

Face Value

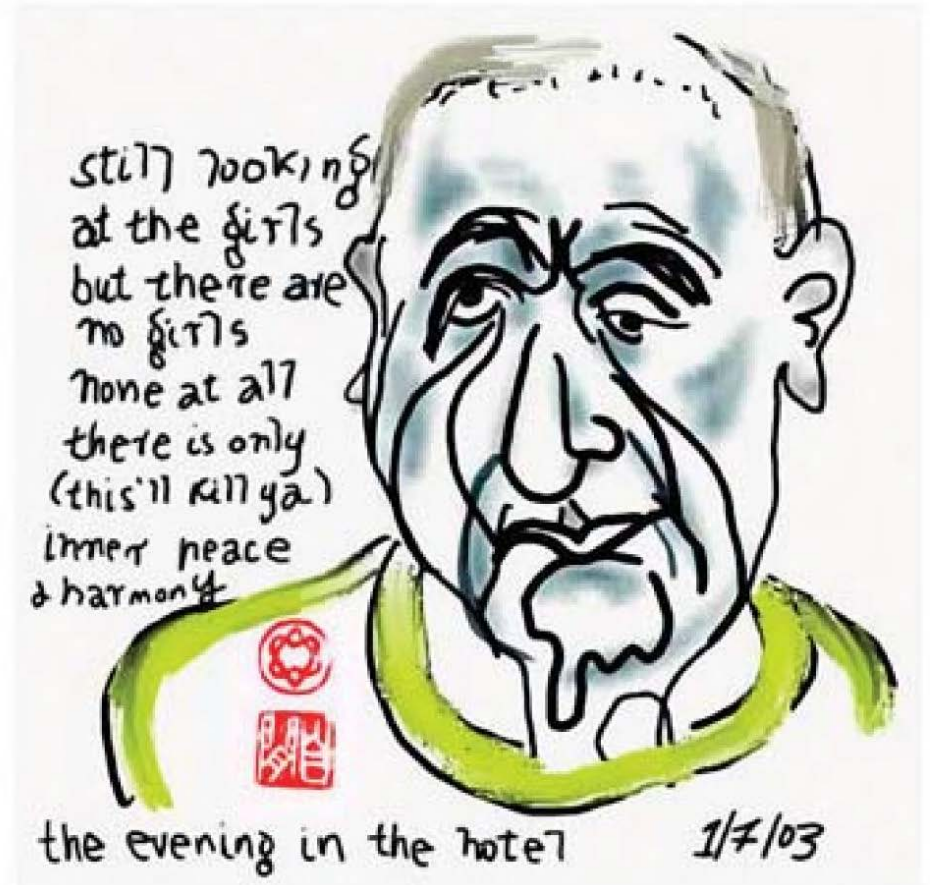
The Arts of Leonard Cohen

by Robert Enright

In 2003 Leonard Cohen got up every morning, put on a pot of coffee, lit some incense (since he quit, the closest thing he could get to smoking), went to a table on which there was a small mirror, and executed a self-portrait. After looking closely at the finished work, he annotated it with a single line, or a sequence of lines that responded to the mood suggested by the drawing. He performed this daily ritual for a year and, taken together, the drawings he produced constitute a journal in pictures and words, a sort of visual diary from which emerge a series of Leonard Cohens. Cohen says not a single one of them looks like him and yet they are unmistakably self-portraits, resonant with his characteristic wit (running from the generous to the sardonic), self-deprecation and passionate intensities. The drawings cover a wide range of media from doodles on napkins to watercolours, oil pastels, charcoal drawings and digitally created images. "Just as play is deadly serious for children," he says, "so doodles are deadly serious for me."

Cohen is aware of how his visual art functions in the context of his poetry, songwriting and performing; "I think one is relief from the other". He always drew and when his children were growing up (in both Greece and Montreal) the family would often sit around the kitchen table and draw. He has continued the practice for himself but never considered the drawings would be shown in an exhibition. In his poetic introduction for *Drawn to Words: Visual Works from 40 Years*, called "If there were no paintings", Cohen modestly describes his work as "acceptable decoration". He admits to no special insight into the world of the visual arts, and while he mentions Chagall and Van Gogh in separate poems in *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961), and refers to the admiration he had as a young child for the "glorious, empty" aesthetics of Japanese painting and watercolour, his looking has in no sense been systematic. It's through the prism of this outsider perspective that he has named his work. "I'm not using decoration as a pejorative but as a legitimate vehicle of pleasure or delight. It's acceptable in the sense that I gently refer to a lot of things in the pictorial tradition but I don't have to participate in current artistic practice, which is involved with originality and abrasive assertion. I don't pretend to understand what is being asserted so abrasively by so many people in the field. My intention was to make something that was really accessible and that I could decorate my notebooks with."

