It has been said that all good art is spiritual, and while many works of art immediately yield a spiritual sense, others slowly reveal one or multiple meanings. Sorel Cohen, an award-winning Canadian Jewish artist, has produced such a multi-faceted work, combining the secular and the sacred in her 1988 photo-based work, *Gothic Lament*, part of the Donovan Collection of Modern Art at St. Michael’s College at the University of Toronto. In *Gothic Lament* Cohen appropriates and unifies two iconic images: a black and white photo of the Brooklyn Bridge circa 1930 and a full colour image of the 16th century crucified Christ of the Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünwald. The Brooklyn Bridge image is placed above the head-to-thigh image of the Christ figure which bears an agonized expression and lies on its side beneath it. The title itself refers to the gothic architecture of the bridge and the lament for Christ. Cohen created the work as “one of a series of photographs entitled, *Beyond Recovery.... organized around binary oppositions.... which elicit multiple associations.*”¹ Various interpretations of this piece might include the sins of the world crushing Christ, or the secular world overtaking the religious world. There is however another, more optimistic, and decidedly Christian way to view the work: joy, beauty, and hope may be found in *Gothic Lament* when approached through Christian notions of the beauty of Christ’s suffering and the mysticism of St. Catherine of Siena, which represents the salvific and loving beauty of Christ as a bridge to God.

Cohen has left no ambiguity for the viewer in recognizing the images used, and it is apparent that she actively seeks to draw the viewer into the picture in three particular ways. The
photographs comprise a small space, about 12 inches by 14 inches, but the entire work is approximately 36 inches by 45 inches due to its large black border which is an important component of the work. This black portion, covered in glass, acts as a mirror which reflects the viewer, who is thereby drawn into the scene, becoming part of it. Secondly, the small size of the photographs necessitates a close examination in order to see their details. This is especially important when viewing the body of Christ which, though gigantic in proportion to the bridge, is not reflective of the extent of his suffering until closer inspection of his facial expression and the damage to his skin. Thirdly, Cohen has placed the title, “Gothic Lament” in dark grey letters on the bottom black border, necessitating a closer look to discern it. In these ways, Cohen establishes a dialogue with the viewer, and whatever his or her interpretation of the work of art, it will, by reason of the gravity of the questions engendered in the viewer, “mediate ultimate concern.”

Thus, different interpretations of Gothic Lament can convey an existential, religious, or mystical concern. Certainly, an examination of these seemingly antithetical photographs is instructive. New York’s Brooklyn Bridge, completed on May 24, 1883, has a long iconic history. It was intended to be “a great work of art, and a successful specimen of advanced bridge engineering... [which] will forever testify to the energy, enterprise, and wealth of that community which shall secure its erection.”

The direction of the photograph is from Brooklyn toward Manhattan, a symbol of financial power and culture. The bridge, however, also has a tragic history. John A. Roebling, its Chief Engineer, suffered a fatal accident while surveying the location for the bridge’s towers. Additionally, a great many fatalities took place during construction, as cables snapped or stones crushed workers; in all, approximately twenty-seven men died during its construction. Finally, the bridge, a popular spot for lovers, also sadly became a place of many suicides. In this mixed symbolism of beauty, joy and suffering, the bridge photograph is analogous to the image of Christ.
Suffering is the most evident feeling evoked by the Isenheim Altarpiece, considered to be one of the most graphic renderings of Christ crucified. Now in Colmar, the painting “originally stood on the high altar of the abbey church of the Anthonites [a hospital order] in... Isenheim.”

Georg Scheja, in his book, *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, notes that the image of Christ portrays scars of the frightful ordeal, an atrocious benumbed pain written across the face... the mouth extinguished in death... [and] the loincloth in tatters, while a thorn of the crown pins the head fast in an excruciatingly painful position digging low and deep into the chest.

This image, which portrays Christ’s “Passion consummated in pitiless isolation, a lonely dying in an empty world from which even light has fled,” seems to be rendered even more tragic by the weight of the bridge upon it. Nonetheless, the beauty of Christ’s sacrifice placed in conjunction with a bridge, coheres with Catherine’s vision of Christ as a bridge to God, and with Augustine’s writings on the enduring beauty of Christ at all times.

