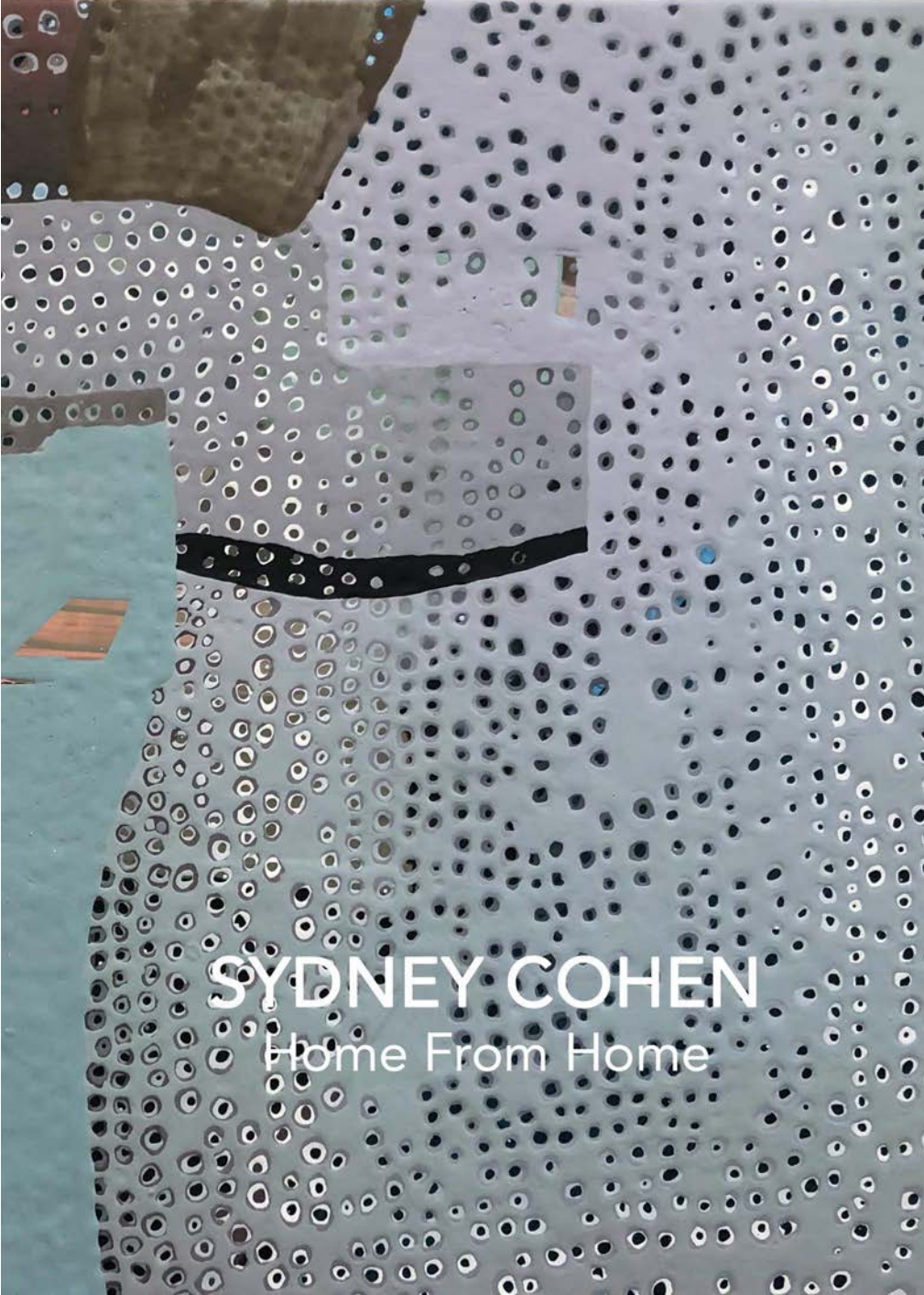
SYDNEY COHEN
Home From Home

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The Fourth Wall

January 30 - March 20, 2021

Counting Time, 2020, acrylic on panel, 10x8in.

