

Oscar Cahén

Past as Prologue

Fifty years ago, double tragedy struck on the roadways of North America; the direction of contemporary art was abruptly deflected, immensely diminished, unalterably changed. August 11, 1956, American painter Jackson Pollock, driving in an apparent drunken stupor, careened off the road and was killed near his studio home at East Hampton, New York. Only months later, November 26, 1956, Canadian artist, Oscar Cahén, traveling in his beloved sporty Studebaker Silver Hawk, collided with a gravel truck and was killed near his home in Oakville, Ontario. At the time of his death, Pollock, 44 years of age, could claim the satisfaction of having lived to read a 1949 *Life* magazine article proclaim the rhetorical question: ***“Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?”*** Pollock's art shattered artistic convention; he eclipsed his contemporaries. By 1956, Pollock's achievements were universally recognized; his seminal vision had earned him a secure place in the international art historical pantheon. He re-invented art, but could he re-invent himself? Pollock had reached a personal zenith, a pinnacle of invention that no one could supplant, even he. Yet unquestionably, Pollock hit a creative roadblock, he had stopped painting entirely by 1956. His violent self-destructive demise perhaps spared him the indignity of having to live with the prospect of aspiring to yet again equal or surpass the standard set by his own glorious groundbreaking example.

Oscar Cahén, at age 40, was Canada's brightest light. Yet, unlike Pollock, his American vanguard counterpart, due recognition and major praise was to come to Cahén primarily following his death. From the moment of his untimely, sad accidental death until today the messages remain consistent. Many bemoan the unfulfilled promise and mourn for what might have been. We pay far too little attention to illuminating and extolling the qualities of the art he did leave for us to experience. Cahén is ascribed a thoroughly, reservedly Canadian eulogy, a temperate tribute qualified by an overriding proviso: ***“Had he lived, Oscar Cahén might be remembered as the greatest of all Canadian artists.”***ⁱ

Thus, after fifty years, what is to be our assessment of Cahén's work? Flattering testimonials abound from colleague artists. Yet to the wider circle of art admirers, his work has somewhat slipped from sight. True, his work is reproduced and discussed enthusiastically in standard Canadian art history texts. However, there have been scant opportunities for the public to see the work first hand. There are solely twenty works by the artist listed in the collections of the public art museums of Canada, many of these concentrated within a few institutions in central Canada. Even so, the works of Cahén, like so many of his fifties contemporaries, are not consistently on view. There have been even fewer works offered for view or sale via commercial gallery shows or auctions.ⁱⁱ As consequence, the general public knows Cahén via poor quality reproduction, or scarcely at all. It is hoped that this exhibition and accompanying publication will make some small start towards rectifying this deficiency.

Seen in isolation, out of art historical sequence and context, first time viewers of individual Cahén pictures might be excused for forming a shorthand conclusion that the work belongs squarely within our understanding of the spirit of its time. Cahén might be adjudged a fellow contributing purveyor of admirable examples derived in response to fifties period style. Even a Cahén admirer recently voiced the concern that perhaps much of the work suffered from being too mannered, conventional, time bound.ⁱⁱⁱ

In retrospect, from our vantage point in 2006, we can look back upon the era, privy to the outcome of fifty years of experiment and stylistic invention, trial and error, discussion and heated debate surrounding the best possible direction that progressive art might take. It is exceedingly difficult for us to inhabit the mindset of those pioneers of abstraction working to progress art in early fifties Toronto. What constituted the norm in the years leading up to November 26, 1956? What did the present look like and the future proffer on that day? If we could stop the clock at that very moment, how would Cahén fair in comparison to the achievements of his compatriots secured up to that date?

