

# A Mind in a Body in a Landscape

## THE ART AND LIFE OF MIRA SCHOR

BY NAOMI FRY



SEVERAL YEARS AGO, the Fine Arts Department at Parsons The New School for Design invited faculty and students to begin the school year with a small introductory self-portrait. Mira Schor, who has been teaching at the school since the late 1980s, used her contribution to this project to make sure her students understood, as she later wryly told me, that they were “not the only thing on my plate.” Schor’s multiple preoccupations and responsibilities are depicted as cartoon thought balloons, so crowded they seem near popping as they hover over her faintly smiling, bespectacled face. Prosaic drudgeries (“laundry”) are presented alongside familial responsibilities (“94 year old mother”), more lighthearted leisure pursuits (“food”; “Mets”), professorial duties (“Parsons MFA”), and intellectual obligations (“other lectures etc....”), suggesting in toto that a woman’s work really *is* never done.

Schor's depiction is clearly anti-spectacular in its stress on the workaday quality of an artist's existence, and palpably democratic. The balloons, both in size and placement, seem at first glance interchangeable, and their arrangement non-hierarchical. This may owe a debt to Schor's longtime refusal, as a feminist critical thinker, to privilege the so-called central over the marginal. Moreover, in this self-portrait Schor introduces us to the extraordinary scope of her work, as a painter, writer, editor, and educator. As she told me when we first met, she finds this self-portrait so much more representative than many more conventional photos that she has ended up using it as her public avatar, most recently on Facebook.

An attractive woman whose vividly framed reading glasses are perennially perched atop her short, spiky hairdo, Schor can appear by turns tart and warm, anxious and assured, reflecting the complex combination of self-effacement and directness, irony and honesty that characterizes her work. As we spoke over tea and cookies in her downtown loft, moving between what I sensed were the space's two symbolic hearths—the open kitchen, adorned with colorful Mexican ceramics, and Schor's large desktop Mac—the scope of her career and the unique position she has held in the art world began coming into sharper focus. Schor, I learned, not only is both a painter and a writer—a hybrid stance that, as she's written, often makes people suspicious (“what *is* she, really?”)—but has also often taken up a role that most aren't in any hurry to fill: that of the person who speaks truth to power. This, I found, has been for Schor an almost unavoidable ethical reaction. Over the course of her career, she hasn't shied away from expressing her deeply felt political convictions, has openly criticized those who she felt abuse their positions of authority or influence, and has consistently worked to subvert the sort of self-congratulatory, cautious-to-a-fault stances that often characterize the contemporary art world.

But despite the art world adversaries that the bold expression of her opinions has earned her, it should be emphasized that Schor is no silenced, marginal figure. As an editor, she was for many years, along with the painter Susan Bee, the cofounder and coeditor of the highly respected art critical journal *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*. As a writer, she is the author of two collections of essays, both published by Duke University Press—the first, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture*, has been in print ever since its initial publication in 1997, and is consistently assigned to painting and criticism syllabi across the country, while the second, *A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics, and Daily Life*, published in 2009, has already been receiving laudatory reviews. She is also the editor of two volumes, most recently *The Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworkov*, published by Yale University Press. She is a recipient of the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award in art criticism and, just this past year, a Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. As a painter, despite her chronic overextendedness, she has consistently produced an inventive and accomplished body of work, for which she has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, and which has been shown, among many other venues, at P.S.1 Museum, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and most recently in a well-received show at Momenta gallery in Brooklyn. This spring saw the launch of her blog about art and culture, “A Year of Positive Thinking,” ([ayearofpositivethinking.com](http://ayearofpositivethinking.com)), and in fall 2010, she will have her first solo show in Los Angeles at CB1 Gallery.

This is an especially good moment, then, to take stock of Schor's work—to reaffirm the recognition she has received, and to puzzle out whatever misconceptions it has inspired. This puzzling out, however, should hopefully serve to *clarify* the dilemmas that animate Schor's oeuvre, rather than erase them: this because Schor's interest in and insistence upon retaining a tension between positions that could seem (and *have* seemed, for many other artists and thinkers) to reside on opposite sides of various spectra, has played a broad generative role in her body of work. By challenging—if not necessarily completely collapsing—the binaries between the



SHOE, MARCH 5, 1972, GOUACHE ON PAPER, c. 7.25 BY 9 INCHES

essential and the constructed, the corporeal and the intellectual, the familial and the personal, craft and art, the native and the foreign, the painterly and the political, Schor has created a deeply original dialect, which, whatever its variable manifestations over the course of her career, has always retained the distinctive beauty of that which rejects comfortable resolution.