Home From Home

Interview with Sydney Cohen by Marlene Angeja

When I look at Sydney Cohen's work, I experience color as material. Although there are complex color relationships in each painting and she has taught color theory for years, I don't get a sense that her use of color is theoretical. The paintings are too physical, too rooted in matter. They are developed through multiple layers of colors conjured up from a slough of acrylic mediums, paints, and pigment dispersions, as she covers, corrects, and builds one coat after another. Sydney's most recent work, done during the unsteadiness of the last year, contains countless tiny spheres. These shapes don't appear to be painted directly but are formed as paint fills the ground around them. What remains are small gaps, which contain a visible history of her process in the traces of the various colors left behind at their edges. These borders between shape and ground (which is which?) appear unstable as the different colors interact.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Sydney recently during several virtual studio visits as we both sheltered in place. It was a back and forth, which felt more like a conversation than an interview.

Can you say something about your process of working. Do you start with any sort of idea or concept?

I think it comes through but I don't have the end result in mind. I can look back at the work and think: Oh yea, I was working out these ideas.

But it's more in retrospect.

And it's like a natural… it seeps down through.

Some of your titles seem to tell stories. Are the paintings narrative in any way?

Everything feels like a narrative, putting the colors next to each other when they build, but it's not like I start with a narrative. I'm not naming things. But I can get into a thing where the names just come and I just say ok. A narrative is a big container. It can contain the main story but it also contains rhythm or the way the words look on the page or it contains characters, which you might wonder about later. Like when you are trying to tell someone your dream and it's sometimes hard to listen to because there isn't a consistent narrative but there is so much happening and everything has so much meaning in ways that you would need a million words to try to explain. So putting a narrative title on a painting doesn't feel like it ends it. It doesn't end the interpretation or the story or even what's happening on it. It just feels like one of the ways in.

I get that. That's how I interpret your titles - as a way in. Color seems to be central to your paintings. Do you begin with color?

Investigating Below Last Year, 2021, acrylic on panel, 24x18in.

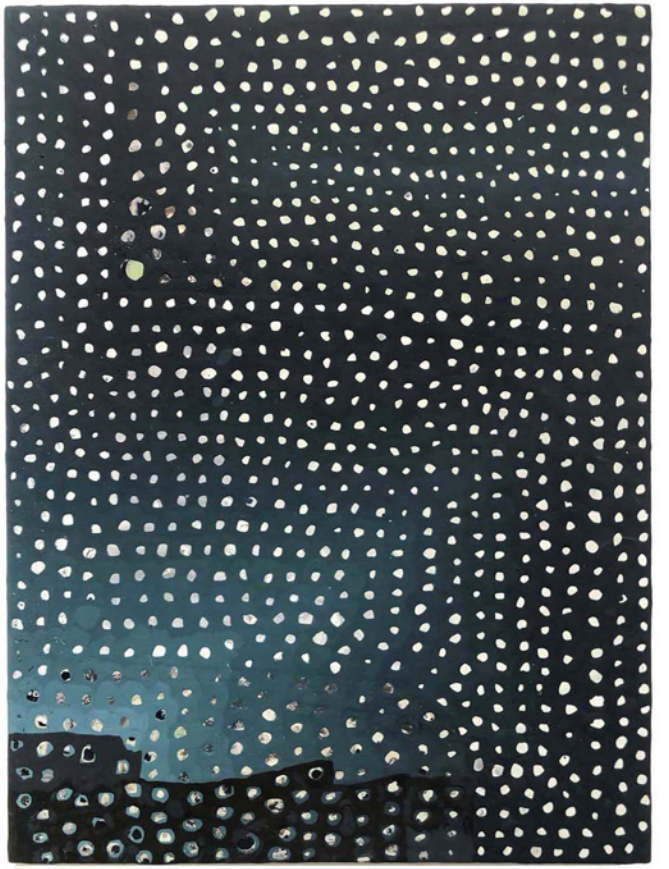
Color and shape are the things. But I have these superstitions or prejudices about how much paint there should be on the canvas before it's done. I have these rules. I don't know where they come from.

