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An Exhibition on an Iconic Modernist Opens at The Glass House

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On view all summer, a new exhibition at Philip Johnson's Glass House provides the first survey to explore the relationship between the early paintings and pioneering design projects of polymath and modernist icon Elaine Lustig Cohen.



Installation view of paintings by Elaine Lustig Cohen in Philip Johnson's Painting Gallery

"Lustig Cohen's paintings resonate beautifully with the Painting Gallery," says curator Cole Akers, who organized the show. "It's as if Philip Johnson designed it just for them." Lustig Cohen's pieces are among the first by a female artist to be shown in the space, and are mounted on rotating panels that house the vast personal holdings of Johnson and his longtime partner, David Whitney, an art curator and prominent collector of contemporary art.

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A pioneering figure of modernism, Elaine Lustig Cohen, 88, first began her graphic design practice in 1955, following the passing of her husband and creative partner, the influential midcentury designer Alvin Lustig, and has continued her work for more than 50 years, cementing her position as a legendary designer, artist, and rare-book dealer in her own right.

Organized by curator Cole Akers, a new survey of her work is now on view all summer at Philip Johnson's Glass House, in New Canaan, Connecticut. The choice of venue is historically significant: As a graphic designer, Cohen's first client was Johnson himself, who commissioned her to produce lettering and signage for the iconic Seagram Building in Manhattan. The two continued to collaborate closely over the years, for projects including the Glass House, Yale University, the Lincoln Center, as well as individuals such as philanthropist and art patron John de Menil, who was also a client of Johnson's.

In addition to her longtime collaborations with Johnson, Lustig Cohen worked with architects Eero Saarinen and Richard Meier, and arts institutions such as the Whitney Museum and the Jewish Museum. Her numerous book jacket designs produced for imprints such as New Directions and Meridian Press are commonly regarded as a high point of midcentury graphics, incorporating elements of the European avant-garde through collage, photography, and typographic compositions. Concurrent to her design practice, she has also collected and sold rare books and continued to produce a body of abstracted, hard-edged paintings, photographs, and graphic art.

Installed in the Glass House's Painting Gallery, the exhibition includes a selection of her paintings from the 1960s and '70s, as well as materials from her multi-year collaboration with Johnson. Here, Akers shares a few highlights from the show, on view through Sept. 28.