**Curator on the Go Podcast. Episode 4 – Interview with *Sylvia Cohen.***

**Curator on the Go:**Hi Sylvia, welcome and thank you so much for joining me today. I am so excited to learn more about you and share your unique story and experience with others. Welcome!

**Sylvia Cohen:**Hi! Thank you! Thank you for having me here!

**Curator on the Go:**Thank you so much for being here! Let’s go back and talk about your background, how did you start and why did you decide to work as an artist?

**Sylvia Cohen:**Going back a lot of years… I studied fine art when I was very young. I’ve graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, and then a lot of people were telling me that “you can work as an artist, you are going to be starving and everything.” I went into art education and finished a degree in art education, but I hated teaching. So, I never really did that.

I went into fashion design and I was a fashion designer for 18 years. About five years ago I’ve decided to go back to my first love – painting. I’ve tried everything, I did reasonable things, I worked in the industry that paid well and then I’ve just listened to my heart and I said: “enough with all these, I did what I had to do – I am back to what I am really passionate about.” Five years ago, I’ve started painting again in full time. I started to see if I can still hold a brush as I haven’t painted for a long time and has been illustrating in my work. Basically, I’ve started really slow with sketches, and small paintings and gradually when into larger work. And I haven’t stopped since and it’s been fantastic. I am really really happy!

**Curator on the Go:**“What a unique and inspiring story!”

**Curator on the Go:**You are painting in multiple media (like acrylics, collage, and mixed media). Which one is your favorite?

**Sylvia Cohen:**I paint mostly in acrylics. I love to work with ink, watercolor, and ink. My work is mostly black and white. I’ve started with ink on paper and then figures why not put in on the canvas and I started painting acrylics in black & white and by adding strokes of color. This is my signature style by painting in black & white. It’s kind of counter-intuitive, but there is so much to think about. When you paint in black & white, it’s like sculpting: the volume speaks, the contrast, there are so many nuances of gray, etc. It’s not really black & white – it’s the shades of grey.

I thought I’ve finished exploring that, and I started working a lot in color, but I keep going back to black & white. There is something that I haven’t finished saying there. I am now adding resin to the black & white portraits, put some gold leaf or colorful details just to add color.

**Curator on the Go:** Why did you decide to make portraiture your art practice and did you have moments when you had thoughts like “I should paint something else?”

**Sylvia Cohen:**I’ve always loved observing people and, to me, a portrait says everything about a person. A figure can also be very expressive, but a portrait – you have the expression in the eyes, the mouth, pose, the curve of a neckline, etc. Sometimes I will include hands that I think are also very important for expression. I am really interested in capturing a person’s soul.

I am attracted to faces as I enjoy analyzing people and their personalities. I can convey emotion better than through a landscape. A lot of artists make landscapes or abstracts, and you can also convey a lot of emotions with those too, but my choice is portraiture. I must have been influenced by my fashion background as a lot of fashion models are ending up on my canvases.

Also, I am naturally attracted to women again due to my fashion background. I’ve painted some men; my son was one of them. Strangely enough, the ones that have been sold were the few men that I’ve painted. They’ve been sold faster than the women.

**Curator on the Go:** In addition to that, I saw an article about you on Artsy Shark where you talked about art practice that is all about expressive dynamism, color, and gestural brushstrokes. And it’s true, it’s all about it.

**Sylvia Cohen:** How much movement can you find in a face? It’s all about the brushstrokes. In the hair – the is always movement and it’s never static. The brush strokes in the facial features – they are not flat. I always like to leave a visible brush mark and I think it gives a certain dynamism to the face. I am definitely all about dynamism and expressing emotion. It’s really all about emotions.

**Curator on the Go:** You’ve been exhibiting at solo and group shows. Do you usually apply for the call for artists or you go to the galleries yourself to see if your work will fit into their upcoming exhibitions?

**Sylvia Cohen:**It’s a bit of everything, I did walk up and down in Montreal. In old Montreal, there are a lot of galleries. It’s one of my favorite ways to spend Sundays – go to different galleries, leaving my postcard or a business card or talking to the owner. Usually, they are not very receptive when you just walk in. So, I follow up with the email. A few have been receptive, but I haven’t been landed in many galleries. One of them actually is now representing me, and I have a solo show coming up on October 10th in old Montreal. So, I am really excited about that.

I did a lot of applications for calls for art. I did a few groups shows through those, but I am not going to peruse these. I did a lot of the group shows and symposiums and I think I am done with that. Sitting for 3 days and transporting your works is hard. I found that people, who come to this shows, are there just to go for a walk and no the right buyers for my art. It depends, some people sell well, it depends on the show and the venue and you have to find the ones that resonate with you and your work. I got a lot of compliments during those shows and that’s it.