I recently re-read an article titled, Choosing to Choose where the author, Jan Verwoert, describes Toma Abst's process of painting, the way she corrects and covers over and over, layering colors. At one point the author writes something like, her lines are not really lines but are the gaps that are left after having layered this over that, after many layers of corrections. So I thought of the way you work.

That's definitely how I work but, to me, I think about it as a real commitment to being indirect.

The bottom line of the article is that each decision is driven by doubt.

That resonates for me. I feel like a lot of those things – the non-linear thinking where it is not a sentence or paragraph. This kind of whole-body way of thinking of things, which I think of as more of a female way of doing things. It's abstract, not concrete or literal. But I have a kind of shame about it. We all have a different way of learning. When it came to academics, my idea of what was right or the way to be smart or think never felt authentic to me. I still feel embarrassed about how much I doubt or the intuitive thing or the letting things happen or unfold. There aren't words to it. It's a blissful place to be. I'm always impressed to read something written about or by an artist that can legitimize that.



Smoke Signals, 2020-21, acrylic on panel, 12x9in.

I think about the way you use acrylic because I work in acrylic too and, lately, I've been wanting to focus on material. I sometimes question acrylic because it's plastic and I think: Am I really interested in plastic? But it's what we have.

It's so emblematic of our time.

Yea, it really is.

It's who we are right now. It's interesting.

With your paintings you get the material of the acrylic at its best. That probably involves having enough paint on the surface.

But even so… So many layers and it's still so thin. I don't want it to be plastic but I want some of the things you can do with oil. Materiality is so important to me. That was another thing that I came to. My parents are both academic professors and I was supposed to be the academic one in my family, which I'm not, as it turned out, but I went to an academic college. It was a long time before I realized this is not who I am at all. Things that don't have words are in a different category – things that I think are true but I don't have a word for. But I remember when I was nineteen after I dropped out of college and started painting. When I was looking at paintings I'd think: I like how the paint looks. It was surface I was noticing but no one had ever said that word – that there is something called surface or the materiality of it. But having looked at things in books and then going to museums and looking at certain paintings and disliking them because the surface

With and Without You, 2020, acrylic on panel, 20x24in.

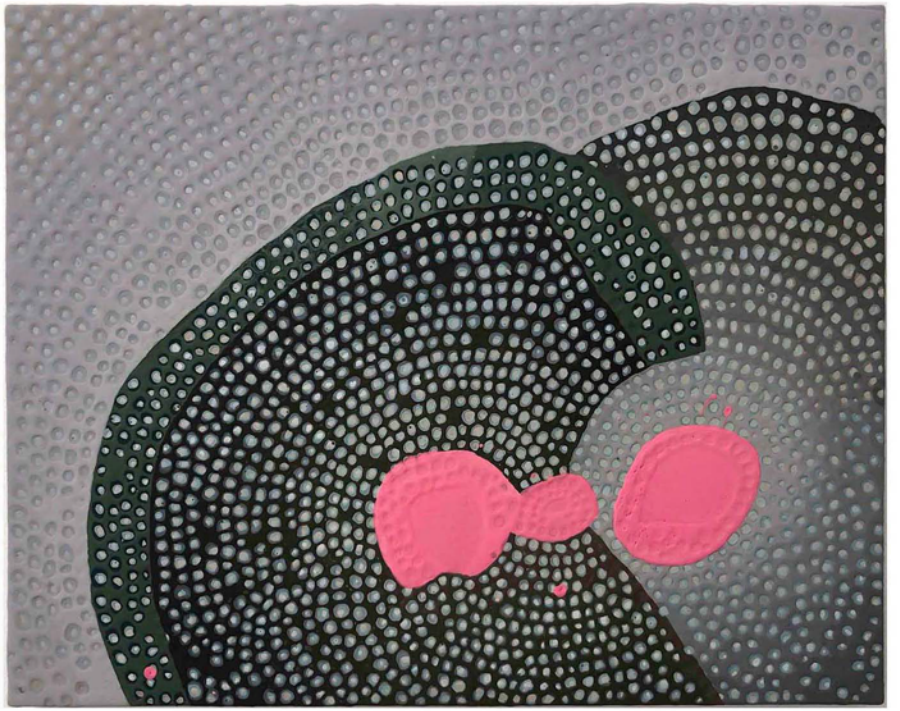
wasn't doing anything for me and finding out later that other people had noticed this too and it's called materiality.