*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.*

— from the Introduction of *Wet*

SCHOR WAS BORN in 1950 to Resia and Ilya Schor, Jewish-Polish artists who in 1941 fled from Hitler's Europe to the United States. Although both Schor and her older sister, Naomi, were born in America, the household they grew up in retained a multilingual, cosmopolitan air, influenced not only by the family's immersion and interest in Western European culture



THE TWO MIRAS, 1973, GOUACHE ON PAPER, 22 BY 30 INCHES



POSTCARD, 1976, INK, DRY PIGMENT AND MEDIA ON RICE PAPER, C. 5.5 BY 6.5 INCHES

(Resia and Ilya had lived in Paris before arriving in New York; Naomi and Mira were both educated at Manhattan’s Lycée Français), but also by its strong Eastern European roots. Ilya Schor was a painter and sculptor, but, most recognizably, a jeweler and Judaica artist, and his delicate, gorgeous pieces, made mostly in silver and gold, represented the humble lifestyle and manner of the shtetl both literally and figuratively. Literally, by having his work feature everyday Hasidic village existence and interactions; figuratively, in the choice of medium and genre: representational, small-scale craft rather than abstract, large-scale Art. His artist’s stamp—a small, lightly sketched bird—signaled this essential modesty.

Resia Schor was also an artist—a painter; but after Ilya’s death in 1961, in order to keep the family afloat financially, she picked up the tools of his trade and found in his materials the medium that truly challenged and engaged her talents. In contrast to her husband’s work, Resia’s jewelry and Judaica pieces were bolder and heavier, more abstract and muscular, suggesting not only the disparity of styles available within the language of a supposedly minor art form, but also what Schor herself has identified as a curious gender reversal among her parents’ aesthetic sensibilities.

Family history is arguably significant to look at vis-à-vis any artist’s work, but in Schor’s case, it’s crucial. To gain an initial understanding of this artist’s own aesthetic sensibility, one might find much of its beginnings in the early breeding ground described above. The parents’ work laid the foundation for the daughter’s own work’s negotiation between ambition and modesty, small scale and monumentality, and, of course, its engagement with a feminist model, as well its belief in the importance of a daily art practice as a redeeming force. Ilya Schor’s nimble dance between craftsmanship and art, and his insistence that material labor need not be divorced from attention to the human element; Resia Schor’s quietly heroic plight as a woman who by necessity was able to alchemically turn art into work, transforming the tragedy of widowhood into a fiercely independent and engaged art practice; and, perhaps most of all, simply the lesson that art and life are not mutually exclusive but can exist and even flourish, side by side, in a cramped, residential Upper West Side apartment, in circumstances that pose a corrective to artistic grandiosity—all of these shaped Schor’s outlook as an artist in critical ways.

A case in point is Schor’s “shoe” series—painted in 1972, in her first year as an MFA candidate at CalArts. Shocking pink or red or lavender, bow-tied or dotted, open-toed or pointy, the ladies’ shoes in Schor’s gouache on paper paintings initially seem to arrive from the minor sphere of the fashion sketch, not unlike Warhol’s commercial illustrations of the 1950s. Indeed, this practical starting point is never completely rejected. These accoutrements

of femininity are treated lovingly and with attention not despite but because of their supposedly marginal design associations. Cut off at the ankle, the feet Schor paints stand handsomely, as busts on pedestals—the stepped-on now stepping up—and the vibrant flatness of the artist’s gouache renders them festive, while also according them a certain bold-lined gravitas.

But though the influence of Schor’s early environment is clear here (indeed, we can almost literally see the trace of Ilya Schor’s hand, as the daughter’s signature is accompanied in this early series by her late father’s bird emblem), this is not the only context through which we should view even these very early works. Rather, the strand that begins to emerge here, and that will go on to make an appearance in one form or another throughout Schor’s entire oeuvre, is her desire, as she wrote in *Wet*, “to bring my experience of living inside a female body—with a mind—into high art in as intact a form as possible.” This feminist agenda was influenced by the general 1970s zeitgeist of second-wave American feminism and, more specifically, by the influence of her sister, Naomi Schor, a brilliant scholar and feminist theorist, and by her formative year at the Feminist Art Program at CalArts, helmed by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro.

