



# BARTLEBY REVIEW

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Lichtenstein Spaceship •••• Eli Bornowsky

**Scott Cohen**

*Nuba Café  
146 East Third Ave*

Indulging in a Lebanese feast at Nuba on Third Avenue feels like being on the set of a sitcom shot by Godard in a beatnik Beirut. It is a roadside pit stop for American hotrod runaways, Islamic poets, avant-garde philosophers, and young underground families. I have these associations because the room is full of details that build an impressionistic picture through cultural references. However, upon closer inspection, the contents of the referents are ambiguous. For example, the coloured flecks on the bar and dining room tables conjure a Lichtenstein spaceship vibe, while the chairs are an unusual combination of legendary Eames design and cheap cafeteria drone. Near the back of the restaurant is a screen wall constructed of modest but decorative concrete blocks, similar to the ones found in the surrounding light industrial

neighborhood. Along with lower middle class associations, these blocks also possess the quality of Arabic open air entryways and mashrabiya windows. Similarly, there are areas of contrasting green and white bathroom tiles, at once quotidian, but also cut in half at an angle, and subtly modulated in colour to become visually more than the sum of their parts. The room is a mixture of semiconscious references that loom in the air and stick in the materials. This ambiguous combination is the ambient pleasure of the room and the tang of a critical agenda.

For Scott Cohen, his intuitively composed references are hybrids intended to confront the modernist tropes of utopian monotony, specifically the repression of cultural referents, that he finds a deplorable hangover from Modernism, still prevalent in current architectural practices. Utopia, for Cohen, is tedious. However, unlike the current craze for antiquarian fetishism, which attempts to take the edge off cold modern geometries with pre-Modern, dusty colonial nostalgia, Cohen creates a stage for a fiction of the real, projecting a long lost Nouvelle Vague moment onto the dining experience. Cohen has joked that function follows fiction. Yet, this fiction is much more than a suspension of disbelief. While Nuba's architectural details may conjure the mid 20th century, they are enigmatic enough to avoid a specific date and time. Cohen has suggested that this ambiguous time signature reinforces the

multiple fictions of everyday life. There are cracks in the Nuba facade too. For example, the green and black tiles that reinforce the Arabic flavour, and make a lively contrast with the otherwise pastel palette of the room, are not tiles at all. In fact they are cheaply spray painted on the wall with stencils, genius in their minimal economy, while simultaneously supporting and rupturing Nuba's mise-en-scène. However, the cracks—where the architectural illusion breaks down—are not disappointments. Rather they are openings where our own fictions come into conversation and mingle with Cohen's. For him, fiction describes any of the voluntary or involuntary, inherited or affected sensibilities that govern our actions.

In this way it is tempting to align Cohen's work with ideology critique, where the word fiction would be replaced with ideology, and the awareness of ideology in architecture would be the critical thrust of his work. But Cohen's preference for a complex, multilayered culture belies any belief in a clear and proper position for critique. Rather than separating himself from culture in order to have a good critical look at it, Cohen revels in the multivocal and contradictory sites he works with. Within these contradictions, Cohen's work can simultaneously critique the normal and relish the natural, in a celebration of the fictions we indulge individually and collectively everyday.

Eli Bornowsky