I love that. I'm not a word person either but our culture prioritizes words so much. I have good visual memory but constantly run up against words or names I can't find.

There's a reality to what's happening in our brains at that point. You're thinking thoughts and feeling something but it doesn't always go through this very narrow place of language, one sentence at a time. But it's not that there's nothing happening. There is so much happening. I think about teaching and I can teach color and I can teach drawing but teaching painting is really… I just feel like so much of painting is not verbal, obviously, but if you can talk to someone who is also a painter you can start to put words to those things.

How do you like teaching color?

Color is an intuitive thing but it's actually interesting to learn the technical stuff. It's super interesting and it's continually interesting and I feel like it deepens. It doesn't close. And being able to identify what's hue versus saturation versus value – to deeply understand those differences and to think about the many kinds of contrasts you can make but understand where on those three scales you can make them, that's a little like a jazz joke. I miss that kind of teaching. That's not what we're doing right now on Zoom but, under normal circumstances, continuing to figure things out about color and then thinking about how to get people to see that through making. It's such a good



Root Cellar Cave, 2021, acrylic on panel, 16x20in.

problem. There's also something about teaching that is very now. You are all together in the same room and you all kind of rise to that moment.

It's what I loved about teaching, setting things in motion and seeing where that took us. You talked earlier about the need to have enough paint on the canvas. You described it as a real need.

Yes, that's one of the things. Each time the color changes it's a whole other painting. There's a book about fermentation by Sandor Ellix Katz. He took these pictures with microscopes of things like pickles, things that are happening, bubbling up. Unfortunately, they are black and white pictures and some artist colored them and I don't like the colors but it's called *Fermentation as Metaphor*. Part of what he talks about is just how porous edges are. Nothing has a hard edge. Everything is permeable. And getting to play with that by having the layers is really fun. Our atoms... there is space in between atoms. We perceive things as being solid but on a microscopic level they are not.

It looks like you were thinking about those kinds of things in making this work. Was the book a catalyst?

I just found out about that book recently. I also think about simultaneity. All these things can be happening simultaneously, very opposite things and I'm really aware of that. And even when I'm painting, I'm thinking: Oh, you're blue but if you are going to be blue you're also going to want to be orange or gray. It's keeping the question open, I guess. Nothing seems really settled. I

Pink with Shadow, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 14x17.75in.