Cohen is able to register a wide range of emotions in these accessible decorations, from the worried consternation in "One more thing", to the mordant humour of "Vibrant But Dead", in which a curmudgeonly poet appears surrounded by a constellation of chop marks and the

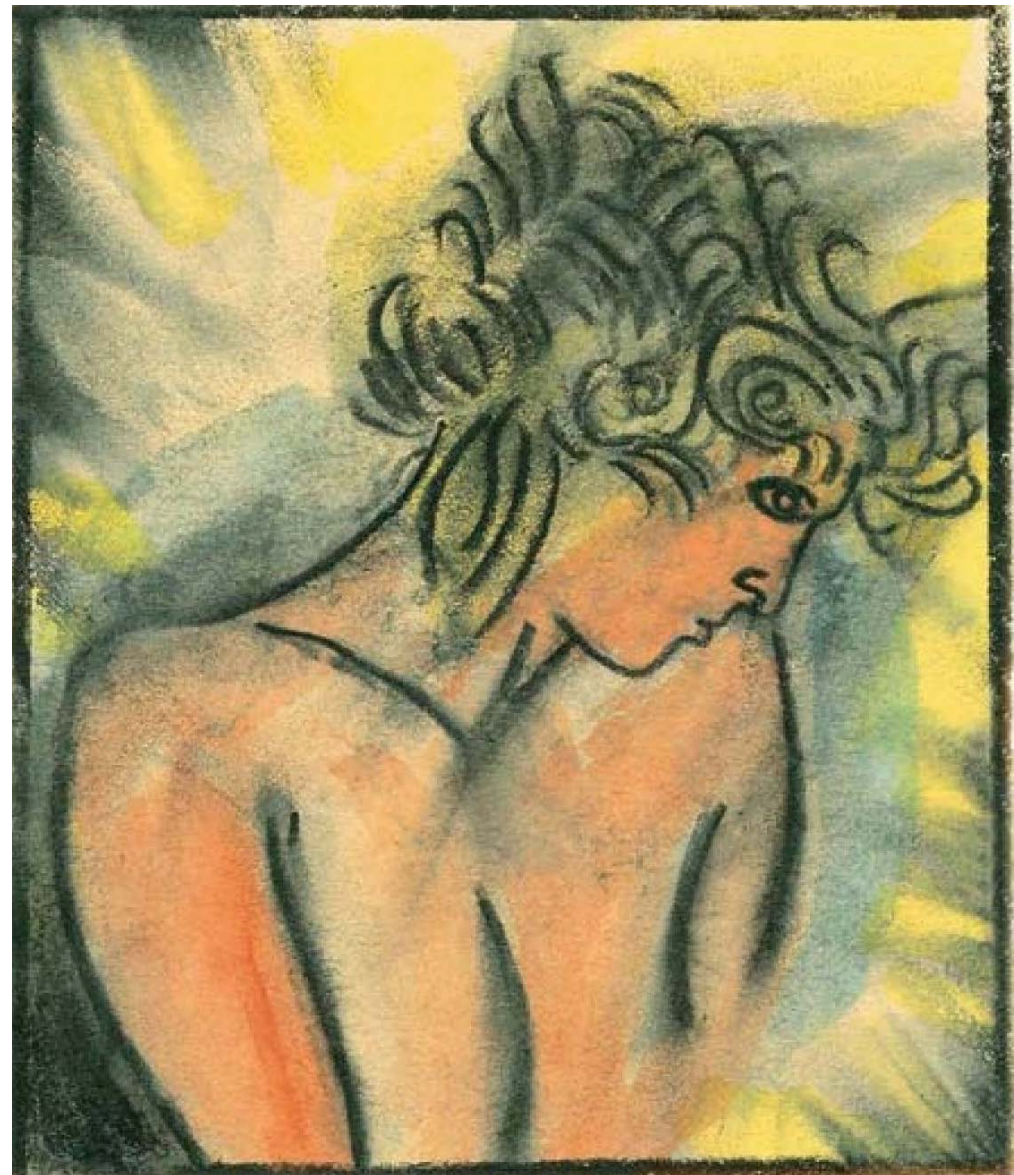


Still looking
Pigment Print 6/100
15 X 12 inches

contradictory title of the piece. In a drawing done in Hotel Kemps Corner, a somewhat frazzled and confused character seems to look out from the page. Even though his eyes are open, he is looking inside and not at the outside world; "Always somewhat off balance", the annotation reads, "an old man with his pen is deeply familiar with his predicament." There is a certain endearing quality to the drawings, best embodied in "One Little Guy", in which a single, beleaguered figure in a floppy, tweed cap stands up against the most recent batch of murderers, the ones in "Too Old" who have "driven out / the heart's warm appetite". This lone figure of resistance is the same character who in "Anthem" refuses to "run with the lawless crowd/ while the killers in high places / say their prayers out loud." Raising his defiant voice against overpowering, crippling odds ("They're going to hear from me") is all the more admirable in that it seems doomed to failure. In a drawing called, "He Refused to Ask a Single Question", the shape of the mouth determined the annotation for the drawing. "It's a certain kind of toughness that I appreciate", Cohen says, "you've just gotta take it, don't ask anybody for an explanation, don't try to penetrate this mystery that is completely unavailable to dismantling". As Cohen says elsewhere, "We're complex creatures, we can hold a number of views. Temperamentally, I've always resisted the claim for the unique truth of one particular model. My orthodoxy is this thing where you can hold various positions."

Cohen's method of annotated self-scrutiny occasionally results in the dismantling of the idea of self-portraiture itself. In "Much hangs down" he shows a face in the initial stages of dissolving. The text takes its lead from the manner of the drawing: "the spirit soars / but much hangs down / much hangs down / from the ladder of love." There is in this last line a slight echo of Yeats's notion that to find inspiration the poet must lie down "where all the ladders start, in the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." There is much that is heartfelt in Cohen's intersections of the visual and the verbal; he is an artist given to emotional and psychic ruminating. What his personae - and there are many scattered throughout *Book of Longing* and *Drawn to Words* - have in common is an apparent casualness that masks how hard-won have been their formulations. Much of his art is an art of the invisible.