Many will forget that America too was awaiting a re-birth of the prevailing art. By 1950, it was all over for all-over abstraction, the first flourish of Abstract Expressionism. It was time for a new art. Pollock knew it; everyone knew it. What could it be? Younger artists finessed and caressed every apparent nuance option of expressive painterly abstraction coaxing a second generational flowering from the first sown seeds of invention. Cahén joined this hunt; first as an equal competitor, then emerging as one of the innovators. Much of what we consider today as characteristic fifties period style are ideas we came into first contact with through the attributes of Cahén's art. In 1956, at 40, Cahén was just hitting his stride. His known career as a painter commenced in 1947. By 1952, he had quickly assimilated much of the manner of advanced abstract painting, adding his own personal flourish. By 1953, his art was evolving a highly innovative unique approach. His final three years saw the creation of astonishing new paintings, a vibrant alternative to the shared ubiquitous stylistic manners then in vogue with his fellow journeyers. Cahén, the student and novice initiate came out of the starter's gate fast and showed promise to lead expressive abstract art out of its morass of stalemate and repetition. The radical fresh difference of his vibrant artistic vision separated him from the rest of the pack. Was there more for him to add? We can never know.

At his death, many works were left undated, untitled, unsigned. We can't place these works within a definitive chronology. Thus, we can't know beyond all question whether his stylistic progression was an unwavering straight-line or else, did it meander and double back upon itself to re-visit past themes and earlier developed approaches. We can't be sure whether his art had attained its culminating apex, was it on the wane or else was it still ascending, evolving. Furthermore, in the absence of writing or markings upon certain of the works, we cannot be absolutely assured of their intended directional orientation: which way is up? More sleuthing will be required.^{iv}

However, we do need to keep in mind that the distinct style that he offered through works dated between 1953-1956 was without parallel among his colleagues, certainly at home in Canada, perhaps even internationally. Following Cahén's death in 1956 there would be plenty of time for a plethora of other art makers to catch up with the direction piloted by Cahén. They lived on and

had opportunity to adopt, nuance and further amplify stylistic traits introduced by the early fifties art of Cahén. Many of the manners attributable to Cahén in 1953-1956 continue on as the prevalent characteristic approaches defining the art of Painters 11, the St. Ives group and CoBrA up through the mid-sixties. Cahén played the opening bar, others were there to pick it up, develop the refrain. We just don't know whether Cahén, if he had lived on, would have retained the lead. Would he have been the one to push on through to the next station? He may have been ahead of his time; yet; his time stopped in 1956. We need to track his rapid learning curve that led to his stellar achievements of the final years.

Cahén made dramatic changes and gains over the course of an all too brief career as a painter. The extant works date from 1947-1956. For new inductees into the pleasures of the artist's work, a little biographical background is in order. Cahén was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, February 8, 1916; his parents were German. He studied art in Paris, Stockholm and Prague, earning a Master of Fine Art, from Kunstakademie, Dresden. Thereafter, he taught as a Professor of Design, Illustration and Painting, at the Rotter School of Art in Prague in 1938. His father, Fritz M. Cahén^v, was author of *Men Against Hitler* 1939. The book jacket purports that Fritz Cahén "Chief of the anti-Hitler forces since 1932, the author has been organizing people inside and outside Germany to overthrow the Nazi regime..." However, it was the Cahéns that were forced to flee, first Fritz to America, then Oscar and his mother escaped to England. There, Oscar was imprisoned as an enemy alien and in turn sent as an internee to a detention camp in Sherbrooke, Quebec. His drawing talents won him release under the protection of a sponsor in 1943. In Montreal he established a brilliant, meteoric success as an illustrator, first freelancing for the Montreal Standard and the National Film Board, then as Art Director of Magazine Digest. While there, he could well have encountered the work of Alfred Pellán and other artists evolving proto-abstract, such as Fritz Brandtner and Henry Eveleigh. He moved to Toronto in 1943 and became a Canadian citizen in 1946. Cahén's dashing witty graphic style was featured in Macleans magazine among many others. His design work won him awards, praise and provided ample money to allow him to pursue his passion for painting. The earliest known surviving painting is dated 1947, the same year one of his pictures was displayed at the annual spring show of the Ontario Society of Artists. He became a regular exhibitor at the O.S.A. and joined the Canadian Society of Graphic Artists and the Canadian Society of Painters in Watercolour.

