

CURRICULUM THEMES

Environment; Place; Photography

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

GRADE 7 | CP7.11: Students will alter a photograph to visually emphasize and communicate ideas about a location.

GRADE 3 | CP3.7: Students will create an artwork depicting a man-made environment that explores the quality of that space.

LYNNE COHEN: *CLASSROOM (HERCULES BOMBER)*

Lynne Cohen's photographs are all about capturing interior environments and the intriguing things they can say about the people who use them, their time in history and their culture. The locations she photographs reveal an artist who is forever in tune with her environment and on the look-out for interiors that act as found objects with interesting stories to tell. Often the spaces are so unusual and artificial in appearance that critics have thought she physically created the installations, like stage sets, and then photographed them as part of her artistic practice.

Her photographs relate to the human existence and this is revealed in these impersonal, private, unoccupied spaces. In an interview in 2001 Cohen commented that, "...My photographs from the beginning have been about various sorts of artifice and deception. I started out probing the boundaries between the found and the constructed, the absurd and the deadly serious, the animate and the inert, and I have been probing that ever since." (Cohen, 2001 interview)

Getting into institutional spaces often poses a problem for Cohen and is part of the challenge and process of her photography. She confides in a 2007 interview, "The finished photographs depend on the generosity of strangers. I see the finished pieces as collaborations of a sort. The process is both exhilarating and frustrating. Exhilarating because I never know what I'll discover behind the closed doors, worrying because I am never sure that the people in charge will grant me permission to photograph." (Hamkin, 2007)

Cohen wants to be in control of all areas of her process and chooses to frame her works with Formica. She comments about her choice of framing material, "I decided on Formica because it is fabricated photographically, it echoes what is happening in the photographs and it adds another layer of illusion and artificiality." (Ewing, et al, 2001) Cohen wants the frame to "resonate with the subject" (Ewing, et al, 2001) and through her framing she provides the only clues about her thoughts on the image she is framing. For *Classroom (Hercules Bomber)* "a photo of a Hercules 'bomber' mock-up was given a yellow frame because of it's association with mustard gas," she explains, "I think the resulting pieces are more complete as objects and the border between the picture and the world no longer so abrupt." (Ewing, et al, 2001)



Lynne Cohen, *Classroom (Hercules Bomber)*, 1991, silver print on photographic paper, edition 3/10. Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery.

[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD THE IMAGE](#)

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

About her work Cohen says, "...I don't see myself as a documentary photographer. Of course, my photographs document places I go. But they are also documenting what I am thinking about, resonances between what is in the world and what is in my head." (Ewing, et al, 2001) How is Cohen's work like documentary photography and how is it different?

"I sometimes describe myself as a performance artist because of what I have to do to get access to what I want to photograph." (Ewing, et al, 2001) What is performance art and how does it apply to Cohen's work?

Cohen says, "Every room is a conceptual piece, an installation in real time." (Ewing, et al, 2001) What does a room say about the people who use it?

What interests you in your life and art-making?

ACTIVITY

In an interview with Mona Hamkin, Cohen revealed, "Pretty much everything I've photographed has an air of strangeness. This is curious, because the subject matter is quite banal – a living room, a classroom, a spa... The strangeness is partly due to the fact that the ordinary is often more menacing than the blatantly bizarre, which can be easily dismissed as impossible." (Hamkin, 2007). Using your own photographs or experiences create an artwork that adds an element of strangeness to the image.

- Find an image you have taken of a man-made location or look up such an image on the internet. Print out a copy of this image to alter or draw this image yourself.
- Think about the environment and surroundings in the image you chose and about how it can reveal a lot about the people who use it.
- Change the image or drawing of your location to emphasize what is strange about the scene. This can be done through a variety of methods such as: drawing into the scene, adding bizarre cartoon characters, increasing the contrasts of dark and light to create an eerie atmosphere, adding text, or using exaggeration to emphasize the peculiar and disconcerting elements.

WHAT YOU NEED

- Image of a location, from your photographs or the internet
- Paper
- Drawing utensils (markers, pencil crayons, colored pens, etc.)

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Lynne Cohen is one of Canada's outstanding photographers. For over thirty years her photographs have consistently represented interior private spaces. These can be places she encounters in her daily life, or as in the case of Classroom (Hercules Bomber), institutional interiors she has sought out in order to reveal unknown and unlikely places where people gather.

Cohen's black-and-white and colour photographs have captured interiors such as living rooms, offices, spas, men's clubs, beauty parlours, lobbies, educational settings, and seniors' care homes, but they are all devoid of people. Only the marks made by the people or the furniture used by the rooms' inhabitants remain. As Pierre Theberge and William Ewing observe in the preface to *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen*, a book of Cohen's works accompanying the National Gallery's 2001 exhibition of her work, "Cohen presents us with a chilling vision of the world, a humanly engineered environment where the boundaries between 'inside and outside', nature and culture', 'pleasure and pain', have been blurred and stripped of their original connotations." (Theberge and Ewing, 2001)

Cohen's interiors are included in many major gallery collections and have been exhibited nationally and internationally. Her successful career was recognized in 2005 when she was awarded the prestigious Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts for her contributions to Canadian art, and again in 2011 when she received the Scotiabank Photography Award. Born in Racine, Wisconsin, she lived and worked in Canada beginning in 1973, and most recently resided in Montreal, Quebec. Lynne passed away in Montreal from lung cancer in May of 2014.

Lynne Cohen studied art at the Slade School of Art in London, England, the Ox-Bow Summer School of Painting in Michigan, Eastern Michigan University, and the University of Michigan. She has a Bachelor of Science from the University of Wisconsin and a Masters of Arts with a major in sculpture from Eastern Michigan University. Cohen has taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario, the École des Beaux-arts de Bordeaux, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Eastern Michigan University, Ecole Nationale de la Photographie in Arles, France, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, the Hoger Instituut voor Schone Kunst in Antwerp, Ecole d'arts appliqués in Vevey, Switzerland, the Virginia Commonwealth University, the EFTI Escuela de Fotografía in Madrid and the University of Ottawa.