

The Artful Lawyer

'Art gives us a reprieve from the everyday routine,' says Cohen. Today, her career melds the legal and the visual.

BY TREY WYDYSH

Allison Cohen's first exposure to art was to two Andy Warhol portraits of Marilyn Monroe, which hung over the fireplace in her parents' living room in Chevy Chase, Md. Even as a child, she found herself fervently defending modern art to her friends.

"If you love something, you want other people to love it too," Cohen says.

Today Cohen—whose father is a lawyer and whose mother is an art writer—has turned her passion into a career that melds the legal and the visual. In an office just north of Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C., Cohen practices intellectual property and art law as the Law Office of Allison Cohen, a one-woman firm. From the same office, she also runs Sightline, an art consulting business in which she acts as a broker for people buying and selling art.

"Art energizes me like nothing else," she says. "It has intellectual and emotional components. I never get tired of looking at it or reading about it. There is always something new to see or learn."

Plus, helping people whose livelihood comes from creativity is "a rush."

But it took Cohen, 33, a few years to find this happy medium. She studied comparative literature and art history at



ALLISON COHEN

Haverford College. Then she went to law school at the University of Virginia, became an attorney at D.C.'s Covington & Burling, and settled in to the life of a big-firm associate. At Covington, she focused on intellectual property and information technology issues, with the occasional pro bono project for a museum.

Even as a young lawyer, Cohen made time to visit galleries and started, in a modest way, to collect contemporary paintings and photography. "Art gives us a reprieve from the everyday routine," she observes. "It invites us to take a break from the all-consuming 'to do' list and step outside of ourselves."

During 2004, her last year at Covington, she began to think about how to make those two worlds of art and law converge. "It was a long time coming," she says.

SHARE THE PASSION

A friend, Sarah Finley, who is an art director at the contemporary art gallery Fusebox in the District, suggested that Cohen spend some time in the gallery, observing, greeting visitors, corresponding with artists, and getting a clearer sense of the art world. Although she didn't end up spending many hours in the gallery, Cohen began to develop a plan for a future that involved art.

"I needed to go out on my own," says Cohen. "I wanted to be closer to art and the people who make it."

She considered several paths into the art world. She thought

about teaching an art law seminar at George Washington University or starting a nonprofit art organization. She asked Covington if she could work part time.

But one day, a friend suggested to her that rather than spending a lot of time raising money for a nonprofit, she should play a bigger role. “If I were going to bring parties together, why not be part of that process?” Cohen says the friend asked.

So in the spring of 2004, Cohen left Covington, where she had worked since 1999, and opened her own firm. At the same time, she launched Sightline.

It’s an unusual niche she has found: Not many lawyers devote themselves full time to both art and intellectual property law this way. As far as she knows, Cohen is the only one in the D.C. area.

“I love working with creative individuals and companies,” she says.

THE OFFICE

Even Cohen’s office, at 1638 R St. N.W., mixes law and contemporary art. One tall bookcase is filled with volumes on law, and the other is filled with volumes on artists and art.

The office is small and white—white walls, white desk, cream-colored shelves—the better to show off the art. One wall holds a large splashy canvas by the New York artist called Reno, a painting that Cohen describes as a “cross between Picasso and Keith Haring.” A collection of smaller works on another wall includes a small framed swatch of saffron fabric from “The Gates,” the recent Christo exhibition in New York City’s Central Park.

They’re all for sale, Cohen mentions. “I’d like to act as a kind of dealer myself.”

Meanwhile she practices law and art, as the client requires. Starting the two businesses at the same time has helped Cohen to make connections in both the law and the arts, she says. Indeed, her legal connections helped to kick-start her art consulting.