The contribution of Cahén to Canadian art history was cemented in association with a number of like-spirited individuals battling against the conservatism of Toronto and a Canadian art scene dominated by the landscape traditions of the Canadian Group of Painters. William Ronald organized an exhibition, *Abstracts at Home*, in which paintings by Oscar Cahén, Ray Mead, Kazuo Nakamura, Alexandra Luke, Tom Hodgson, Jack Bush and Ronald, were shown as complements to modern interior settings as a display at the Robert Simpson department store, Toronto in October 1953. They were later to team up with Jock MacDonald, Hortense Gordon, Walter Yarwood and Harold Town to form an exhibiting group, Painters Eleven. The group held their first exhibition under that banner at Roberts Gallery, Toronto in February 1954. During Cahén's lifetime the group was invited to a prestigious exhibition in association with the American Abstract Artists Group at the Riverside Museum, NY in 1956.

Stand on Guard

As Cahén commenced his transformation from an illustrator to his early adventures in painting, the world of art had a pervasive preoccupation. Dour, despondent, brooding, sometimes plaintive other times urgent and overwrought with emotional outpourings, post-war art responded to the massive injustice and inhumanity of the age. Artists conscripted painted imagery to the cause of expressing the deeply felt yearnings to lash out, fight back against oppression of the individual. The social realist art of the depression morphed into post-war art of social conscience. The example of Kathe Kollwitz looms large, as does Marc Chagall, Georges Rouault, and a generation of respondents, Ben Shahn, Alberto Giacometti, and the British Neo-Romantics: Graham Sutherland, John Piper, Paul Nash, Elizabeth Frink and Henry Moore. One thinks particularly of Reginald Butler's sculptures of air raid wardens peering intently skyward into the impenetrable depths, ever on guard against the constant threat of the imminent danger of bombardment.^{vi} Travesty and impending evil could rain down from an unseen combatant upon the unwary, inattentive, nation or individual. We need to be at constant alert. This stark, strident humanism appealed directly to the Latin temperament, Rico Lebrun, Ruffino Tamayo, Antoni Tàpies and the Mexican muralists. Picasso's *Guernica* could be thought of as the milestone of the era, a rallying cry and *piece de resistance*. The figurative art of the day distended, dismantled and stretched the body to the breaking point. The human form was *done an injury*, torn into fragments, sharp and angular, twisted out of all proportion and shape. At home, Frederick Hagan, Roloff Beny and others responded with their own versions of Stations of the Cross, and the general climate of gloom supports the sullen introspective post-war realism of Alex Colville.

Among Cahén's earlier known works *Praying Man* 1947 and *Praying Family* 1948 are expressive stylized representations that set the stage for examination of his later moves into abstraction. The plight of Cahén, forced to flee the Nazis, only to be interred in an Allies detention camp, provides legitimate personal reasons to despair the human condition and fear the defenselessness and vulnerability of the individual at the hands of larger external forces. His painted response carries through in works such as *Grief* and *Untitled (Clown and Monk series)*. Themes of paintings decried alienation and the decimation of the human spirit in the face of the clinical barbarism of war. The individual, viewed as helpless pawn, a bit actor on the world stage, could turn in desperation to seek the shelter of religion, existential philosophy or Dada jesters. These Cahén works are grounded in representation, perhaps a carryover employing his considerable graphic flair learned from his 'day job'. To current eyes, *Praying Family* may appear to overtly illustrate, over speak. At the time it may have seemed imperative to wage an earnest campaign to restore fragile hope. However the resulting art was perhaps coaxed over the line, contorted to rhetorical excess. Desperate times calls for desperate art. *Grief* employs sombre neutrals and dark jagged splayed lines that physically 'weep' down the picture in empathy with the intended emotional tone. Thankfully, Cahén would rocket past this aesthetic option to sublimate the specifics within more abstracted compositions.

