



BOOK REVIEW

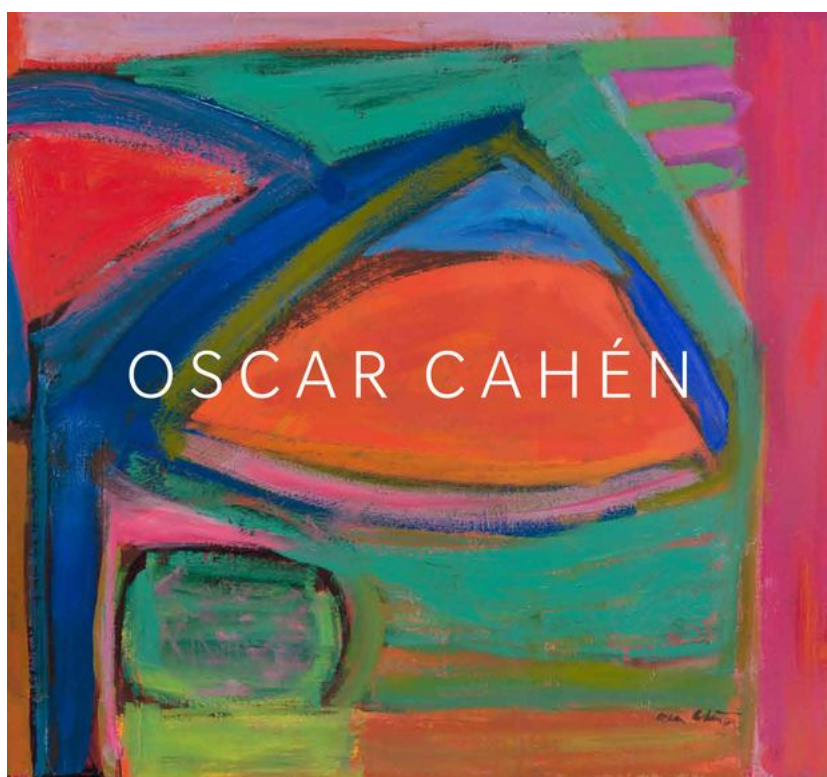
Review: Oscar Cahén book marks an important step for appreciation of Canadian art

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Oscar Cahén is a collaborative publishing venture between the Cahén Archives and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton.

In a poem called *Can Lit* published in 1962, Earle Birney lamented that in Canada, “it’s only by our lack of ghosts we’re haunted.” As it went for our writers, so it has gone for our painters. It’s hard to figure out why this has been the case. It may be some combination of indifference, hostility or willful cultural amnesia, but the result has been that our significant artists have ended up being ignored or underappreciated.

Oscar Cahén is a case in point. Cahén was a prodigiously gifted illustrator and artist who in 1953 was the catalyst behind the formation of Painters Eleven in Toronto, and who died tragically three years later in a car accident at the age of 40. At the

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time of his death he was fast becoming one of the most admired painters in the country and was making inroads in his painting and drawing that promised international recognition.

A major step has just been made in understanding his achievement with the publication of an elegantly designed and printed monograph simply called *Oscar Cahén*. (The monograph is a collaborative publishing venture between the Cahén Archives and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton). In addition to a rich selection of coloured reproductions that considers his magazine work as well as his fine art production, the book contains contributions from 11 art historians, critics and conservators that, taken together, provide a compelling and layered perspective on the artist's life and work.



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Cahén was an inventive and successful illustrator, but his lasting contribution to the visual arts in this country comes through his intensely colourful paintings. In 1954 he painted a medium-sized oil on canvas called *Vibrant Structure*: The single naming is an accurate description of his entire production. In paintings like it and *Growing Amethyst* and *Traumoeba* (oil on masonite from 1953 and 1956) he pulls out all the colour stops. The early painting has a cluster of reds and blues that form a sort of intense, abstract beehive. He had a genius for making paintings in which forms contain colours and colour produces form.



Traumoeba, oil on masonite, 1956 (The Cahén Archives).

Untitled, watercolour and pastel on paper, 1955 (The Cahen Archives).

Cahén was an aesthetic magpie, picking up as many bright things as he could (and some darker ones as well) while moving through the international painted landscapes of 1950s postwar art. There are traces in his work of artists from Europe, Britain and the United States, including Picasso and Matisse, Joan Miró and Georges Rouault, Robert Motherwell and Adolf Gottlieb, Graham Sutherland, Ben Nicholson and William Scott. Cahén was utterly adept in employing a creative practice that privileged accretion over innovation. In his looking at other artists and deciding what he could use from them he exercised a highly personal and intelligent eclectic engagement.

What is apparent is that he is not a groundbreaker or a dazzling conjuror of new painterly forms. His gift was to work inside modes of figuration and abstraction and to present, through a brilliant display of high-chroma colour, movement within that oscillating framework. Colour was his dazzle. From 1953 to his death he made one remarkable painting after another, and from 1951 onward he developed a drawing vocabulary that was as advanced as anything being done in contemporary art. As aggressive as was his palette in the paintings, his arrangement of form and colour in the drawings was delicate and lyric. He could set pink resting on the page like blush.

The essays in the monograph provide an admirable degree of information which allows us to measure Cahén's achievement in the history of modern art in this country. But all good scholarship raises as many questions as it addresses, especially when it comes to the fascinating process of artistic influence – on him, and his on others. In this regard, the book helps define Cahén but it is not definitive. That openness is one of its many strengths.

Ascend, mixed media drawing, 1951-52 (The Cahen Archives).

Oscar Cahén is a splendid, important and game-changing publication that sets a standard for what needs to happen if we are going to become serious about the history of the visual arts in Canada. What should really spook all of us who care

about the future of our culture is if we can't find any ghosts from the past who are brilliantly haunting our present.

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Oscar Cahén can be purchased from oscarcahen.com.

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