At other times he advises us to understand the misleading limitations of his self-descriptive enterprise. "These portraits are far behind my actual development," he writes on a drawing in which he appears to be "deeply concerned about one thing or another". Don't be fooled; "this is merely an old habit of the face." In this regard it is equally useful to keep in mind Cohen's poetic warning about "decoding these cries of mine, they are the road and not the sign." It is a caution that resists reading the self-portraits and the poems as inflexibly autobiographical and literal. Cohen wants us to be aware of the way that a persona is both a declaration of one identity and a construction of another. At the same time that



Grecia Woman
Pigment print 6/100
30 X 20 inches

we are shaped by circumstance we are also engaged in a process of actively making ourselves what we are. To accompany a particularly craggy self-portrait, he writes about the way drawing can be manipulated to create specific identities: "the face can be composed so as to never appear foolish but rather menacingly unbalanced". In another drawing, called "the inner sweetness" and also done in Hotel Kemps Corner, he presents the viewer with a cranky visage, the jaw set in an immovable scowl. The annotation reads, "the inner sweetness of the man could not be concealed." The intelligently ironic gap between the characters in the drawings and the verbal commentaries that accompany them is often wide and wickedly amusing. Cohen sets himself up as a target for his own self-deflection, and the results convey a sense of charming honesty, even courage.

Cohen continues to be our most compelling poet of love and erotic desire. He has already come so far for beauty and, on the evidence of the poems in *Book of Longing* and the paintings and drawings in *Drawn to Words*, he is prepared to come even further. As he writes in "Sorrows of the Elderly", "The old are kind. / The young are hot. / Love may be blind. / Desire is not." To be sure, his desire is omnivorous and it tends to focus on the beauty of women. This is not a novel phenomenon in his art but it has taken on a certain urgency in the face of the implacable advance of time. Cohen concedes to being old but he hasn't relinquished to the young the exclusive ownership of the property of heat. From the use of his "whole mouth" against the "hungriness" of his lover's sex in "The Collapse of Zen", to the sabotage his "enormous hard-on" brings to the careful ceremony of monastic dressing in "Early Morning at Mt. Baldy", the poet persists, willfully and otherwise, in his amorous quest. He has followed the advice of a friend and he is taking his desire seriously. It is a conviction in which the erotic can also genuflect in honour of the simple lyric, as it does in "Mission": "Beloved, I'm yours / As I've always been / From marrow to pore / From longing to skin." The economy of the declaration is in perfect balance with a commitment to loving complete enough to run from core to surface, and to move inside and out.