Drawing the Line

Pollock dribbled and spattered and Mark Tobey scribbled his way into the history books. Leaders of the New York School branch of the modern movement emphatically demonstrated that,

deftness, facility and consummate skill as a draftsman was entirely unnecessary. It might even be a liability in an era showing disdain for the tradition of the artist's craft. How could Cahén cope? He was an adroit draftsman acknowledged to be at the very top of his craft as a commercial designer. His quick nimble penmanship brought him fame, bought his groceries and provided the extra time needed to pursue his painting. Could he afford to give up on one of his principal personal strengths, his natural gift for drawing, in order to advance his painting?

Many in Canada turned their attention to Picasso. His Minotaur series inspired the emergence of many horned creatures, personages and beings.^{vii} Consistent with this sentiment, Cahén's *Untitled (animal series)* GFA 234 presents an abstracted bird or rooster-like form, a beaked, creature with sharp talons, menacing and threatening. Many of the leading artists of the world made works as direct expressions of faith. Their art spoke in reverent tones. A pall hung over late forties art, darkness, blackness of the soul, imposed an unspoken moral imperative to bedeck art with badges of despair. It ushered in a decade of sameness, pious art that relied upon the crutch of never-ending wail and lament. The Christ complex warranted the celebration of the heroic long-suffering martyr, whether offered up through physical sacrifice of ritual crucifixion to bear the agony of slings or arrows or else the metaphoric, verbal harangue and indignity visited upon the little man: the jester and the clown. The human condition was portrayed at peril, the smile a hollow charade. The artist inhabits the role of troubadour: "*You never turned around to see the frowns of the jugglers and the clowns, when they all come down and did tricks for you*"^{viii}

● *Resurrection and the Vegetation Myth*

Cahén's titles are in sync with the pervasive mood as well as overt religious themes: *Grief*, *Herod* 1950, *Masque* 1950, *Requiem* 1953. Artists as diverse as Frederick Varley and Abraham Rattner addressed crucifixion, ascension and spiritual quest. Though sometimes sublimated, latent Judea-Christian themes permeated the art of the day. The touchstone unquestionably is Graham Sutherland. His crucifixion images, *Thorn Tree* and other stark black and whites forced artists to respond to their emotional power. His forms conjured references to Christ's crown of thorns, the passion and resurrection both directly and via symbolic representations.^{ix} The crucifixion plant bled drops of Christ's blood upon the ground, birds of prey and other of nature's menacing creatures posed potential bodily threat to pierce body and soul. They are all as welcoming and cuddly as a porcupine. Stern black gesticulating lines pointy, nasty, mean, exploded outwards, a Kristallnacht of form. Like shards of glass, jagged, spiky forms careened dangerously off into the outer reaches of the pictures. The drawn lines now failed to encircle and contain; forms shattered. Claws, horned and jagged sharp points, protrude from many of Cahén's pictures of the early fifties.^x Painted with force in resolute black they threaten to bite: Be careful or they'll put your eye out.

Though abstract, numerous Cahén pictures allude to natural history: sea anemone, amoeba, and life forms. It can't be precisely pinned down, but the strength of coloration is in kinship with Max Ernst's view of the life cycle. Rather than a neutral fascination with the mystery of procreation and life force, both seem fixated upon drama and violent clash. Crucifixion prefigures resurrection just as fall and winter foretell spring; sacrifice and death are fodder in support of a

new growth cycle. *Vegetation* 1951 functions like an abstracted 'prayer', the prickly growing forms appear to sprout anthropomorphic limbs, arms and heads that gesture and strain towards a burning red heavenly orb: Miro's automatic surrealism meets Gorky. Several of the paintings and drawings from this Cahén exhibition sport similar elements. Despite its title, *Candy Tree* just doesn't look entirely benign. *Subjective Image* rivets our attention with its disquieting colour.

Cahén was effectively wending his way through the abstract painter's box of tricks. He began his move towards pure abstraction through the lens of the cubist grid, reality abstracted, distilled down to vestige underlying imagery. Some such as *Candy Tree*, *Growing Amethyst* and *Masque* seem to be cognizant of the fracturing and faceting that we associate with Pellan. Works by Pellan and fellow Canadian artists of the period seem to be splitting the difference between abstraction's options. These works by Cahén operate in the last throes of late cubism an approach that would have appeal to The American Abstract Artists group, who invited Painters Eleven to exhibit with them in 1956.