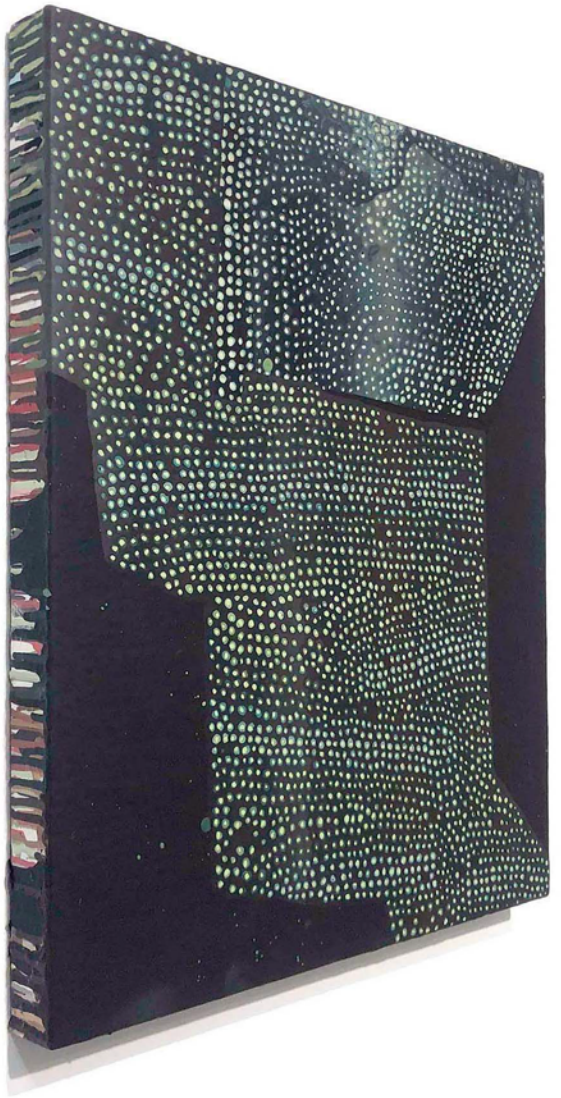
think we can be a lot of things. It's a feeling that, just that there's stuff going on that we don't see. I don't know, there's a kind of energy. Like when you are a teacher, some of that job is holding the space for the students. I'm not saying it's a psychic thing but it's definitely some kind of intentional energy. You're sweeping up the energy without having words for those things. I feel very aware of that.

When I look at the little particles in these paintings, I can see traces of the different layers of color that you put down. Each particle is a gap but it's also a thing with multi-color edges that reveal its history.

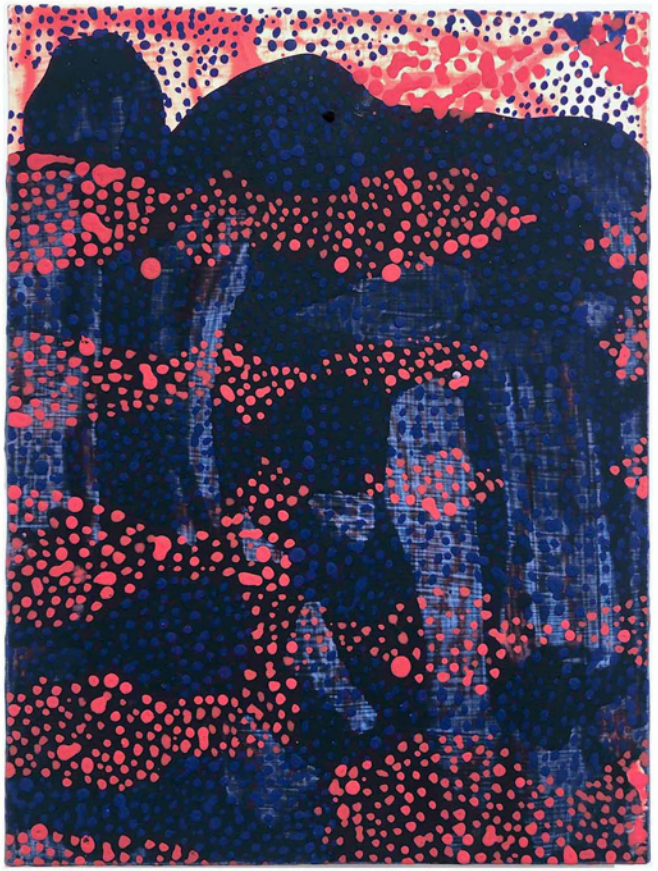
I feel like there is always something with color that I'm wanting to do where there's some tiny interaction happening. There are lots of tiny interactions happening in the paintings. On some of the paintings I just wrote SOS and let that be the starting point and that got covered up. It's under there somewhere.