After receiving a bachelor’s degree in art history at New York University, Schor decided to pursue her art practice more fully at CalArts. With the encouragement of Naomi Schor’s close friend Sheila Levrant de Brette-

ville, who was then creating a feminist design program at CalArts, she joined Chicago’s and Schapiro’s Feminist Art Program, which stressed the exploration of embodied female experience, consciousness-raising in a communal context, and the rethinking of traditional educational authority structures. Schor took part in the germinal 1972 *Womanhouse* exhibition, in which the members of the feminist program took over a dilapidated house in Hollywood, where they organized an installation and performance-heavy show of their work (Schor was one of the very few painters to contribute to the project—as she explained in *Negative Thinking*, feminist art making has tended to disregard most painting, as it “had a degree of inherent abstraction that made it less useful than the real in the elaboration of a political thematic”). She then remained in the program for the duration of her first year at CalArts. During that period, she began investigating in earnest what it means to be a woman making art—both personally and politically.

At CalArts in 1972–73, Schor worked on what she called “Story Paintings”—figurative small-scale works done in gouache on paper—which depicted intimate, colorful, and often dream-like narratives in which she herself served as the protagonist. Combining the flatness of early Renaissance paintings, the haunting quality of Surrealist aesthetics, and the vividness of Rajput miniatures, Schor represented stages in her sexual, psychological, and artistic development as a way to observe female subjectivity, both concretely and symbolically. In *The Two Miras* (1973), the artist is pictured twice—once with her back turned to the spectator, and once, bare-breasted, facing front. Framed by engorged desert plants, reminiscent of the California sandy landscape as much as of *Little Shop of Horrors*-like flora, the doubled Schor is herself an ambiguous figure: both retiring and blunt, a body and an idea, a material and a metaphor, an external “front” and a concealed “back,” not one of which is necessarily privileged over the other.

These early works can be seen as mounting a feminist critique of patriarchal power, in terms of both content and form. The embodied feminine is thrust unapologetically to the forefront, and, what’s more, this is done in a method and format that quietly but pointedly negate the forcefully male-sanctioned AbEx technique of oil on large-scale canvas. Additionally, the insertion of a woman’s own personal story into public discourse—deeming it worth representing by the woman herself, as both author and model—is an approach that was not just advanced generally in early 1970s feminist politics, but also lay more specifically at the core of the feminist program itself.

The fact that Schor had created most of these feminist paintings after she had left Schapiro and Chicago’s program speaks not only to her enduring belief in its ideals, but also to her ultimate independence from its more

constricting aspects. Significantly, despite her (then burgeoning, now long-standing) commitment to feminist thought and praxis, Schor's eventual resistance to fall in completely with the ethos of this program is another essential point to consider when assessing her trajectory as artist and thinker. Schor decided to leave the program at the end of her first year at CalArts, feeling that the negative effects of its insular stance as well as the aggressive personality clashes within it were outweighing the considerable benefits it offered. In a 1972 letter to her sister, Naomi, which she excerpts in her essay "Miss Elizabeth Bennet Goes to Feminist Boot Camp," Schor describes a tense encounter with Chicago:

I told her that I was allergic to her and she told me that she felt pretty much the same way about me. . . . She believes that she has had the single vision of a liberated woman artist and we must trust her with our lives for the next few months and she will lead us to the Promised Land. I told her that I thought she was using [us] as tools to create her vision and was very upset when we tried anything on our own. She didn't like that too much.

Besides the almost comical directness of the student in this exchange with her teacher—a frankness that will come to characterize Schor's writing later on—what is important to note here is her insistence on her right to occupy an ambivalent, multifaceted stance as an artist as well as a woman. She is, indeed, "two Miras," if not three or four or five, refusing to consent to any "molding," as she calls it in the same letter, through "violent methods." Indeed, this contention that there is not one but multiple ways to attain the "promised land"—that is, that a woman's subjectivity is a complex, variable thing—may itself stand at the core of feminism's demand for a recognition of that very subjectivity.