The tone of abstract painting of the period was in empathy and camaraderie with a world population of sufferers: hardships, deprivations, calamities and slaughter. Human nature is messy. Cold War art portrayed damaged, imperfect, terribly dangerous creatures constantly poised and capable of striking out. Ugly became a virtue, as did mean, uncompromising, fecal and skeptical. Painting addressed the angst, anguish, pain, uncertainty and vulnerability of the individual in the face of larger dark malevolent forces. The art that arose from an automatic surrealist birthright, notably Ernst and Riopelle, derived from organic forms that suggest fertility rituals, growth in exultant upward thrust, the flow of life juices, acknowledging themes of natural cycle: birth, maturity, decline, death, decay, and re-birth. Simply surviving in the natural jungle was serious business as attested by the title of Grace Hartigan's *Black Widow* 1951 (University of Lethbridge Art Gallery Collection). Gershon Iskowitz' abstracted landscapes of the period view nature with caution and grave suspicion; his pictures are dark brooding and reticent. So too are the fifties abstracted landscapes of western Canadian artists: Jack Shadbolt, Takao Tanabe, Don Jarvis, Tony Onley and Otto Rogers. True, the elements and weather of Canada can be at times daunting, even punishing, but in the fifties the land was portrayed as primeval territory, with survival perched on the spiritual precipice.

The painted imagery of the period was anchored by heavy black lines whether it be: Braque, Derain, Leger, Miro or for that matter Mondrian. Black encircled and constrained the other elements, imposing a psychic restraining order against joy. The painted ground became a battleground figuratively and literally. Paint was forced to bear brusque handling and considerable physical abuse, aggressively smacked and slapped upon the canvas ground in wild abandon. A painterly parallel to the pains inflicted in wartime upon the persons of their creators. pigment was smeared, encrusted, combed, dragged, scratched, scraped, scumbled, buffeted and battered: *gotta be tough, gotta be rough*.^{xi} Ironically, this supplication to painterly torment increased in proportion to the degree of abstraction. The further discernible subject matter receded towards abstraction, the more that art declared its seriousness of purpose by revealing its battle scars. Decoration was viewed as frivolous and not befitting art's higher purpose. The surface of *Painting with Red Square* appears to have survived an action painter's onslaught. It has been heavily worked, attacked. Its final form results from the residual history tracing its own construction. It records a battle royal pitting resolute, steadfast domineering black shapes

counterpoised by animated swirling energy fields of lush, vibrant intense colour compressed, bottled within container forms lurking just below the surface.^{xii} Cahén's *Painting with Red Square* exudes the anxiety and ambivalent spirit of the age. Nevertheless, its body language is more confident, assertive even cocky.

Even while abstract, these works by Cahén, like his counterparts Gottlieb, Baziot, Tobey, Gorky all seem to suppress meaning just slightly out of reach. They beckon us to unravel the mystery and decode their implicit messages embedded in painterly gestures. Many feigned the appearance of hieroglyphic writing, with stacked boxes of iconic symbol-like forms, lost languages of lost civilizations.

● *Red is the New Black*

In 1953, the preponderance of art of the period remained grim, black and rooted in despair. Cahén's art ratcheted up the volume. Works such as *Growing Form*, *Composition*, *Subjective Image*, *Still Life* (FAO-203), and *Untitled* (GFA-239) cloaked themselves in searing colour. Red dominated the entire surface further heated by proximity to orange, pink and magenta. Equally intense, yet smaller accents of blue, green and turquoise created dazzling effects. However, this was not undertaken within the fauvistic spirit of Matisse's *Red Studio*. Instead, latent Cahén imagery conjures a mysterious otherworldly place, hot celestial fireballs, suns, moons, distant planets and indescribable forms. They are visually insistent, demanding our attention. Discordant, shocking colour combinations cast all into an eerie unsettling light, a world of difference from workaday lived reality. Hot pink for the Cold War; in many respects this elemental set of combinations defines a signature style Cahén picture. No one came near the decibel level of audacity of these spell-binding works: Pieta not pity.

