

MIRA SCHOR

(cover)

AREA OF DENIAL

1991

oil on linen

16" x 20"

INTERVIEW

STUART HORODNER Your parents were both artists, making ornate religious objects, jewelry, etc. How did this impact on your ideas about making art, and how art functions?

MIRA SCHOR They both worked at home so I got to see people making art objects as a daily practice. I'm continually amazed at all the artists I know who became artists without having had the opportunity to watch art being made.

My parents transmitted two very different art traditions. My father, Ilya Schor, was initially trained as a goldsmith and engraver. His work passed on a Hasidic spirit, something very Other to modernism. His work, from silver and gold Torah crowns, mezuzahs, and jewelry to small gouache paintings of scenes from the shtetl, was figurative, playful, tender. My mother, Resia Schor, is a modernist of the School of Paris variety. She was a painter until my father died, then she continued his Judaica and jewelry practice and truly found herself in the craft media. Inasmuch as art movements are gender-coded, I got a crossed gender art message from them. My father's work—folkloric, figurative, narrative, Jewish, delicate, light in weight—carries a feminine code. My mother's work, abstract, muscularly sculptural although small in scale, heavy in weight—carries a masculine code.

SH You had the unique opportunity to know some of the European and N.Y. School painters in Provincetown during summers and in Manhattan. How did this contribute to your understanding of the art establishment?

MS It is true that I grew up in the art world. My mother took me to see silent movies many Saturdays at the Museum of Modern Art. Then we'd wander through the galleries. My father and Jack Tworok were close friends. Through Jack and his family, I got a first hand view of the New York School and had transmitted to me a particularly sensitive painterly touch in oil. I wish he'd lived to see me finally address oil paint. But by definition my parents were outsiders. I was exposed early to the prejudices and limitations

of the New York School, against craft, against narrative content, small scale, and unconventional or feminine materials. Some of the artists we knew, like Chaim Gross, were genuinely appreciative of artists' work. I'd say the more a part of mainstream modernism people were, the more exclusionary were their categories of art and non-art. I treasure the last time I saw Chaim. I exhibited one of my ear>penis>ear paintings in Ptown in 1989. Some old blowhard said to me, "Well, I'm shocked." And he was too pompous to be kidding. Chaim, old and feeble, summoned all his forces, shook his cane in the guy's face and said, "If Max Ernst did it you would like it." Then he took me aside and said, "You're really a surrealist, and don't let anyone stop you!"

So, it was a unique background, I was lucky! I also learned how many art worlds there were. I worked for Red Grooms and Mimi Gross, at their house met Yvonne Jacquette, Rudy Burckhardt, Edwin Denby, and George Kuchar, but also hung out in Pat Steir's studio, right across Mulberry Street. Graduate school at CalArts in the early 70s, including participation in the first feminist art program in the country, provided a vibrant and important experience.

SH How does writing influence your work?

MS I started to paint in oil around the same time I started to write, in the mid 80s: the process of editing, the potential for mutability, intrinsic to both, was synergistic. And both were more public activities than what I had been doing before. I was finally grappling with the major mainstream material of painting and breaking out from the position of silent victim in the art world. My essays research the same concerns as my paintings. I'm proudest of "Figure/Ground" which juxtaposes a particular critique of painting with certain feminist texts to reveal some of the gut fears (literally) behind that critique. I think "Patrilineage" is a useful text, pointing to a mechanism in art history that routinely erases women. "Representations of the Penis" is fun. And I'm still glad I had the nerve to write "Appropriated Sexuality," about David Salle's depiction of women, with no effort at journalistic evenhandedness. I recently found out he had at last seen it. It was like shooting a gun, and having the bullet arrive at its target 7 years later. I'm concerned that some painters embrace my written defenses of painting as permissions to retreat into formalism and craft without realizing how much I think painting must operate at the intersection of the richness of its past and its materiality with the critique of painting, the challenge of the real. My own work wouldn't be what it is if I had just stuck with all the art that I love, it owes as much to all that seemed anathema to painting and to love of visual art.

SH Where does the phrase "Area of Denial" come from and how do you see it functioning in your recent works? Politics, sexuality?

MS I heard the term on a Nightline expose two years ago on the US's preGulf War arms trading with Iraq: we sold them "area of denial" weapons, bombs which explode above ground, denying oxygen to life in the area below the explosion. I wrote it down and said "Thank You!" Because so many things are an area of denial: the body, its contingency and mortality, and the body of painting itself.

The last group of "area of denial" paintings multiplies each section by four: a a a a, rea rea rea rea, of of of of, denial denial denial denial. Someone said to me it was like stuttering, another person pointed to the eroticism of the endless deferral of pleasure and closure. By the time you get to the end ... you have to start all over.