In 1974, back in New York, Schor developed her preoccupation with this issue further in her "empty dress" series. Once more using her interest in women's fashion as a starting point, Schor began following the logic of form more radically than she had before. Rejecting the figure/ground template of traditional painting, she reduced the dress to its abstract, bare-bones shape, using gouache on paper, tearing away the ground to reach the desired result. Schor was among the earliest artists to work on the image of the dress as an emblem of femininity, along with artists including Judith



Shea, Maureen Connor, and Mimi Smith, as well as Nancy Youdelman and Faith Wilding, who were also in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts. All of these women were seeking to create specifically feminist artwork that would speak to the experience of being a woman in society. In the case of Schor's empty dresses, the category of "woman" is defined by her encasing, the purportedly essentializing outline of her clothing. The very emptiness of this figure is what allows for multiplicity, both politically and aesthetically. In the "empty dress" works, we can see Schor first taking up fully her lifelong concern with art as an arena in which content colludes with form. Schor's dresses recall political content extrinsic to art, yes; but they do so through formal, aesthetic cues beginning with the artist's hand ripping away and thus authoring the ground of the painting, making it synonymous with the woman's figure.

Later that year, Schor was hired to teach at Nova Scotia College of Art & Design in Halifax, Nova Scotia, then, along with CalArts, one of the most advanced art schools in North America. Schor was again a feminist pioneer: in her early twenties, she was the only woman on a fourteen-man fine arts faculty.

The school was notable for its strong early commitment to conceptual art. Here she had a chance to develop the vocabulary of her work even further and incorporate aspects of conceptual art-making into her feminist-inspired dress works. For the first time employing the technique of applying dry pigment and ink on both sides of fragile rice paper, she began to work on a series of "fans," in which she refined the abstract V shape that had defined the general shape of the empty dresses. Those were also the first works in which Schor began to use language in the form of her handwriting as image, and this, of course, had political implications: as Hélène Cixous has famously written of the notion of *écriture féminine*, "Woman must write herself. . . woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement." But it also has aesthetic ones: the fan's V shape signals at motion and transcendence, the double-sidedness of the paper signals at the metaphorical multiplicity of that which is represented, while the writing, in Schor's own words, is "elegantly indecipherable." Its rendering on both sides of the paper, which is then folded up to resemble a lady's fan, emphasizes its formal qualities—language as purely graphic, rather than a specific meaning imparting medium.

Language passes through the hand and so the body, but it is also an intellectual rather than a merely atavistic endeavor. Even if incommunicable, or not readily reducible to a single thing, a woman is full of—in fact overflowing with—thoughts. In *Book of Pages* (1976), Schor took on a major—though, importantly, fragmented rather than large-scale—project. Working on a series of rice paper sheets, employing ink, pigment, and paint on both sides of each notebook-sized page, Schor then layered these one on top of the other. The marks on one page often embossed or transferred onto another, making the sheets both separable and yet part of a whole. Throughout this accrual, the writing is sometimes legible, but often not. The fact that the whole project is comprised of letters to a resistant lover—a male muse—both matters and doesn't. To borrow Barthes's terms from the field of photography, it might be important to consider this piece's studium—an unrequited love affair—but it's even more significant to pay attention to the punctum—the actual mark on the page, made by a hand, at a certain point in time, ready to be reanimated and considered by a spectator's gaze.

As in *The Two Miras*, the depth and fullness of a woman's psychology is represented here—but this time, more formally and conceptually. In *Book of Pages*, as well as in stand-alone postcards Schor worked on over the same time period, doubleness is once again used to productive effect: pigment, ink, and paint coming from one side often highlight or erase a word written on the other, creating, say, a white halo or blotting out selectively in cobalt, violet, and crimson, and so pressing further on language's synaesthetic flow into abstraction. Increasingly, the half-legible language of dreams is used, as well as snippets of family history. On one *Book of Pages* sheet, Schor jotted down a comparative table, standing for two emblematic sides of her



TOP: TEN MASKS, #9 (FRONT), JULY 13, 1977, INK AND JAPAN GOLD SIZE ON RICE PAPER, 14 BY 7.5 INCHES; ABOVE: BOOK OF PAGES: "PORTUGAL AND AUSCHWITZ," 1976, MIXED MEDIA ON RICE PAPER, C.12 BY 20 BY 1 INCHES