There are, of course, numerous drawings in *Drawn to Words* that focus on giving visual form to Cohen's appreciation of beauty and the women who possess it. He has used a variety of sources for his images, including photographs, magazine transfers and actual models. Not to mention memory and its inevitable transformations. "Montreal Woman # 1" is an example of this migratory process. The image shows a woman wearing a v-neck jersey, her head resting against her upraised hand, and gazing out from under a luxury of curly hair. She is rendered in the pop classical manner of Hockney's Celia portraits. "It began with my doing a drawing of a woman but then I started seeing somebody who looked like that," Cohen recalls. "That's what happened with a number of the

drawings. I'd be doing sketches out of books, or copying masters, and then somebody would turn up in my life. I'd keep doing the studies and before long they would end up looking like the person who was sitting across the table from me. Eventually the figure in the drawing became that person." This "ping-ponging back and forth," in Cohen's playful formulation, is a recognition that the drawing invents the person and that art generates life.

In the mid-eighties, Cohen was among a number of Canadian writers who were given MacIntosh computers to work with. "Some of the things the early programs did were considered imperfect and have been improved. Now you can get a smooth line but I liked the jagged quality from the obsolete program. I've kept the computers they work on". In "Sunlit Woman", Cohen employed a neon palette - ruby red, lavender and three slats of limey yellow - to break up the linear coherence of the body and stutter the lines and colour across the page. What results is a drawing that is both tonal and structural. The source drawing, called "Strong Standing Woman" (which he still owns), is a grey, oil pastel mixed with lighter fluid that Cohen made while living in Hydra. "It was a particular grey that I loved. I'd rub it with my finger and the lighter fluid would dissolve the colour". In this version, the thrust of the woman's right leg, the elongated waist and the full, rounded breasts are all boldly outlined. The trim sensuality of the body merely hints at a sense of the voluptuous. Throughout this period, Cohen was going beyond straightforward ways of rendering the body, a practice aided by his imperfect computer programs. In one variation, he came up with the idea of a black outline which he then reiterated. As always, Cohen used technique as a way of servicing content. He called one drawing in this style, "A Woman Made of Double Lines Will Never Do You Wrong", a bitter-sweet title for a man who writes that, "my heart is broken as usual / over someone's evanescent beauty". It may be that the poet is trying to rehabilitate the notion of the drawn double cross.

In "The Living Poet" he inventories a short list of complaints - including "taxes, lost pussy and war" - that are vexatious in differing degrees. The annotation recognizes their presence before moving on to another, inescapable problem; "the living poet / in his harness of beauty." It is a rich metaphor: the harness, admittedly a form of constriction, is also linked to something desirable. Cohen is constantly being overthrown, to use one of his most evocative and stirring words, by life and beauty. His most famous articulation of this notion is in "Hallelujah", his song about power, desire and music. The song conflates two biblical stories, one involving David and his desire for Bathsheba and the other chronicling Samson's capture by Delilah. "Your faith was strong but you needed proof", begins the song's most seductive verse and it continues, "You saw her bathing on the roof / Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you. / She tied you to a kitchen chair, she broke your throne, she

cut your hair / And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah." The inexactness of what actually happens is the source of the song's appeal; it has been covered by singers from k.d. Lang to Rufus Wainright, and each reading is different and each, splendid. The detail that makes the verse work is that the baffled King, is overthrown not just by her beauty, which would have been enough, but by the added seduction of the moonlight. In finding himself shorn, tied to a chair and surrounded by pieces of his broken throne, he joins one of many men, including the artist himself, who are "harnessed by beauty" and from whose lips are drawn cries of pleasurable anguish. For Cohen, the condition of life is to be overthrown and no one is in a position to master it, ever.