A lot of people just want to fill their shows and they will take on any artist that has enough work to show and it’s not necessarily curated.

I am getting picky now, but when you are starting out, which I was 5 years ago, I just wanted to get out there and do as many shows as I could. Which is a good thing. At least I learned which shows are good for me and not. We all have to go through that. As you keep doing, you can feel what are your clients and what types of clients come to that shows. You can always talk to the organizers, but I usually find that the organizers will all be very positive and will say that they have amazing buyers and that you will do great. But they are basically are trying to sell you a spot.

I would prefer to be represented by galleries or to work with interior designers and architects. I have to be more in the niche and it is the difficulty artists have today – finding their niche and finding the right customers.

**Curator on the Go:**So, you’ve mentioned that you are represented by one gallery in Montreal. Do you sell exclusively through them or you also sell on your own?

**Sylvia Cohen:**No, I also sell on my own. I’ve just signed the contract with the gallery – we are starting out with my solo show and from that point on I will be represented by the gallery 203 in old Montreal. The show, called “She,” will be on for 2 weeks and it’s going to be my second solo show. The first one I’ve organized myself three years ago.

**Curator on the Go:**I love gallery 203 in Montreal and I love Corinne. Good luck with the show!

**Curator on the Go:**Do you sell prints or only originals and why?

**Sylvia Cohen:**I do sell prints. I have some on my website. So people like my paintings but can’t afford them. So, they ask me if I can do print versions. My prints are always very limited, no more than 20 prints per image. Yes, I’ve sold quite a few prints actually.

**Curator on the Go:**Do you do just one print (edition of 25) or you do different sizes of the same image?

**Sylvia Cohen:**I usually do I set of prints (14x18 size). If someone requests a specific size, then I will do it. One client reached out on Instagram and asked about the painting that I’ve sold. I made a print of the same size as the original painting and it was only one (custom size). I am pretty open to any kind of request, I’ve done a lot of commission work through Instagram and Facebook. People have contacted me through my Facebook page and asked if I can do their portraits. So, I did that. It was cool, as I always post on social media, but never expected to get orders, but I did.

**Curator on the Go:**Yes, it’s important to use social media nowadays.

**Sylvia Cohen:** Absolutely! I think it is the most important tool. If you are going to sell on your own or even through a gallery – you have to be on social media. If you are not on social media – you don’t exist. Instagram and Facebook are huge, especially Instagram because it’s mostly visuals and it’s great for artists. I found that Facebook is great for communicating and getting a lot of feedback from people, more than from Instagram. People go more in-depth when they talk to you on Facebook and I got more orders from Facebook.

**Curator on the Go:**We started talking about exhibitions and I know that you’ve participated at Art Palm Beach Art Fair this year. What was your experience and did it match your expectations?

**Sylvia Cohen:**It was fantastic to be able to show in Palm Beach. Unfortunately, I was with a gallery from Quebec, and I only got to show three paintings which is not a lot. I wasn’t there myself –the gallery was representing me. I only saw pictures of the show. It didn’t bring me anything as I should have been there as you get to meet people who come and see art and get to make contacts. If you are not there – the gallery is doing all of the contact work and you never see it. Lesson learned and I will never do that again!

**Curator on the Go:**Did you pay to go there?

**Sylvia Cohen:**Yes, and it’s quite expensive. I was trying to show in either Palm Beach or in NY, but it’s very expensive if you are going to be on your own. Artists don’t always have that kind of money. I thought that was a good way to get my foot into the door, through that gallery. It was still very expensive and the paintings didn’t sell. The gallery took those paintings to another show where they had too many artists to represent and only one of my works was up. I wasn’t there and couldn’t control anything. These shows are good for exposure, the US market is absolutely amazing, and I still have to do one of these shows but myself or with another gallery that will be more serious. I would love to do Art Expo in NY.

**Curator on the Go:**A lot of artists share the same experience as you had. I recommend that if you are going with a gallery, you shouldn’t pay as they are taking a lot of artists and they should take the commission percentage. And that is why you are going with them. If you are going on your own, you have to pay as you will be there. You just pay for them to be there and not selling at all.

**Sylvia Cohen:**Yes. You pay for their booth. The gallery sold other works that were there, but I think it wasn’t enough representation when you have only 2-3 paintings hanging next to someone’s else paintings without any cohesive presentation. A lot of galleries do that to be able to participate at those shows as its good for their brand and name, but they don’t care about the artists. That is why they make them pay.

**Curator on the Go:**I also saw on the website that you tried selling your works at ArtBomb online Auction. Did this platform and action format worked for you or not?

**Sylvia Cohen:**Not really. I haven’t sold anything on ArtBomb. I think the concept is really interesting, and the curator who came to my studio to pick up the pieces said that it would work if I kept showing a few times. Auction is like a lottery, and she is right. If I kept showing throughout the year, then maybe people would start recognizing my name or my work, but I haven’t sold anything through ArtBomb. It’s good exposure again.