RED HALF, 1981, DRY PIGMENT AND MEDIUM ON RICE PAPER, 14.75 BY 26.25 INCHES  
COURTESY CARNEGIE ART MUSEUM COLLECTION, CITY OF OXNARD, GIFT OF THE LANNAN FOUNDATION

personality: on one side the lusty, life-loving “Portugal”; on the other the fearsome, paranoid “Auschwitz”—referencing a link to her parents’ journey from occupied Paris to the vibrant, free Portugal en route to America. In another postcard (reiterated the same year in *Book of Pages*) a shore (a clear homophone of “Schor”) is sketched as part of a dreamscape, with a ferry approaching Provincetown harbor. But, as it often does in dreams, this idyllic scene comes to an abrupt and ominous end, as Auschwitz once again disrupts Portugal: “Then suddenly came a storm and maybe disaster.”

In the late 1970s, Schor began working on the “dress books,” another major group of pieces in which the figure of the empty dress was melded to the V-shape of the fan, and took on the layered function of her books. In this series, sheets of rice paper—made translucent and then painted on from both sides with pigment and pastel—were attached in open-ended layers to make a life-sized book in the shape of a woman’s dress. Marrying the dress with her interest in writing, legibility, and reception, Schor created works that were fragile in their materiality, but also, somehow, aggressive in their fragility. The viewer could approach them (and they were installed to tally with a male viewer’s average height), but he couldn’t touch them (too delicate!) and he certainly couldn’t completely understand them (too illegible!). These ciphers certainly meant something—they were saying so much, after all—but what, exactly?

This question was developed but not completely answered (or rather, developed by not being completely answered) in Schor’s “mask” series from 1977. In multiple rice paper “heads”—hovering somewhere between Marie Antoinette ballroom accessories, tribal costumes, and Halloween garb—Schor was playful and experimental, coming at the task once again from both sides. Sometimes the masks had open mouths, and sometimes no mouths at all. Often they looked as if they’d been burned, or patched, or collaged in layers; they wore glasses, or frazzled paper “hair”; sometimes their hollowed-out eyes were ringed with kohl-like ink; often they had cursive writing lining their flatness. Sometimes they opened up into perspectival depth, bearing architectural elements—Piranesi-like staircases leading to invariably shut doors. Schor has admitted in conversation that for a long while, she felt a bit embarrassed by this body of work—by its possibly clichéd and primitivist associations. Only now, she says, has she

come to appreciate it as an important precursor to her recent work, in which a mask finally meets the dress—in which the head finally meets the body.



I BEGAN this essay by calling Schor a New York artist, and this is certainly accurate. Born and bred on the Upper West Side, Schor has lived in the same lower Manhattan loft since the late 1970s. But Schor is also a Provincetown artist. She first came to Provincetown with her parents when she was seven years old. The Schors had tried some of the other summer art colonies in the Northeast, Rockport and Woodstock, where they were friendly with Philip Guston and his family, but finally took to Provincetown, where they enjoyed friendships with many people, including the families of Jack Tworkov and of Chaim Gross. Schor fell in love with the place, the landscape of the bay and the ocean, a passion that has grown into a major part of her life, over the course of the summers she spent there, first as

a child, with her parents and sister, and later with her mother and sometimes her sister in the house in the East End that Resia Schor bought in 1969. Resia worked in a small space downstairs, while Mira worked upstairs; Naomi, and then later Mira, wrote at a desk with a view of the bay. The summer of 2010 will mark Schor’s fortieth summer in her beloved house on Anthony Street.

Provincetown has had an effect on Schor’s work and perspective from the very first, not only as another early example of a space where artistic endeavors could exist alongside everyday life, but also because of the passionate attachment Schor has for its ravishing natural world. Indeed, in the early 1980s, Schor turned explicitly to that landscape in her work. Her preoccupation with the figure became more overtly a preoccupation with the figure in landscape, and in a series of paintings—done in gouache and pigment, once again on both sides of rice paper—the colors, outlines, and textures of Provincetown’s physical environment came to the forefront. Schor herself speaks of this period as a “seduction”—away from more explicit political commitments and toward a closer conversation not only with landscape as such, but also with the tradition of American landscape painting, represented by artists such as Marsden Hartley and Arthur Dove. Yet in Schor’s oeuvre, the engagement with the body and with material—even when unaccompanied by a linguistic component—is always in itself political.