One of my teachers used to say that when you cover something up it's never really gone. It's always there. Somehow these paintings remind me of this weird, precarious time period we are in. Not directly. It's ephemeral.

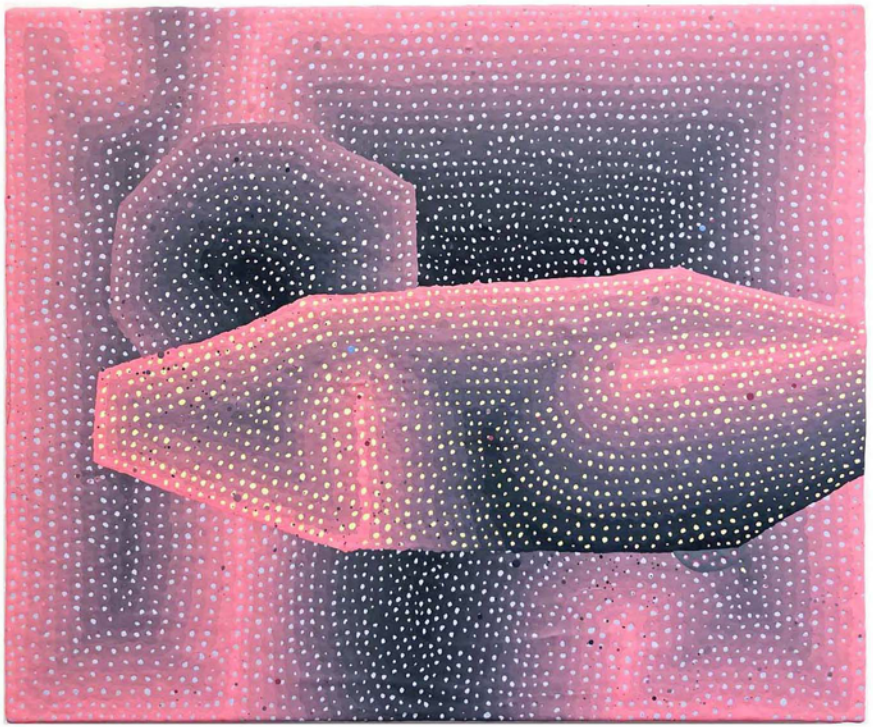
We just don't know what's going on. I think it's profound.



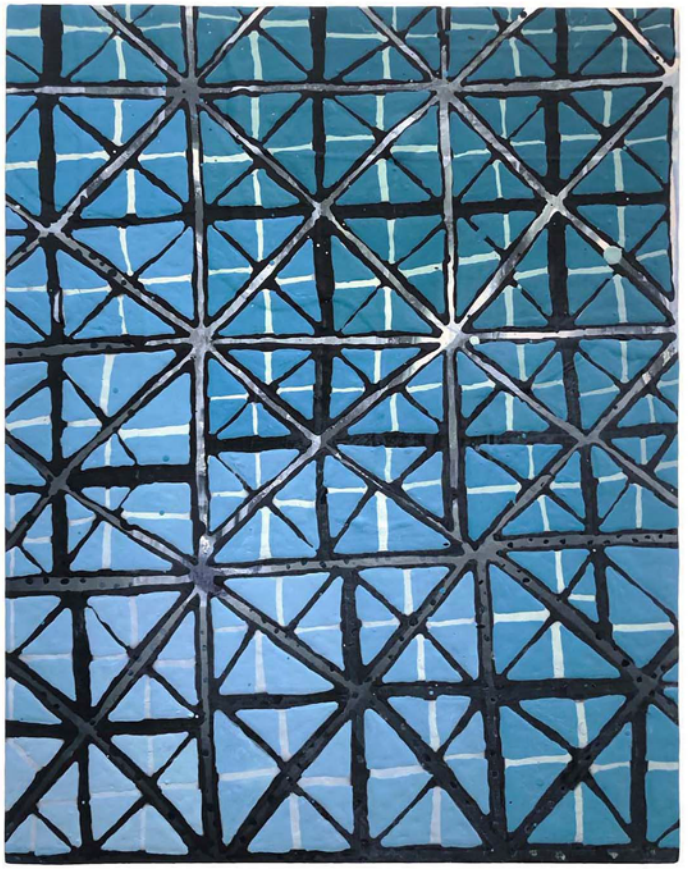
We Lay in the Grass that Day, 2020-21, acrylic on panel, 24x20in.