SH You've used text in your paintings for years, the early dress shaped paper pieces with their invitation to intimate reading ...moving to a current strategy of fragmentation and enunciation of phrases. How do you see narrative structures functioning in your paintings?

MS I'm interested in the visual appearance of text, once it was my own handwriting, recently it is the actual look of theory language, all those interventions for multiple linguistic readings of a word. And I'm interested in narrative, although not storytelling per se. I've always been drawn to creating large works through accretions of small modules, like the pages of books or frames of film. The "story" at first was autobiographical and the text my barely legible handwriting, sometimes just as a sign for inner thought. Now the style of writing is less personal and the text appropriated from the news media with a political or art historical focus. But still always working on a, forgive the language, meta-narrative of female subjectivity. And how it's painted is just as important as what is spelled out.

SH How does your of painting what you paint orchestrate the range in the work, from clarity of image and text to suggestive drama and mystery?

MS Part of the effect of my work may come from the medievalist's attention to painterly surface I bring to even the roughest and goriest work. No one seemed to want to look at paintings of penises, for instance, but if the painting quality is seductively delicate and detailed you are, I hope, trapped onto the surface long enough to have to deal with the image. I can be ironic about constructions of sexuality, but it's impossible for me to be ironic with the act of painting itself. Your question "calls for a conclusion on the part of the witness," so, speaking with hesitation, I think perhaps there's an undercurrent of loss in

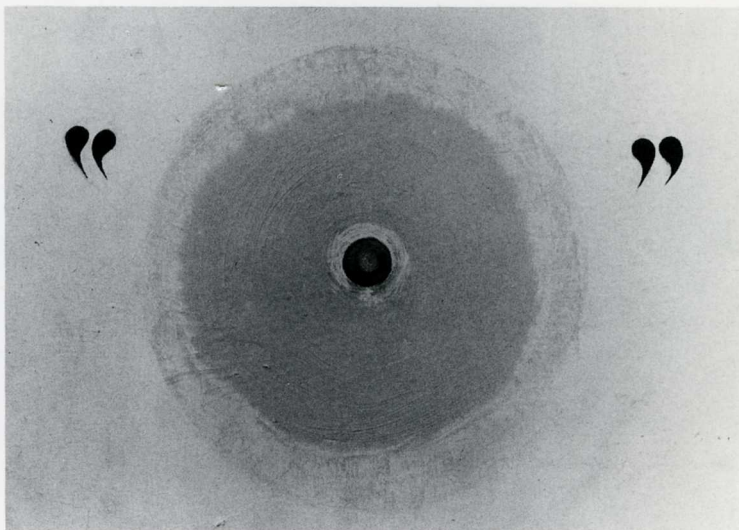
my work, it exists as a razor's edge between loss and presence, or sorrow and joy. It is why I paint.

SH How language is painted creates the direction for how to read the components, giving language a body. Can you talk about this relationship?

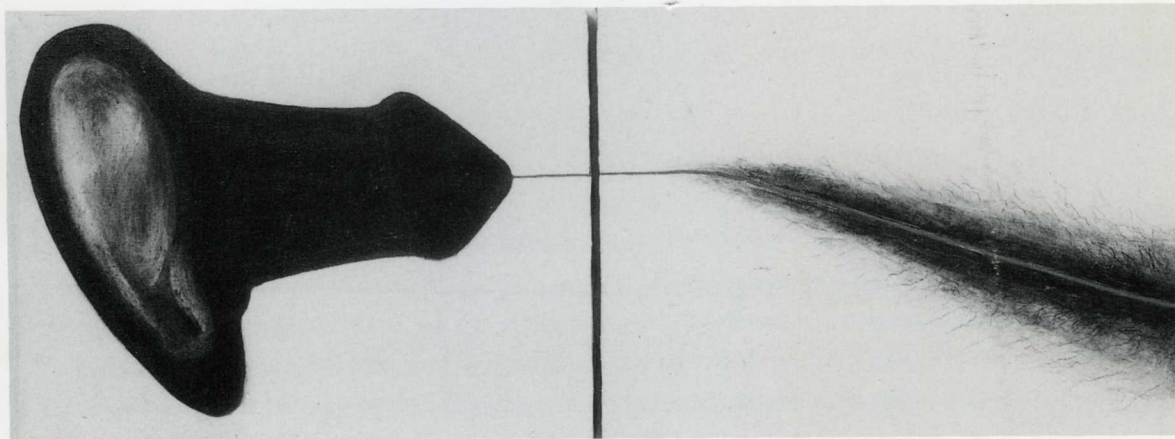
MS Maybe I can move towards an answer by talking about some recent works, all of which deploy language. I started War Frieze right after the Gulf War. I wanted to make an endless painting, about completely circular militarism and aggressivity. It is a continuation of works in which I represented the transmission of power in society through the transmission of fluids from sexual body part to body part. In War Frieze the fluids became discursive script: sometimes the language, spelling out "area of denial," or "undue burden" (from the wording of the Supreme Court's Webster ruling on abortion limits) is blood streaming through scraped flesh, or milk streaking across barely stained linen. Paint is body-like anyway, it can be meaty or fluid, it imparts these bodily traits to the language. War Frieze is a work in progress which has evolved into nearly 200' of discrete segments of from 1'x8' to 1'x25'. One segment, Pub(l)ic hair, speaks to the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings and Duchamp's Fountain. Another spells out "It's Modernism, Stupid," inspired by the Clinton campaign motto, "It's the economy, stupid." My favorite panel is the red comma. It looks very graphic on a slide, but is in fact very painterly. That led to painting incarnated punctuation marks: cunts, breasts, and penises framed by quote marks; red commas and semicolons set into pubic hair, embedded in flesh. Gender positions, no matter how gory their physicality, are put into question by the quotation marks. Markers of printed language are sexualized, and text, which had been so dominant over visuality in feminist theory and art in the 80s, is presented for its visual seductivity and bodily contingency.

