camera, in photo-prints and cyanotypes, which she entitled Le rite matinal (1976-77). Here the flourish of gesture intrinsic to the manipulation of bed-clothes is taken beyond the context of the mundane. Recording at relatively slow shutter speeds resulted in a somewhat blurred depiction of motion and a so-called "painterly" or brush-like effect, particularly striking in the flashing gesture of a coverlet being tossed or flung out over a bed. Similar effects are evident in The Shape of the Gesture (1977-78), where serial images of Cohen's activity, recorded while cleaning glass with a cloth, could be seen as a woman waving a handkerchief. But there is more than a sense of Eadweard Muybridge's motion-studies here; more than an indexed reference to the mechanical aspects of gesture which perpetrate an evocation of simple anthropomorphic empathy. These works entertain

both grace and panic, as the spell of the anonymous subject, whose features are obscured in the blurring of the gestural images, combines with the ambiguity attending the apparent investment of her vigour. Is she cleaning glass, waving goodbye or calling for help? What these two bodies of work have in common is that sequential images of the ordinary activity in everyday life are seen and framed by the artist as "ready-mades." In this framing that begins with their appropriation by the artist, these images constitute windows of opportunity thrown open for review, and the exercise of re-interpretation.

t was Mikhail Bakhtin who recognized the specifics of any "temporal expression of space" in representation, and framed them as the textual entity which he coined, the "chronotope." His understanding that "[t]he image of man (humankind is implied here) is always intrinsically chronotopic" invites us to explore the relative distinctions of this phenomenon at play, with respect to appropriation and pastiche at work in Cohen's images, Bakhtin's manifold orders of major and minor chronotopes permeate not just images as text within the interior folds of her individual works, but the entirety of what we can perceive as their inter-textuality. In other words, the relationships of expressed encapsulations of specificity pertaining to the operative space/time context of images, within the limits of a given work, have dialogic relations with the text of other works, and also with the world outside the field of representation or "world represented."2 According to Bakhtin, a trace of these inter-chronotopic and dialogic relations is present in the work; however, he sees the 'actual dialogue" as existing apart from

▲ Le geste qui cache (detail) PHOTO COURTESY OF WYNICK/TUCK GALLERY, TORONTO



the "world represented" and not able to enter the artwork or any of the chronotopes represented within it.

Julia Kristeva refers extensively to Bakhtin in her Semiotike,3 where she describes inter-textuality as going beyond the relation of mere appropriation or citation, allowing correspondence between all historical texts or ,for example, between Cohen's work and let us say Bacon, Maffi, Manet, Muybridge and Velázquez, in an open dialogic relation. As Levi-Strauss would say that Freud on Oedipus belongs to the myth of Oedipus, we could follow that Deleuze and Guattari's text in Anti-Oedipus and even A Thousand Plateaus are similarly claimed. The implications of these elements of theoretical analysis pervade the interstices of Cohen's matrix of artistic production as she participates in a complex correspondence with the viewer which involves the great texts of social and cultural history.

Over the course of the next several years, Cohen's actual presence as a selfreflexive subject in her work was to disappear, reappear and disappear again. Her studio work The Camera Can Obliterate the Reality It Records (1978) marks the occasion where Cohen vanished as a subject in her work (by the gradual diminishing of shutter speed), and stepped through the aperture to discover her next project. Cohen's realization that Francis Bacon's paintings of figures coupling were based on the sequential motion-studies of Muybridge's wrestlers caused her to reflect on both the synchronous relation between motion-study and the serial imagery of her own work, particularly the interface of her earlier blurred-motion passages with those effected by the brush of Francis Bacon.

In the series After Bacon/Muybridge (1980) Sorel Cohen locates both Bacon and herself with respect to Muybridge and each other. In studies of the fleeting gestures of male bodies locked in the urgent embrace of combat, she shares with Bacon a homo-erotic appreciation of the male body. This appreciation is suspended between a classical or neoplatonic ideal and the ambiguity prompted by these later studies of both artists. Here a formal allegory of gender relations is considered through voyeuristic glimpses of a sensuality inherent to embraces of the flesh. Cohen was also fascinated by her perception of a parody of death which may be perceived in the climax of lovemaking. Despite common factors, seeing combat as an allegory of love can be a dangerous trap which views sexual intercourse as combat; by definition without love. When the traditional extension of this parallel view sees the gender-role relation as male/ female with the dyad of strength/ weakness denoting the privileged partner as dominant. This leads us straight back into the master/slave debate. However, submission and weakness are not entirely synonymous in association with the Cohen/Bacon images, as the ambiguity held within by a blanket of sensuality induces a condition of abandon-