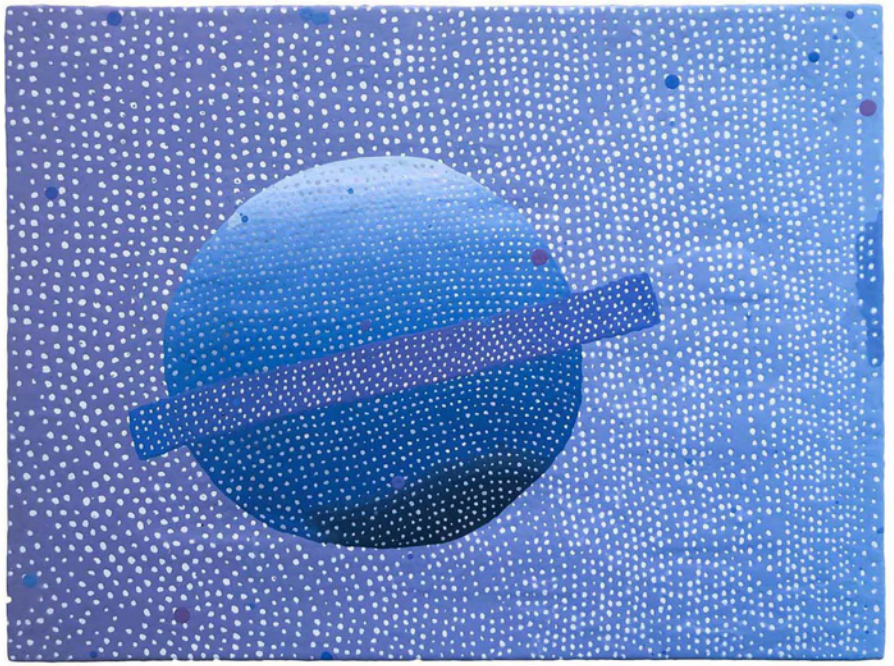
The Denser Parts of the Cloud Core, 2019, acrylic on panel, 12x9in.



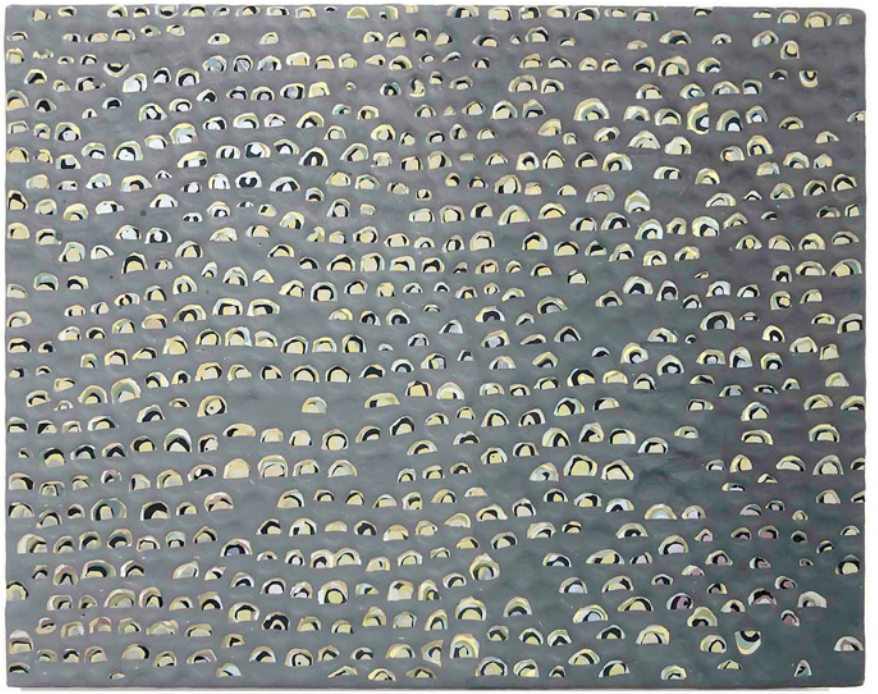
Comes in Waves, 2020, acrylic on panel, 20x24in.



