

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 hesitation 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 *ME/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-