ment to the perceived dialectical movement. Playful contests of strength in love insist on mutual submission to pleasure; the deadly holding associated with combat does not belong. Nevertheless, the trace of win/lose central to the idea of the contest lingers in the images. Cohen recognizes that this formal relation of domination/submission thrives in typical models of both hetero- and homo-sexual relations, and forms a matrix through which gender relations are traditionally seen and understood. In recognizing the status of otherness in her identity as woman and artist, Cohen empathizes with the gender perspective revealed in Bacon's studies and candidly declares vulnerability to a similar state of sexual disenfranchisement to that which is often experienced by male homosexuals in the world of real men. In these photo-works, Cohen restores authorship of the "wrestler" studies to Muybridge, augmented and enlightened, if you will, by their Baconian/Cohenian experience.

he artist's presence is restored in Cohen's An Extended and Continuous Metaphor (1983-86). In the course of an extenuated, studio exercise, the artist set up a condition of perpetual interpolation between the roles of painter (author), model (subject) and viewer (reader). The work consists of several

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successive ensembles of life-size colour prints. Speculating from various perspectives, each grouping achieves the chromatic richness and subjective intrigue of a Caravaggio, while echoing the formal hierarchy and symmetrical emphasis characteristic of traditional Flemish altarpieces. The photographic montages, achieved by multiple exposures, depict Cohen uniformly dressed in jeans and white pullover, often with lengths of scarlet drapery in evidence as she appears to portray herself in all of the roles at once; her camera noting the simultaneous manifestations of her various meta-presences. That she is the author, her own subject and the first reader is not in doubt here, but this constitutes a set of internal relationships which include us in the work by locating some of the points from which our various inter-relative views proceed. The images generated by this work challenge established views within the symbolic order which governs objective relations in the realm of artistic production, primarily by challenging the cloak of legitimation worn by the historical logocentrism of male authorship in all genres of artistic production.

The cultivated mood of the work is questioning but not squarely interrogative, with Cohen's sinuous path touching one stone just as she overturns another. Each element in turn is posited as mediating the relationship of the remaining ones to each other, and to the whole construct.

One is strongly reminded here of Las Meninas, by Velázquez; of being fixed by the riveting gaze of the artist's image of himself as he directs it out towards us, past the large canvas on which he works - but of which we can only see the back. In Michel Foucault's surgical account of the operation of visual "vectors" within this painting,4 he reveals the structure and the nature of a perceived political economy of the gaze, at work within the composite details of Velázquez's imagery: "In appearance, this locus is a simple one; a matter of pure reciprocity: we are looking at a picture in which the painter is in turn looking at us." And yet, "The painter is turning his eyes towards us only in so far as we happen to occupy the position of the subject. We, the spectators, are an additional factor. Although greeted by that gaze, we are also dismissed by it, replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model itself."

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To the void that confronts the painter's portrayal of a portrayal, do we then occupy the "real site of the spectator" or "the unreal site of the model"? For Cohen, relationships of the gaze are fragile and evanescent; flickering evidence of the relay of signification. It seems to be this very flickering which propels the operative ambiguity within Las Meninas and throughout An Extended and Continuous Metaphor. Her own gaze, however, became an exponentially introspective one in the unfolding of this series, as she rarely portrayed her image looking



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■ Noli Me Tangere PHOTO COURTESY OF WYNICK/TUCK GALLERY, TORONTO

out from its own frame of reference. Instead she saw herself looking inquisitively into her own role in the process of representation.

To appreciate the parallels, it must be acknowledged that Kristeva's notion of inter-textuality is at work here. Las Meninas is an important document in the annals of the commodification of women and this painting, on the most fundamental level of its historicity, is one of a series of paintings which illustrate the "packaging of a princess." It can be seen as a typical "marketing job" of the period which extended these images of the available female child to such princely heads of Europe as may have bargained in marriage as a means to suit the economic ends of their social and political purposes. This may be a glimpse of the "real" picture of representation that Velázquez is opening for us here, in his distinguishing of this painting from others of the series featuring the Infanta Margarita. This issue of sexual appropriation by means of the gaze finds women as the sexual object in imagery throughout the history of painting. It seems to have been strangely overlooked by Foucault in this instance but it is a central theme in the trajectory of Cohen's work.

