

Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture

by Mira Schor

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I get a little wary when artists describe their work as “poetically intended.” Meaning that it is unfinished, inconclusive, a springboard for viewer interpretation. While this is awfully generous, I always try to hold my own impressions at bay for a moment so that the artist’s individual choices, aesthetic, being, might reach me with integrity intact.

Funny then that I just can’t help but instantly absorb Mira Schor’s *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* as though it were a poem. From the moment I saw its cover—the “V” of half the “W” in “Wet” cradling a key detail from Schor’s painting “Slit of Paint,” (that detail being a thickly brushed vulval slit framing a semi-colon)—I’ve found myself drifting off into emotional reveries on what this book means to me, my friends, and to our past and future. Not a typical reaction to reading theory. Just carrying the book around in public, reading it on subways, in coffee shops, I’m constantly aware of my own hesitance or boldness, depending on whether I try to conceal its in-your-face cover. But because Schor is an artist, teacher, and critic, and not, to my knowledge, a poet, I’ll restrain my personal musings for awhile and try to do justice to one very powerful, and fair-minded collection.

In 20 essays divided into four primary sections—"Masculinity," "Femininity and Feminism," "Teaching," and "Painting"—Schor manages to mesh and unravel the prevailing issues of art and feminist history and theory arisen over the last decade with absolute authority. (Much of the writing was published first in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, a journal co-founded by Schor in 1986.) She studied art history as an undergraduate, and spent a year in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts, from which she received her M.F.A. in 1973. Beyond these academic influences, Schor lists the ingredients in her writings this way: "The recipe could read as follows: mix Hasidic Eastern European ancestors, European artist parents, a French education, New York School of painting family friends, add a splash of H.W. Janson, stir in a shot of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, a cup of conceptual art, simmer, and, before serving, pepper with critical theory."

There are several kinds of artists who write. There are those, like Bruce Naumann and Jenny Holzer, who use words as elements in their art, like a brushstroke or a slab of steel. There is Robert Motherwell, who wrote brilliantly on abstract expressionism during its misunderstood infancy, and on many subjects throughout his life, yet who maintained, "I loathe the act of writing," and asserted that painting was his separate and vehemently preferred calling. And then there is Schor, who fuses the artist with her writing and the writer with her art. Two years ago she exhibited at Bangs Street Gallery in Provincetown a series of canvases with painted words threaded across the surface, entwining language and paint.

With so much experiential cushioning beneath her, Schor walks many lines securely—balancing formalism and feminism, theory and practice, public advocacy and private artistry—and finds ways to honor and integrate opposites, without ever getting wishy-washy. Take her argument in "Appropriated Sexuality" (1986), a full-steam bash of not just the misogyny in David Salle's paintings of faceless women penetrated by phallic forms, but also of (male) art critics' wholesale refusal to address the artist's dominant preoccupation. As Schor explains, Salle's work "is discussed in terms of art-historical references to chiaroscuro, Leonardo, modernism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, Goya and Jasper Johns, Derrida and Lacan—you name it, anything but the obvious." Schor delineates the reasons for this neglect, and, best of all, exposes the cowardice that makes people hide the truth. She lays out so considered an analysis of the motivations behind Salle's abusive images that by the end, her identifying Salle as "an impotent sadist" seems perfectly just. Name-calling may not be in all kindness, but it's convincingly in all fairness here.

While taking on heavy subjects like the "phallosensical homologue on Western civilization," Schor rarely weighs us down with exces-

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as a wonderfully literal and comedic task—locating and characterizing a full, historic range of images of the male member. The drive to inventory continues in “From Liberation to Lack” (1987), in which Schor lists 20-odd feminist and art historical texts on her shelves. They run the gamut from *Our Bodies Ourselves* to *The Second Sex* to *Sexual/Textual Politics*. Schor does this, she explains, “not to boast of erudition but to illustrate the feminist dilemma, which is that all of these books remain relevant.”

Having illuminated three phases in the development of feminism: the women’s liberation movement, radical feminism, and the most recent position, based in French feminist theory, which places men and women on not just different physical, but different metaphysical planes, Schor continues (and I must quote at length because this is the very passage that has been gnawing at me for three months now): “Feminism has little institutional memory, there has been no collective absorption of early achievements and ideas, and therefore feminism cannot yet afford the luxury of storage. Teaching young women to paint, I have found that every young woman who feels in herself the inchoate desire to do something, say something about her life, must begin at the same beginning, or very close to it, that my sisters and I did 17 years ago.”

God, did this get me! It got me doubting my previously sturdy determination to live as though that nagging patriarchy thing can’t touch me, a way of life I convinced myself had been made possible by the “sisters,” now 27 years ago. It got me into three-hour phone conversations

in my first year of college when, as I walked through the dining hall, a male friend reached out and pinched my ass and the entire table broke into hysterical laughter. This was, perhaps miraculously, a first, and I felt my cheeks fill hot and red. I ran to my room, cried for hours, then called my mother, who calmed me with her half-in-jest theory that scientists need look no further because in fact it’s men who are the “missing link.” Having never endured a birds and bees chat, I often count this lesson as my induction into womanhood.

Upon reading *Wet*, it occurred to me, not for the first time, but with the most clarity, that I owe to myself and to others more than 24 hours of phase two. Phase one could also use some attention. I have a friend my age who has pinned to her bathroom wall a few little feminist poems with titles like “How to be a Woman in a Man’s World.” When a mutual friend commented, “Isn’t that, like, kind of over?,” I agreed for the moment, finding such sentiments naive, and not wanting to admit that these concerns remain relevant. And as far as phase three goes, I guess I might someday buckle down and dig in to French psychoanalytic and linguistic theory, not for the fun of it, but because it is part of the history, part of the process in actively pursuing the “inchoate desire to do something, say something about [my] life.”

A particularly valuable aspect of Schor’s collection is that it traces her own three phases as a writer, which she identifies as progressing from “pre-theory, to theory, to post-theory.” She explains in the preface that in preparing her essays for publication she debated over the question: “Does one leave the original writings intact as historical artifacts?” Thankfully she answered yes, and did not reconsider and update her ideas. This way we get ruminations on Ana Mendieta’s art just after her death, not a decade later when so much has been written and said about an icon of feminist art history. We also get a recorded history of the Guerilla Girls, beginning with their formation and first injections into New York’s boy-run art world in 1985. And later, we find a 1995 essay, “Painting as Manual,” which considers the so-called death of painting in the light (or shadow) of computerized virtual reality.

Schor presents history—of feminism and of art—so truthfully, with so much of its original integrity still intact, and with so little agenda interference that it can behave like poetry. It is evocative not because it’s open-ended, but because, unlike much writing on complex issues, which tends to get skewed and even manipulative, you can trust it, and listen to it, and learn where it leads you.

—JENNIFER LIESE

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