Augustine, like Plotinus, was concerned with the lure of material beauty, and endeavoured to move beyond it to see higher beauties such as, for example, wisdom. He applied this Plotinian ideal of elevated beauty to Christ, forming a new concept of the beauty of his suffering, pain, and death. Accordingly, Augustine wrote that Christ is “‘beautiful’ as God, the Word with God,” and therefore was beautiful in all phases of his life on earth, for example, as an infant and in manhood, by the very fact of his Incarnation. More importantly, he was “beautiful under the scourge”, “beautiful in ‘laying down His life’”, and “beautiful on the Cross.” Augustine writes that this beauty of Christ comprises the “highest beauty, the real beauty... of righteousness.” Therefore, Christ’s terrible suffering and death should engender in Christians an appreciation of this beauty, so evident in Christ’s taking on human flesh and suffering for humankind. In the image of the crucified Christ, therefore, can be seen the highest beauty: that of Christ’s love.
Most striking is that Cohen’s picture is in dialogue with the revelations of the fourteenth century visionary, St. Catherine of Siena, to whom it was revealed that Christ is the soul’s bridge to God. The theology of Christ as the mediator between humanity and God is traditional but Catherine’s imagery is unusual and highly developed: “He is the way and truth and life – the way that is the bridge leading to the very height of heaven.” Catherine senses God saying: “This bridge, my only-begotten Son, has three stairs. Two of them he built on the wood of the most holy cross, and the third even as he tasted the great bitterness of the gall and vinegar they gave him to drink.”

The stairs have a dual meaning. First, they represent the virtues of affection (the feet), love of Christ (the side), and the third stair, peace of union (the mouth), which is so high that “the flooding waters cannot strike it – for the venom of sin never touched my Son.” Secondly, the stairs represent three stages of spiritual life: purgation, illumination, and union. Christ is the bridge in his person, actions, Passion, teaching, and example. To follow Christ is to walk on the bridge, the stones of which represent virtues held together with the mortar that is Christ’s blood: “his blood was mixed into the mortar of his divinity with the strong heat of burning love.... built into walls on no less a foundation than himself.”

Catherine interprets Christ’s promise to return in the Gospel of John, 16:28, in terms of his function as bridge: “My Father sent me to you and made me your bridge so that you might escape from the river and be able to reach life.” The language of this vision is so explicit that a distinct parallel can be drawn to Cohen’s uniting of a bridge with Christ, and, considered in the light of Catherine’s mysticism, the disparate images of the Brooklyn Bridge and the dying Christ become a concrete unity.

Indeed, in Gothic Lament’s fusion of the secular and the sacred, it is possible to discern a joyous harmony between heaven and earth, and between humankind and God, achieved through the salvific intervention of Christ. Moreover, rather than the bridge and the city closing in on Christ,
Cohen’s work, when interpreted through Catherine’s mysticism, can be viewed in the opposite way, with the body of Christ expanding into the scene above, merging with, and becoming the bridge, the colour bursting toward the black and white and opening the world to his truth, goodness, love, and redemption. Consequently, the work gains “an harmonious balance, of an activity or a movement; there is the reflection upon things of a human or divine thought.” Additionally, the joined images share a dual horizon: the literal horizontal horizon between the images, and the “horizon where matter and spirit meet.” Certainly, discernment of these layers of meaning requires contemplation, but yields rich results.

In *Gothic Lament*, therefore, Sorel Cohen has created a work which “captures our attention and appreciation.... [and in which] anticipations and expectations are aroused, and then... complicated... [and] intensified.” One is a secular symbol of engineering brilliance, but also of despair in the number of deaths which have occurred as a result of accident or suicide. The Brooklyn Bridge has also been called the “[t]errific threshold of the prophet’s pledge,” constituting another apt analogy for Christian theology, where Christ is prophet, priest and King. The use of the Grünewald image, a classic Christian symbol of suffering and radical love, portrays the beautiful Christ: beautiful as sacrifice and as Saviour. Through its unity and harmony *Gothic Lament* consequently offers a representation of Catherine’s mystic vision of Christ as bridge to God, overwhelming associations of sorrow, and leading toward a higher beauty. The large black portion of the work which reflects the viewers invites them to cross the bridge to God.

As noted earlier, there are many possible interpretations of this picture, and Cohen herself certainly did not conceive it through the lens of Christian mysticism. She did, however, intend to “raise questions about the nature of photographic representation, and how, when recontextualized, photographs may deconstruct their own meaning,” and in this she has succeeded. As Graham
Howes notes, society has “been relatively antagonistic to dimensions of the transcendent in human thought and experience.”21 It is, therefore, a testament to Sorel Cohen that she has successfully closed the gap between the secular and the religious, and created a moving and deeply religious work of art for the Christian viewer.
Bibliography


Cohen, Sorel. E-mail Correspondence, dated March 18, 2009.


A Gothic Lament in a Modern World Margaret Hirst
Note: The artwork *Gothic Lament* can be viewed in person. It is currently on display on the first floor of Odette Hall, University of Toronto, as a part of the Donovan collection of modern art.
Notes

1 Sorel Cohen. E-mail to Author dated March 18, 2009.


4 Ibid.


6 Ibid., 15.

7 Ibid.


9 Ibid., 31.

10 Ibid., 30.


12 Ibid., 64.

13 Ibid., 65.

14 Ibid., 66.

15 Ibid., 70.


17 Ibid., 33.


20 Sorel Cohen. E-mail to Author dated March 18, 2009.


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