o explore and utilize the conflict encountered within the structure of meaning-production specific to photography seems to be the artist's central motivation in her series "Beyond Recovery." It was first shown at the Toronto Photographer's Workshop in 1988. Cohen's earlier profile of operation, creating auto-biographical, self-reflexive studio-works in the context of photo-based production within a feminist discourse, opens up here to consider a wider amplitude of cultural experience, framing both feminist praxis and the seemingly universal crisis of representation. Key elements of this series consider the conflicting nature of the representation of landscape within the landscape of representation which we inhabit. Beyond Recovery found Cohen creating a series of photo-dyptichs, each suspended in a black photo-ground. This was accomplished by the intuitive appropriation/manipulation of various images from Cohen's visual experience and their juxtaposition into visual dyads, each forming a dialectical unit; culture/nature being the most significant one to a discussion reflecting on the central issues of Cohen's identity. In Boreal Portage a photo-print depicts a tutu-

There is an absolute distancing at work within any photograph - a denial of presence in spite of the likeness of the image. It is this constructed view of the real - the hyper-real, that is intrinsic to images of desire. Anything that is represented, subject to the constructed view becomes a commodity; and what could be more appropriate than photography to perpetuate commodity fetishism, through its infinite denial of the presence of the sublime object represented? If we read culture/nature, we see on one hand, the dancer not the woman as persona. Under the terms of the enlightenment, woman is associated with nature by way of her essential fertility, which implies a responsibility to reproduction and motherhood; but the enlightenment saw nature as something to be utilized, domesticated, managed and controlled. This echo is heard when the cabin is seen as culture, deferring nature's presence by actually consuming it. Beyond Recovery reflects Cohen's sense that the real is being eroded from experience, never to be recovered as such. Experience, in her view, is evermore an assimilation of the real, through selected or constructed signs of it. This ultimately constitutes a reality of assimilation or the hyper-real.

ed, prima ballerina, posed on painful tip-

toe, limbs fully extended, frozen still - in

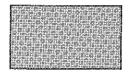
a gesture of pointing that would quicken a

common denominators, perhaps suggested by the appropriation of the adjacent scene - a cabin with chimney, halated by northern lights in a forest clearing. The presence of terror in the sublime is proposed by the use of reverse or negative images in these works, but it adopts a subliminal habit, as Cohen has worked them with sensuous monochromatic washes of photographic colour. In effect, the reversal entertains a kind of Derridean deconstruc tion which would redistribute privilege within the relation, to reconsider the dyad as nature/culture. The allegory apparent within further orders of deferral in this work may help explain the artist's

bird dog's pride; an image with some

motives.

Cohen's solo exhibition at Wynick/ Tuck Gallery in January of 1991 comprised many of the new works conceived during her sojourn in Paris. The most striking was a piece entitled Noli Me Tangere. This work is the second generation of two pieces by the same calling. Both featured an enlarged colour-photo study of the hand of Manet's Olympia. "Noli" the first was shown in 1990 at New York's Jayne Baum Gallery as part of a group exhibition called "Odalisque." The excerpted image, showing the confluence of Olympia's thighs and abdomen guarded by the controversial hand, is underscored by a painted band of deep, cobalt blue on which the text, "Noli Me Tangere" is juxtaposed. Cohen's cropping of Olympia also features an inverted triangular patch of the dark background space which interrogates Manet's method of conspicuously invoking the sign of the pubic triangle itself. His designation of so called negative



► Medusenhaupt
PHOTO COURTESY OF
WYNICK/TUCK GALLERY,
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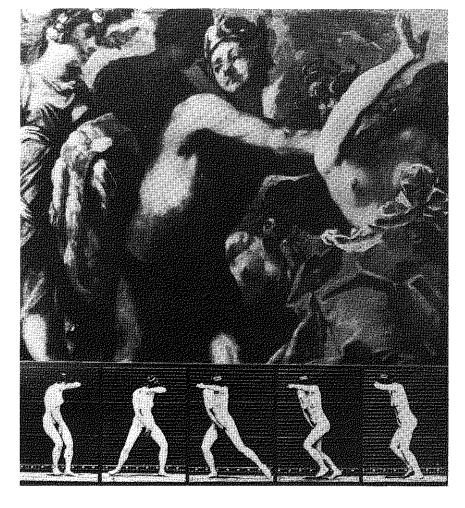
space in his composition, to metaphorically denote what we have come to know from Jacques Lacan as the *lack*, works as a kind of topological interception of perceived space by actual space within the work. This appropriated visual phrase demands at least a para-literate consideration of the *text* within Manet's painting and of the relationship of *Olympia* to its art-historical context.