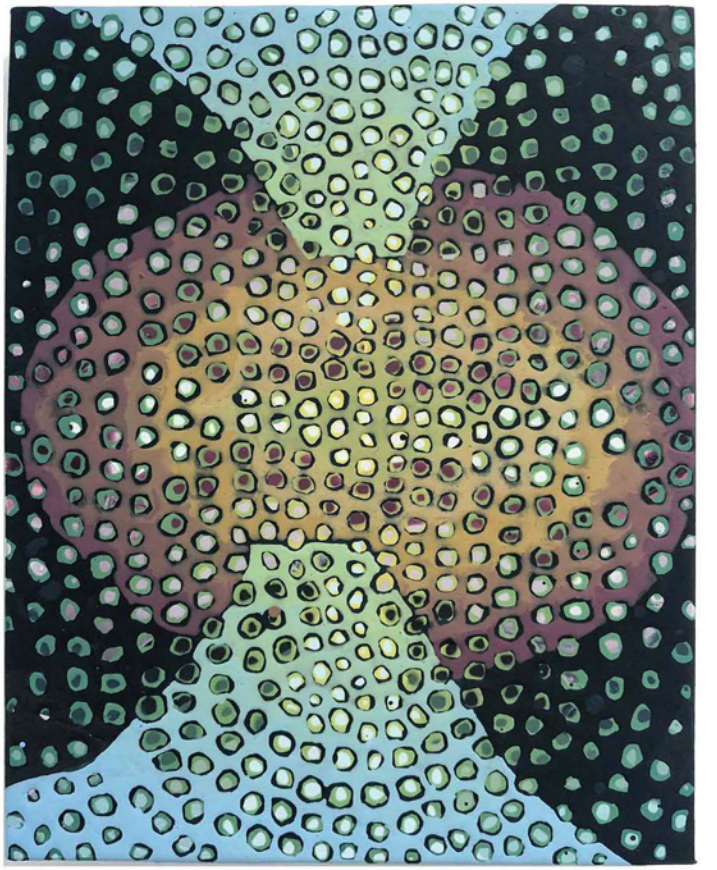
Untitled, 2020, acrylic on panel, 12x9in.



Until We Meet Again, 2021, acrylic on panel, 18x24in.



Watching, 2020, acrylic on panel, 8x10in.



Mountain Days, 2021, acrylic on panel, 10x8in.

Radio Dial, 2020, acrylic on panel, 24x30in.

Sydney Cohen's work has been exhibited throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as Atlanta, British Columbia, Iowa and Chicago. Her paintings are in public collections in Boston and Iowa and private collections nationally and internationally. She was an affiliate artist at the Headlands Center for the Arts from 2015-2018. She is a Senior Adjunct Professor at the California College of the Arts, where she teaches classes in color, and has taught painting, drawing and printmaking since 2002. She also teaches a long running figure drawing class at the Urban School of San Francisco. Cohen lives and works in the Bay Area.

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