● *Out of the Darkness and Into the Light*

What accounts for this triumphant paradigm shift? Certainly there was nothing of its like being produced in Canada. We could point towards parallels with certain works by Abraham Rattner, though his fifties work remained grounded in imagery and specific narrative message.^{xiii} The sheer strength of the larger fields of basically un-modulated high intensity, saturated hues was a personal breakthrough. We would have to wait till the early sixties to see John Meredith and Gershon Iskowitz pick up this challenge and advance this brazen dare.

What did it? Biographical details about Cahén need to be fleshed out. Sometime in the early fifties he and his family spent the winter months near Nokomis, Florida. Were the trips to Florida a contributing factor to his change of artistic view? Was it the lush colour of the Florida vegetation, watching sunsets over the Gulf, looking wistfully towards legendary Mexico? Nokomis had long been an artist's colony; did Cahén gather with other confrères to exchange ideas and inspiration?^{xiv}

We solely know that sometime around 1953, Cahén's art switched gears. First it shed the cloak of darkness in favour of the full chromatic spectrum. It then distanced itself from much of the angst inspired 'hot licks' held over from abstract expressionism. The paintings became simpler, with fewer elements and marks, lighter in touch as well as attitude. Tenderness, gentle,

sweetness, sensual: these qualities had not been part of the artist's inventory. In recent conversation, Tony Urquhart, mused that perhaps news of the death of Henri Matisse, Nov. 3 1954 holds a hopeful clue. The French master's example might have served reminder of the dignity of creating paintings exalting pure joy, ushering a challenge to liberate Cahén's art from despondency.

Paintings such as *Trophy* and *Untitled* (FAMM –027) keep good company with works by William Scott and Victor Pasmore. Many evoke the appearance of the art of the south sea: exotic in colour enlivened by the rich mark making that adorns tribal masks and shields. They pre-date related treatments by Alan Davie and Ray Mead.^{xv}

The Spiders Web

“New needs need new techniques. And the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements... the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture”.^{xvi}

In the wake of the Manhattan project, many would puzzle over the glimpsed domain of the molecular, microscopic worlds while another eye was trained upon the heavens and stars by telescope. The new horizons offered access to answers to countless age-old mysteries; it also posed the potential to unleash awesome cataclysmic disaster. The world of appearances used to be the purview of representational art. The scope suddenly became simultaneously both immeasurably larger as well as smaller. Although these micro and macro worlds could not be seen by the naked eye, their impact was most definitely felt. Painting strove to picture the invisible forces driving the modern world.

A new motif entered contemporary design, emblazoned upon fabrics, furniture, curtains, clothing, and ceramics, even paintings: jumbles of continuous line drawings looping, trailing then congealing into concentrated pockets of activity. As precedent, one could perhaps point towards Pollock's drip paintings. More so, it created a tangible visible form to mimic the forces of the nuclear age. The frenetic drawn line and squiggle, emulating x-rays, radio waves, electrical power and atomic energy.

Within the realm of semi-abstract art one could encounter formal precedents in the art of Lionel Feininger, Vieira Da Silva and Alberto Giacometti. Their sombre art relied upon the combination of delicate filigree linear elements, tendrils like spider webs, used to forge structures woven over a backdrop of colour washes. This manner was popular with artists in Canada such as York Wilson, Gordon MacNamara and Gordon Smith. Cahén turned it into an opportunity to further evolve his art; his abstractions clarified and simplified.