The figure of the young woman in this painting of Manet's represents a young, Parisian courtesan of the period. Paintings of prostitutes were a category in which they served as visually available icons representing a class of women whose bodies were physically available and dedicated to the service of male pleasure. This situation attended the general availability of all women's bodies to the male gaze. Typical images of women as object (the so-called female nude) obeyed an iconography designed to demonstrate the lack of the

phallus and thus an envy and dependency on male possession of the penis, which of course was never revealed or even depicted publicly in its aroused state. The attitude of Olympia's gaze does not accommodate male appropriation but defends the space of her persona and "self conscious" possession of the phallus. T. J. Clark notes as evidence the subtly flexed attitude of her left hand which "fails to enact the lack of the phallus."6 The typical male viewer, seeing only his advan-

tage, is invited into speculation by the apparent availability of the body, but is summarily exposed in the pursuit of this exercise. Though the body of Olympia at first glance assumes the classic, available posture of the female nude, the obvious confirmation of her mind, in its spirit and sense of self-identity, does not comply. By abandoning the sensual gloss and usual suggestiveness of such painted images in order to focus on the persona of his model Manet distinguished her and inscribed her subtle enigma on the face of modernity.

"Noli" the second reconsiders the hand, but this time in a reverse or negative image, echoing the feeling of deferred presence. This section is richly coloured with a wash of transparent, cobalt blue. The actual text invites the captional consideration of a wider social context.



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Olympia's hand now shares the 77.5 by 51.0 inch, vertical frame of reference with an early, sepia coloured photo-image of the Paris Stock Exchange - la Bourse. In his work, A la bourse (1878)7 Edgar Degas represented a scenario of tailed and tophatted males whispering in each other's ears in the concourse of the stock exchange, where commodities (including women) were formally exchanged within an exclusive society of men; Degas gives a real contextual flavour of the period to this image of the status quo; the institution requiring even them to submit to a uniform business attire of dark suits and silk hats. Cohen's fleshing out of the context of Olympia's world, clearly cites that the hegemony of male-dominated institutions is still intact and guarded by the implied, Hands Off! or "Don't Touch Me."

Muybridge's influence on Cohen and her intrigue with his studies began as a close reading of his work within the historical context, but carried forward and considered against the experience of contemporary, urban, social praxis it manifests itself as counter-memory in reaction to the implications which his images have continued to inscribe on gender relations within the social structure since their publication in the 19th century.

n Le geste qui cache, the artist appropriates an interesting passage of six serial images directly from Muybridge; again committing them to the service of review or reconnaissance in the breadth of our inherited, historical context. In each of six vertical panels, an enlarged, black and white photo-print of a figure from Ashamed surmounts an underlying panel of red-painted wood, which carries in bold, upper-case, bronze letters,

one of the following inscriptions: "AS-SEMBLÉE," "FAMILLE," "BOURSE," "MUSÉE," "AUTEL," "ACADÉMIE." The figures are excerpted from a series of 15 studies, which depict a nude female in some aspect of turning away while one hand covers her genitals and a raised forearm guards her averted eyes, in each case reflecting Eve's posture on being discovered naked in the Garden of Eden, as oft represented in historical painting. Cohen's research had revealed that this series, which in the published catalogue of his works is titled Female (Nude) Turning around in surprise and running aways was referred to in his personal notebooks as Ashamed. For Cohen this particular passage, distinguished by her personal revelation, is a key to understanding the inscription of social prejudice throughout Muybridge's studies. His portrayals of nude men are divided between the responsible activities associated with defense and production and the progressive pursuit of athletics, generally characterizing the work and play of males as noble and important, respectively. These depict lithe male bodies in which skills and strengths are refined through practice in trades, or competition in a variety of sports. Women are generally depicted by Muybridge, as awkward with motion that doesn't involve: carrying water, spanking babies, taking off their clothes, waving hankies, scrubbing pots and floors, or being led around the dance-floor. Cohen's point is that histori-

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cal prejudice is carried forward by these published images, socially perpetrated as a matter of course, and is alive and well in the status-quo of the operational deus ex machina of our contemporary institutions. Divesting the popular media of their charismatic aura of ecstasy reveals them as a systemic, working element of this machine, and clearly shows that the fearful and omnipotent view being avoided by Muybridge's ashamed subject is not God's own, but the male gaze embodied in the panoptic view of the camera. Photographic practice, with its aptitude for appropriation feeding the appetite of its affiliated technologies, can intimidate by objectifying and misrepresenting the subject, especially those subjects perpetually vulnerable to the gaze which sees a lack. One of the important elements in understanding Cohen's work is to share her knowledge that seeing is conditional, a function of the mind's eye doing the seeing, and its particular point of view.