SH How do you think painting can function as a hand made thing at the end of the 20th century?

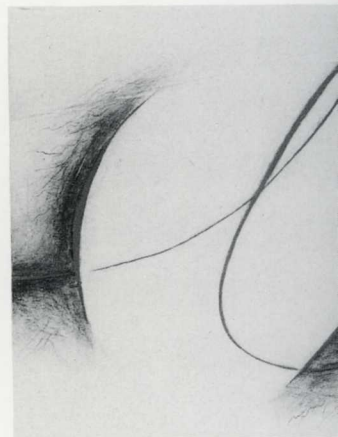
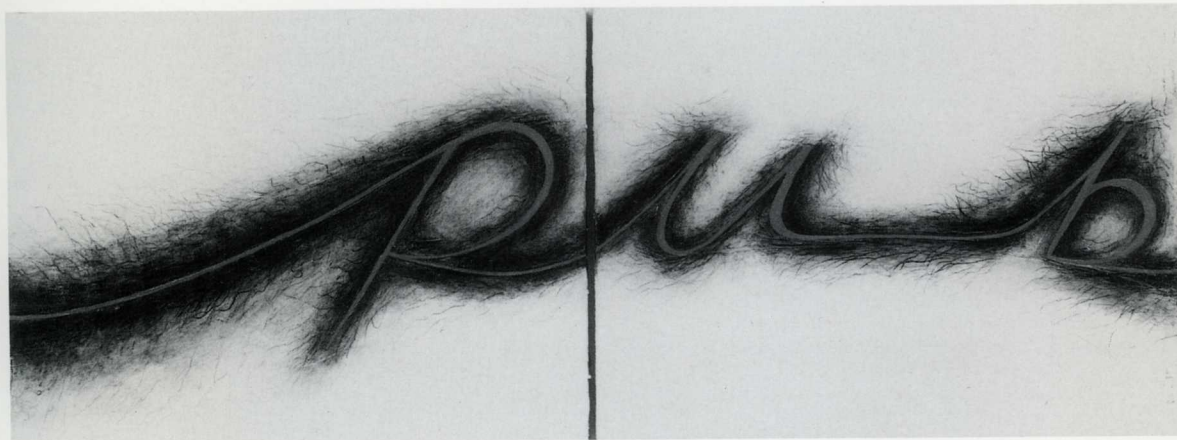
MS I don't care, or, rather, I can't care. It happens that painting is the place in which I can best bring together my visual, sensual, emotional, and intellectual concerns. I also feel that every single art discipline has a history dominated by the points of view of men. So there's a lot of room for work by women artists in all the "old" media of literature, architecture, film, as well as painting and sculpture, whose male practitioners and advocates often went out of their way to condemn and exclude any female creativity other than procreativity. What is erotic to women's eyes? What do women perceive as important? What do we chose to critique?