**Curator on the Go:** Did you have to pay to be there or it just sharing the percentage?

**Sylvia Cohen:**It’s just share the percentage which is great. That is how it should be. I find that too many places and art shows just want artists’ money. I am kind of tired of that. It’s kind of a system where you have to pay to show – it’s not like that in any other business where you have to pay to be able to sell. It’s kind of crazy! A lot of scammers out there – you have to be careful.

**Curator on the Go:**Absolutely! I talk a lot with artists about the importance of personal branding. Do you believe that artists need a brand and to see themselves as creative entrepreneurs to be successful?

**Sylvia Cohen:** Absolutely! Unless you are really lucky and you got discovered which I don’t think happens really. It’s only in magazines or movies, whatever… You have to brand yourself, you have to be recognizable, and show your work in as many places as possible, on social media, doing shows. It’s important to have your own style and not do the same thing over and over again. To be recognizable – it’s branding! When people start recognizing your work without a signature – it’s really great! Clients will trust you more if they will recognize your work. I don’t see myself painting portraits today, landscapes tomorrow and the abstract the day after - the client wouldn’t understand my message and will say “What should I buy from this person? What is she doing? What is she saying? She doesn’t know herself!”. These are the kind of things you don’t want.

**Curator on the Go:** I know that you use social media a lot to promote yourself and your art? Do you use other methods like newsletters, advertising in print/online magazines, etc.?

**Sylvia Cohen:**I did try to contact some magazines for interviews. That didn’t really work so much. Besides social media, and doing shows, that is all I do. I’ve been trying to collect emails and I need to do a newsletter. I know that it is very important, but I am kind of ok, I don’t want to bother people, they will be unsubscribing every minute, and I will be hurt. So, I just don’t do it. But I know that it is very important and I should do it.

**Curator on the Go:**You should definitely start doing that and see how it goes.

**Sylvia Cohen:**I started collecting email addresses and I will start by announcing my shows – that should be interesting for some people.

**Curator on the Go:**Yea. You don’t need to do that every day. You can do once a month or like quarterly and people will be happy to see what you are up next.

**Sylvia Cohen:**True! There is so much to do when you are painting every day and you are posting on social media. Sometimes I am really busy painting, and I remember “Oh my God, I should be filming my time-lapse and I have to show people my work.” And I don’t think about it as I am so into the painting and forget to take pictures of the process and the painting is finished.

You have to be disciplined and plan things and do them like an actual business. This is a business!

**Curator on the Go:**It is! What is one piece of advice you would give to emerging artists?

**Sylvia Cohen:**First of all, make sure you work a lot! That you work every day! That you paint and draw or do something every single day to develop your style and to make sure you have a signature style. Don’t worry if you don’t know what it is right now, but it will come up – it’s natural. You are naturally attracted to certain styles or methods of painting. As you work, your style will be developing. It’s very important for an artist to be recognizable. And then just show your work as much as you can: social media, art shows, galleries if you can! It’s very difficult in the beginning but just show as much as you can. You have to be out there every single day, talk about your art! When you meet people – tell them that you are an artist. Talk about your art! Give out your business cards – some people might look at your website. Have a website! Very important! Live and breathe art and you will make it!

**Curator on the Go:**Where my listeners can find you online?

**Sylvia Cohen:**All of the links are on my website.

<http://www.sylviacohen.com/>

<https://www.instagram.com/sylvia.cohen/>

<https://www.facebook.com/artsylviacohen/>

**Curator on the Go:**So, my last question that I hope you will be excited to answer. You don’t have a shop option on your website, do you believe that having an online store devalues your art or not?

**Sylvia Cohen:** No, not at all! People are going to see your work on Facebook or Instagram and they will click on the link to go on your website – they will see more work. If they are interested and really want to buy – they will click on your shop to have an idea of your prices. You can say “DM me if you want to know the price,” but some people might be shy and just want to get an idea of your pricing. I don’t have prices on all of my paintings, just a few, to give people an idea of what my prices are like. And if they feel comfortable- they will contact you. If you don’t have a shop and it’s another gallery – what’s the point! People want to know more about you and on the website, you can talk about yourself, have your CV, etc. I haven’t made any sales through my website directly, but people have contacted me directly for commissions through my website several times.

**Curator on the Go: Absolutely!**Thank you very much for sharing your story today! I am excited to see your new works and projects and hope to meet you in person in the near future!

**Sylvia Cohen:**Thank you for taking the time to talk to me. It was a pleasure and I hope your listeners learned something or got some ideas. We all need other people’s opinions and see how other people work, what they do, and how they promote their works. It’s always interesting to see what others are doing!