By this I mean that the centrality of the powerful female body within landscape, even if abstract, could certainly be taken as a feminist statement. In works such as *Red Half* (1981) or *Two Suns* (1986), Schor uses the template of a skate egg—a pod-like sac found littering the Provincetown shoreline. Though snakelike, potent, and purposeful in both works, this form does not follow the phallic model. In some ways, it is the body of Schor herself, swimming in Provincetown’s waters. And the anti-perspectival flatness of Schor’s compositions, coupled with the working in concert of the paper’s front and back, create an equalized environment in which what matters is not one shape over the other, but the enveloping motion of the artist’s own hand: rubbing, stroking, and layering.

While these developments were going on in Schor’s own landscape, the broader cultural landscape was also shifting rapidly—but in a different direction altogether. It was now the 1980s, and the postmodernist appropriation artists—dubbed “The Pictures Generation”—were achieving critical success



DICKHEADS OR THE SEVEN DWARFS, 1989, OIL ON CANVAS, 20 BY 16 INCHES EACH, INSTALLATION 20 BY 112 INCHES

and market prominence. In political terms, the conversation had shifted: as Schor herself said in *Negative Thinking*, 1970s feminism was now considered “old-hat, marginal and irrelevant,” while painting was thought equally *démodé*, especially for women artists. For Schor, the representative of this trend was David Salle, whom she knew at CalArts. In opposition to Schor’s implicit critique of the phallus in her landscapes—both through the positioning of a strong corporeal female presence in her compositions, as well as by using the “feminine” paper and gouache, rather than the more “masculine” apparatuses of oil on canvas—Salle was, as she saw it, using painting only strategically, while upholding phallic representations to misogynist ends, and being critically and economically celebrated rather than critiqued for it.

But as they say (or if they don’t, they certainly should), there is no phallus mightier than the pen. And 1986 marked Schor’s return to language, but this time, in order to write *about*—rather than within the sphere of—aesthetics: specifically, a scathing, direct appraisal of what she saw as the objectifying, commodifying, and ultimately degrading representation of women in Salle’s painting. In tandem with the adoption of this new critical medium, two things happened: first, Schor joined forces with a friend, the feminist artist Susan Bee, to form the contemporary art journal *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*. In the journal, Bee and Schor were reacting against the flattening of meaning in the age of postmodern art criticism, while recognizing that the holding of an essential, totalized position was also no longer completely possible (hence, the fragmenting virgules in the journal’s title). And second, Schor began, for the first time, to paint in oil on canvas. After fifteen years of refusing the so-called master medium, Schor suddenly found herself in the role of the guardian of painting over and against the critics and artists who were announcing its demise in the age of “art after modernism.”

This was, of course, deeply ironic. Even though Schor’s love for painting as a medium never wavered (as she states in the closing passage of *Wet*, “My heart rests in the ultimately nonlinguistic, ineffable pleasure and deep meaning of the figure/ground interaction, of the visual language of paint”), oil on canvas was not the most predictable choice for her to make, as an artist and thinker who had consistently attempted to claim a space for feminist painting apart from the grandiose ejaculation of oil on canvas. And yet, it also made perfect sense. Learning the language of the opposition in order to subvert it was something that had always interested Schor, and her admiration for the work of a Provincetown family friend and noted member of the AbEx generation, Jack Tworkov, was a case in point. As she states in her introduction to Tworkov’s recently published writings,

I am the first to note the deep strangeness of my serving as the mediating voice for a patriarchal figure who was critical of the content and medium of my early work. As a feminist I am deeply invested in a critique of the kind of power structures that Tworkov represented to me in my youth. However, as an artist, I was instructed deeply in the beliefs of the system that wished to exclude me.

In getting to know painting even more intimately, then, Schor was enacting what she has called a “survival strategy”—wresting the conversation back from the cultural capitalists, and redefining it on her own terms.

In groundbreaking essays such as “Figure/Ground” and “Researching Visual Pleasure” (later collected in *Wet*), Schor linked up formal questions about painting in the post-studio era with a gender critique. In “Figure/Ground,” she positions herself against *October*’s gang of “aesthetics terrorists,” who, she suggests, portray painting as a primitive, animalistic, and, ultimately, feminized endeavor. Those critics, she writes, would like “. . . an art that would be pure, architectural, that would dispense with the wetness of figure . . . (this desire) may find a source in a deeply rooted fear of liquidity, of viscousness, of goo.”