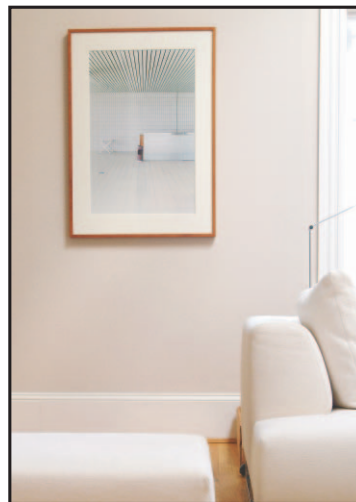
One art client, Philippa Hughes, was introduced to Cohen through a law school friend. Hughes was new to the city and was looking for some contemporary art to hang in her apartment. Cohen immediately narrowed their search to a couple of galleries.

“I told her what I liked, and she found it,” Hughes says. “Her skill is in that she really listens to what you are saying.” Hughes ended up buying a photograph that examines, in detailed close-up, the intricate patterns on a wall.

“One of my artists nicknamed her ‘the razor’ because she is so sharp and intelligent and enthusiastic,” says Annie Gawlak, director of the G Fine Art gallery in Washington.

Cohen agrees that her legal skills enhance her art instincts. “I know how to thoroughly research and analyze an issue, and then effectively persuade someone, without forcing them, to see the strength of my position.”

But she doesn’t just encourage people to enjoy and collect art; she’s also able to help them figure out what it is they actually want—to get from “art” to a particular artwork. “I know that you can learn a lot just by listening to your clients’ needs and concerns,” says Cohen.



ART HOUSE:

Allison Cohen’s D.C. apartment showcases her love of modern works, from photographs to an Andy Warhol silk screen titled “Flowers.”

PHOTOS BY ROBERTO WESTBROOK

The convergence of art and law has worked in the other direction, too, when art consulting has led her back to the legal world.

URBAN GEISHA

Iona Rozeal Brown is an artist living in Japan who shows some of her art at G Fine Art in Washington. She mixes cultures by painting geisha girls wearing styles associated with black urban culture—geisha girls with afros and dreadlocks listening to headphones. In 2004, Brown needed legal advice to work out a contract with a French liquor company that wanted her to do some painting.

Brown says, through an e-mail, “I was excited about the project and just started doing the preliminary sketches, then the company started to ask me for more work.” At that point, she began to have questions about her legal rights. “I was concerned about going forward without a contract, so I contacted Allison and she went right to it.”

Brown says that Cohen’s insight into the artistic process made the legal process go more smoothly.

“I try to avoid serious matters concerning money and the like—the business side if you will—and Allison understands this completely,” explains Brown. “Allison believes that the artist is [there] to create and she wants to help the artist by handling the legal/business side.”

Cohen often helps artists with contracts and copyrights. The mix of business and art that she sees every day is one of the things she enjoys most about her current career.

"I enjoy the fact that no two days are the same," Cohen says. "I like the diversity of the two businesses. I can take on the kind of legal work that I want and decide what artists I want to work with."

In addition to guiding art collectors and representing artists, Cohen also volunteers her services to Washington Area Lawyers for the Arts (WALA). In May, she led a WALA-sponsored workshop that focused on the legal issues surrounding art protection and promotion.

"We went over agreements that artists would be asked to enter into," in particular with art that appears on Internet sites, Cohen says. The main goal, she notes, was "to make sure they're not giving away more than they have to."

Cohen is also developing plans to work with Communities in Schools, a nonprofit organization new to the D.C. area that

connects volunteers in the community with public schools. Along with Elizabeth Spratt Cooper, who works as a business consultant for art organizations, Cohen wants to oversee mural projects with visiting artists, talk with the students about art, and donate art posters to the schools.

Another goal that drives Cohen's work is her desire to make modern art accessible to more people. She wants to bring art into people's lives. In her own D.C. apartment, she displays a painting that is not much more than a huge "color field" with squares along the bottom. Some of her friends say they don't "get" the painting.

"That's fine," says Cohen. "I want to live with something that keeps catching my eye and makes me question it."

Art, she says, calls for us to get personal: "To have a reaction, express an opinion, and, hopefully, in the process, learn just a bit about what makes each of us tick."

Trey Wydysh is a former intern at Legal Times.