Cahén's work expunged the multiple surface re-workings and encrustations. Instead, he paired counterbalanced elements, subtle but larger areas of tonal wash, overlaid by of an animated linear scrawl in black. Alternately he created a white linear trail by means of applying wax or rubber cement to act as a resist to aqueous washes of paint. *Untitled* FAMM-037 utilizes this technique to great advantage. The white lines crackle, spark and flare. The resist allows the lines to be applied rapier speed, in crisp razor thin continuous lines. The delicacy and lightness of the linear drawn element is a dramatic contrast with the broad even bands of solid colour washes maximizing their difference. The areas of tone function as the ground, an area of repose in distinction to the drawn figural lines that dance and swirl amidst the painterly atmosphere. The contrast enhances the sense of vibrant animation of the drawn element, their rapid execution evoking speed, freedom and confident ease. Specifics are gone. Are they based upon reference to: a plant form, electrical towers, or a human figure? Who could tell? This becomes the primary method of constructing a Cahén work, polarities drive the works, including: many of the watercolours: *Untitled* (FAMM – 038) enhanced with a lovely single magenta accent, the pastel *Untitled* (GFA –068), as well as the mixed media painting *Untitled* (FAMM –058).

Whereas *Painting with Red Square* relied upon dense multiple layers of activity accumulated through extensive work and re-working, touching every square inch of the canvas. Cahén conspires to hold our attention through slight inflections upon the surface, whispered washes and a few drawn linear accents, leaving large tracts of surface untouched. He seems to be toying with seeing just how little he can do and still maintain pictorial interest and tension: *Untitled* (FAMM –020), the principal pictorial combatants in *Objective Painting* is the pairing of vibrant areas of strong complementary hues with slight linear counterpoints. He continually tinkers with the formula mix by: softening the hues to tints and tones *Untitled* (FAMM –027), reduce the contrasts. He further pares down the overall number of elements in *Untitled* (FAMM –056), *Untitled* (FAMM –236). In a certain grouping he eliminates black entirely and narrows the contrasts even more by limiting his palette to soft muted tonalities, *Untitled* (FAO–315), *Untitled* (GFA–332), *Untitled* (GFA–336).

They close in upon the brink of a new sensibility. They seem headed in the direction where in subsequent years we have come to expect to find colour field painting of the sixties. They are built from large expanses of stained colour with the overlay of slight, linear counterpoints. Earlier works jockeyed part by part relational compositional constructions, abstracted objects or personages carrying out some surrealist dialogue set upon a painted field. These abstract works were nevertheless, ultimately narrative, even if we had to contort and puzzle to interpret their latent implied message. The later compositions of Cahén rely almost entirely upon the beauty and dynamic of colour juxtaposition alone. It is a more modern attitude, signaling a generational switching of lanes. The obsession with panic and anxiety of modern warfare is a speck in the rear view mirror, Cahén prepares to slip into modernist overdrive. Yet, before a next turn could be navigated, painting technology had to be re-tooled.^{xvii} Aqueous acrylic paint was not readily available till after Cahén's death.

What road was Oscar Cahén headed? Certainly his path seems to telegraph continuing sophistication of indescribable colour combinations, refinement and simplification of composition and forms. In effect, his work sets the course for the maneuvers that we record in association with the art of Jack Bush in 1960-64. So, maybe this is where Bush thought Cahén was going.

Helen Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* 1952 is credited with predicating a radical re-invention of painting: and hence the birth of stain painting, post painterly abstraction. *Mountains and Sea*, inspired by a trip to Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, made possible the option of utilizing broad expanses of fluid transparent washes of paint soaked into the canvas, decreasing the reliance upon linear drawing to cohere the works. Yet, it is well to remember, that while the initial breakthrough occurred via this single work of 1952, the artist, herself, did not immediately seize upon the opportunities afforded by her own stylistic revolution. Instead, from 1952-1956 Frankenthaler continued on unabated; she resumed working within her prior manner: abstract expressionist-inspired paintings with customary black calligraphy. It was not until 1956 that she exercised the options foretold by her own hallmark invention. It was in the late fifties and early sixties that she turned to dedicate her explorations of compositions constructed in the new manner of colour field abstraction. Stylistic progress does not always unfold in a continuous chronological order.