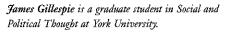
edusenbaupt (1990, 66.5" x 60.5") features a visual deconstruction and review of the Medusa myth, via a passage cited from Francesco Maffi's painting Perseus and Medusa. The punctum, employed to precipitate this, is a horizontal band comprising five of Muybridge's "ashamed" women (as featured in Cohen's, Le geste qui cache) set against a ground of vivid, red photocolour, catalytically providing a bottom line to underscore Maffi's baro-que, Venetian image. Perseus's assault is strangely encoded in a plan, said to have been is-

sued by Zeus himself. He stands with both arms extended, holding the victim's head while readying to sever it with the sword in his other hand. Cohen sees an allegory of the photographic process implicit in this story. In order to avoid the deadly gaze of this demon Perseus's eyes are sharply averted. He is able to monitor his murderous work, however, by observing the image of his prev seen in the mirror of his polished shield. The young hero believes that he has access to Medusa only by deferring the actual presence of that which threatens him - the female persona. No eves meet within the work; nor are they offered to the viewer, as Medusa's gaze is directed toward's the hero's turned head. Her head is all but obscured by her right arm being raised in front of her face; a gesture appropriately echoed by the arms of the "ashamed" figures below. The ground of blood-red colour correlates the instances of violence, making it clear that the full integrity of womanhood has been denied in both instances; the portrayal of the body without countenance or identity sans bersona.

Dreams, Memories, Fantasies echoes the Medusenhaupt theme with an image of the severed head of a Roman Fury statue. It lies as if on a pillow, in mid-ground with curiously blissful, closed eyes, and a countenance that a Buddha would envy. A headline of Ashamed figures across the top is reversed so that the figures themselves appear red. Their former relation to a blood-red ground, is recalled here by a bold horizontal passage of red at the bottom, strangely underlining the martyr-like head. There is a pervading sense of the weight of suffering borne, the innocent

surrender of fury to peace, vengeance foregone and the subliminal evocation of "love thine enemy." Cohen clearly decapitates the myth of Perseus and Medusa, but the story remains forever enhanced through its inter-textual association with *Medusenhaupt* and related works; its amplitude broadened by the recognition of new perspectives through the reviewing of Maffi's reflection of the Perseus and Medusa myth, and the deconstruction of its assumed connotation of male dominance.

Implicit in the aesthetic of Cohen's production is the critical flux which penetrates the rigid rubric of signification constantly shaping society, and which seeks a condition of openness for the decodification of traditional sites of meaning. Cohen seems determined to make her art reflect the fullness of texts drawn from within her own life circumstances. Using the medium of photography with startling powers of articulation, she has found a way to address the dialectic within experience, including her experience of history, in works that invite a fresh semiological reading of related images as text. It is the extensive correspondence of inter-textual relations which Cohen's work enjoys with both historical and contemporary images which imbues its amplitude with pertinence. That historical artists such as Manet or Velázquez (some of whose works were shocking in their own time) could anticipate an artist such as Sorel Cohen within the range of their own inter-textual theatre may seem far-fetched; however, the common denominators are evident. They identify a kind of artwork that is a valuable critical resource; a vigorous challenge to the interpretation of culture and our notions of what culture is.









- 1. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: U. of Texas Press, 1981, pg. 85.
- 2. Ibid., pg. 252.
- 3. Julia Kristeva, Semiotike: Recherches pour une semanalyse. Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1969.
- 4. Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences. Trans. of Les Mots et Les Choses, New York: Vintage Books, 1973, pp. 3-16.
- 5. Ibid., pg.10.
- 6. See T. J. Clark's, The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U. Press, chapter 2, "Olympia's Choice": pp. 79-146.
- 7. Ibid., pg. 256, ill.
- 8. Eadweard Muybridge. *Complete Human and Animal Locomotion*, Vol.1, plate 73, pg. 320, New York, Dover Publications, 1979.