The idea of brokenness figures prominently in all the forms of art he practices: in his perception of things the skin of the world is ruptured. Like Rumi, the great 13th century Persian poet that he read as a young writer in Montreal, Cohen accepts that the wound is a source of illumination, an idea he captures in "Anthem", one of his most moving lyrics. The trope of brokenness embraces everything from the romantic cliché of a broken heart to the murderous operations of political systems. It is an idea Cohen elaborates out of his cultural background:

"When Moses came down from the mountain and saw the Children of Israel worshipping the Golden Calf he threw the tablets to the ground and they broke. Then he went back up and came down with the full set again. Now the interesting thing - and this isn't in the Bible but in the oral tradition - is that when they built the tabernacle they put the broken ones in with the whole ones, as if to say, this too, is part of the immutable, inflexible human law. We are broken. Many years later, the Hassids say that "from the broken fragments of my heart I will build an altar to the Lord". So that sense of brokenness is impossible to avoid. It seems clearer today than it was when I was young, so I say it over and over again, "there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in". While it is important to realize that the value of brokenness is central to Cohen's aesthetic and way of living, it is equally important to understand that he also holds to a version of the world that is both harmonious and commonplace. It centres around the table, in which the simple object functions as both a practical thing and a philosophical platform.

Cohen attributes his love of the table to the Quebecois writer, Michel Garneau, (who has recently translated *Book of Longing* into French). "I went into his little house and the whole downstairs was a rectangle on which a table had been built on three sides, permanently, against the wall. He said, 'I spend my life at tables, so I might as well have a good one and a big one'. I've taken the lead on that." Cohen has become the man who collects tables; he has three or four in Montreal and another a friend constructed for his L.A. apartment that is nine feet long and three and a half feet wide. "In Greece I always had a really good kitchen ta-

ble." He has made two drawings of that table (Hydra Table # 1 and #2), a nocturnal version of a still life arrangement, with one of the candlesticks characteristic of Hydra, and a second daylight version in which the fruit - the cantaloupe, grapes and peaches - has changed colour and the candle has gone out. Their relationship is less about *vanitas* and the passage of time than about *gravitas* and the creation of order. This is an idea that Cohen has held since his days in Montreal when he and a friend, the artist Morton Rosengarten, would go to the Salvation Army looking for apartment furniture. "We'd find a good table and a good chair and bring it back and somehow it filled the room. It was glorious." In "Tonight Will Be Fine", one of his earliest songs, he recorded his sense of the significance of this particular quotidian ritual. "I choose the rooms I live in with care, / The windows are small and the walls almost bare, / There's only one table and there's only one prayer". In this configuration, the commonplace rises to the condition of the spiritual.

Cohen ritualizes any act of perception that recognizes the value of domestic objects. In his introduction he thanks the viewer for coming into his room, a space in which he records his love for the objects on the table, "such as the candlesticks and bowls and fruit/ And the table itself." In a poem called "The Mist of Pornography" from the *Book of Longing*, he writes about, "the impeccable order / of the objects on the table", and in conversation he amplifies their significance. "These objects come upon you with their own sense of urgency. The moment arises when they assert their beauty and their unassailable perfection". For Cohen, they become objects of contemplation and the focus of his avid attention. "The time to absorb these things - the candlestick, some pieces of fruit - is what makes it so sweet. It stands for the order that we can't acquire in our own psyche." But characteristically, Cohen's metaphysical self moves toward his visceral self. "My sense of the voluptuous is involved. It isn't simplicity I'm after. It's the opposite; the voluptuous feeling of simplicity".

This subtle paradox seems exactly right. Leonard Cohen, the voluptuous monk, comes down from the mountain, and recognizes the features of permanent beauty in the face of a mutable, anxious world. In one way, the future is murder and there is ample evidence in the *Book of Longing* to fear the new order of killers. But in another way, the world is an impeccable table, surrounded by figures of beauty and courage and wisdom. At the radiating centre of this vision, sits Leonard Cohen, in all the guises of his self-portraiture, creating a sense of longing big enough to embrace us all.

All of the quotations from Leonard Cohen are taken from a pair of interviews conducted by the author by phone on May 7 and May 12, 2007. Robert Enright is the Senior Contributing Editor to Border Crossings magazine, and the University Research Chair in Art Criticism at the University of Guelph. He lives in Winnipeg.