Which way was Cahén headed November 26, 1956? We don't know. However, the places he had already been are ample cause for us to celebrate the flair and idiosyncratic brilliance of Oscar Cahén.

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ⁱ Graham Broad [The Beaver](#) Vol 84:1, p.21 Feb/Mar 2004. Similar sentiments were expressed by many including Paul Duval and curator, Karl Nickel in the catalogue for “Oscar Cahén: First American Retrospective Exhibition”,: The [Ringling Museum of Art](#), Sarasota, Florida 1968:“Such men speak clearly for their times, hurrying, even speeding through life and through brilliant accomplishments to an early and violent death. Any exhibition of Cahén’s work, as of [David] Smith’s, gives a sense not only of great and lasting achievement, but also of tragically unfulfilled promise.”.

ⁱⁱ It has been remarked by the Cahén archives that following the artist’s violent death, the artist's widow fell into a depression, clinging to everything pertaining to the memory of her husband, effectively holding it artificially ‘off-view’. While this may be a possible contributing factor, we need to remember that there were in fact a number of important museum and commercial gallery shows from 1957 onward capped by the Ringling Museum of Art retrospective in 1968. The slide in interest and exhibition activity seems to commence in the seventies.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gary Michael Dault, “Oscar Cahén: In Search of Lost Fame” [Border Crossings](#), p. 63 vol 23, number 3, August 2004

^{iv} The Cahén archives has conducted style analysis comparing the works of known date and orientation

^v The book uses Cahen without the accent: Cahén

^{vi} An outstanding example is in the collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo

^{vii} The drawings of Harold Town express admiration and homage to this specific theme. Many of Painters Eleven employ this feature. Internationally Julio Gonzales and Graham Sutherland are thought to benefit by adapting this lesson.

^{viii} Bob Dyan “Like a Rolling Stone” 1965

^{ix} Cahén’s “Untitled” (GFA –068) among others, bear direct comparison to Sutherland’s surrealist beings and morphed plant hybrids. The impact of this one theme has not been fully chronicled. It has a bearing on the evolution of the art of Julio Gonzales and other sculptors of the period. It is unquestionably the source for countless works by Canadian artists coast to coast, Gordon Smith, Shadboldt, Tanabe, Otto Rogers and the Painters Eleven. In this specific respect most notably Town and Yarwood

^x Also compare the forms of Julio Gonzales, Ibram Lassaw

^{xi} Elsewhere I’ve suggested that an amusing take on Canadian art History would be to follow the evolution of subject matter preference from tortured priests, to tortured pines, to tortured paint

^{xii} The very most up to date developments in abstraction were available to be seen just 'down the road' from Toronto at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo. Cahen and his contemporaries would have access to De Kooning's *Gotham News*, Motherwell's series *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* and the collection of astonishing powerful sombre works of Clyfford Still.

^{xiii} Women’s Committee of the Art Gallery of Toronto made many important purchases of British art in the early fifties. Thus, Cahén would have been able to see first-rate works by Sutherland, Peter Lanyon, Ben Nicholson and Ceri Richards. Their work holds some clues, for his work 1951-1952, but his next moves 1953-1956 seem unrelated to his British contemporaries.

^{xiv} There seems to be a history of German-born expressionist abstractionists, moving to Florida. Karl Zerbe, German-born expressionist painter led the art department at Florida State University. After Cahen's death, German-born abstract expressionist, Jimmy Ernst (son of Jimmy andhimself a respected member of the original Ab-Ex group would move to Nokomis. This area was a gathering place for progressive abstract artists; however at this time there is no known connection between Cahén and any other artists in Florida.

^{xv} There are interesting comparisons to be made with the artists associated with St. Ives School: Roger Hilton, John Hoyland, Brian Wynter, though mostly with work they created after 1962 or thereabouts.

Alan Davie, Ivon Hitchens, Patrick Heron

^{xvi} [Jackson Pollock](#).

^{xvii} Acrylic paint could be soaked directly into raw canvas without causing damage and breakdown of the fibers. Oil soaked into canvas causes the canvas to deteriorate.