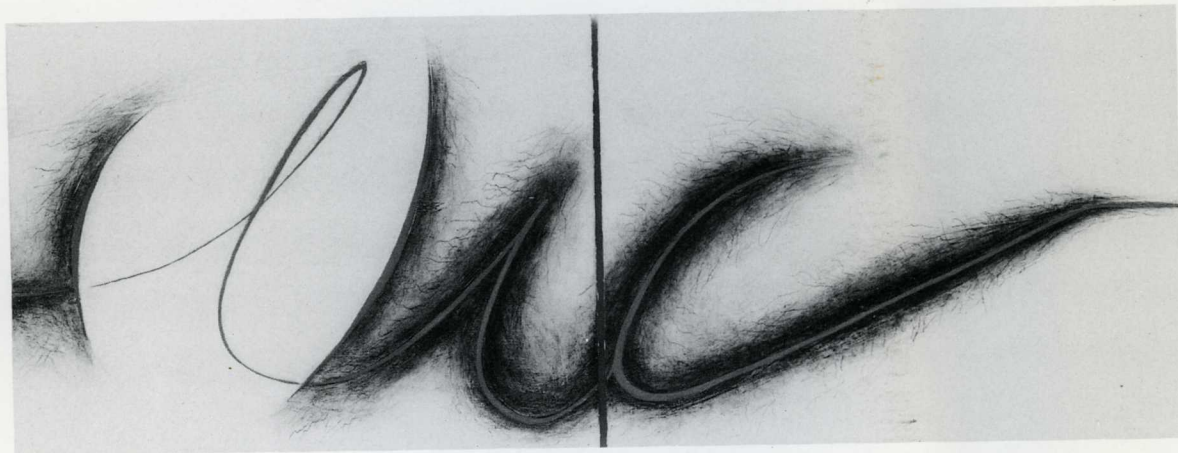
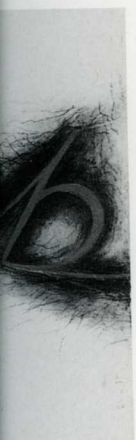


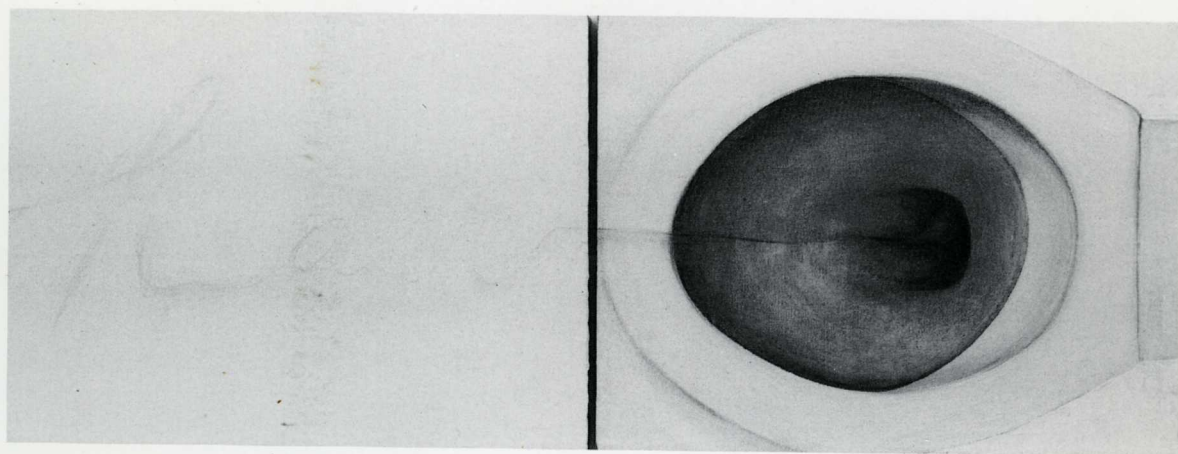
"BREAST"
1993
oil on linen
12" x 16"



Pub(lic) Hair
1992
segment of *War Frieze*
oil on linen
12" x 128"







Mira Schor lives and works in New York City. Since 1986, she is the coeditor, with Susan Bee, of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*®, a journal of contemporary art. She was a participant in the Womanhouse project of the Feminist Art Program at CalArts where she received her MFA. She currently teaches at Sarah Lawrence College and the Parsons School of Design and writes and lectures frequently on theories of painting and on gender issues in visual art, including essays on Ida Applebroog, and the Guerrilla Girls, in *Artforum*; also essays and statements in *Parkett*, *Tema Celeste*, *Art Journal*, *Heresies*, and *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*. She has exhibited her work at the Edward Thorp Gallery, P.S.1 Museum, the Jersey City Museum, Hunter College Art Galleries, P.S.122, Franklin Furnace, Provincetown Art Association and Museum, and Ovsey Gallery in Los Angeles. She is the recipient of a 1985 NEA grant in painting, a 1992 Guggenheim Fellowship in Painting, and a 1992 Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation "Space Program" grant.

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