Schor is a fierce writer. Her words are animated by a theoretical framework, but they also have the plainspokenness of true conviction. In her eyes,



SLIT OF PAINT, 1994, OIL ON LINEN, 12 BY 16 INCHES

pigment is political, whether you accept or reject its use, and the decision to subsume sensual material to depersonalized, mediated aesthetic forms has implications. In articulating a resistance to the perspectives advocated by some of the most influential critics and historians in the art world, Schor took career risks in order to defend painting in a way that drew on both feminism and theory, giving many painters who read her words support and courage. Her ability to identify the mechanisms of validation and meaning-making in the art world is inimitable. In essays such as “Patrilineage,” in which she bitingly questioned the overwhelming importance of male artist forebears to art canon formation, or “Recipe Art,” where she mockingly lamented the “high-concept” way in which much art is made nowadays (“something from popular culture + something from art history + something appropriated + something weird or expressive = useful promotional sound bite”) Schor’s writing is sophisticated, art-theoretically inflected, but always approachable. Mostly, it just wallops you with its honesty.

Not a complete surprise, then, that at the time when she began her writing career, the metaphorical seizing of the phallus was also taking place in her actual artistic practice. The “dick paintings” (or, “my penises,” as the artist has dryly called them), which Schor began to paint at that point in oil on canvas, were direct descendents of her earlier landscape studies. In 1987, she taught for a semester at UC Berkeley, and took many sketches of the northern California natural environment. And just as figure evolved into landscape in her work of the late 1970s and early 1980s, landscape slowly began to morph back into bodies in the late 1980s. Shrubs sprouted breasts and sloping bellies and vulvas; trees trailed penises and testicles from their branches. And gradually, the framework of landscape fell away, and the unadorned body itself took center stage. In 1989, she painted *Seven Dwarfs (Dickheads)*, comprised of seven paintings—like *Book of Pages*, it was a major work arrived at through the joining of modest-sized fragments. Red penis heads are rendered in oil on canvas, using the medium of painting to make a political point about power, mediation, and gender. As Schor wrote in *Wet*,

That these were in the full sense of both terms *political paintings* was exactly what I was trying to achieve: a visual and conceptual experience whose political content was all the more powerful given that the message of the challenging image was embedded in the seductive potential of oil paint, painting not as “eye candy” but as a synergic honey-trap for contemporary discourse.

Some of Schor’s “dickheads” are adorned with ears (in fact, to my eyes, more than one is presciently reminiscent of George W. Bush’s person!). Condoms are attached to others, like little red caps, or perhaps more menacingly, like missile heads, stained in blood. Their paint is glazed and

glossy, creating tension between comfortable finish and uncomfortable content. Schor's granting these "dickheads" the status of self-important portrait sitters is an act that is simultaneously comical and critical.

The term "dick" stands for several things. The crassness of the signifier suggests the aggression attached to its signified, which is certainly the body/the penis itself, but, also, the phallus: the location the body occupies in language, and following that, in ideology. And indeed, in this period of Schor's career, the question of engagement between language and the body reemerges. This time, however, both are made less personal and more political. A penis, an ear, a breast—all of these body parts become receptacles and transmitters for language, and, thus, of meaning. In multiple canvas works such as *Alterity* (1991) or *War Frieze* (1991–1994), language flows like liquid through the body and out into the world, where it eventually enters and affects the ground of the body once again.

Gender politics are at play here, certainly: in a panel of *Alterity*, for instance, penis and breast, "mama" and "dada," are collaborators in the transmission of language, but also adversaries: the penis and the ear form a handgun-like contraption, turning the faint ribbon of "mama" milk delivered from the breast into the forceful, darker script of "dada." Schor's paintings from this period mark theory and the conceptual as spaces useful for both the feminine and the painterly. In paintings such as *Slit of Paint* (1994), Schor signals at the separation between the corporeal and linguistic by layering punctuation marks in her paint. The lexicon of references that these works suggest could extend anywhere from art historical figures such as Jasper Johns, Judy Chicago, and Mary Kelly, or literary influences such as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, including Charles Bernstein, the husband of Schor's coeditor Bee. In these works, Schor is reconfiguring feminist art as well as, importantly, the story of modernism.

Indeed, as Schor notes as an aside to herself across several panels of *War Frieze*, "It's Modernism, Stupid." After years of battling the macho AbEx masters of oil, she was now appropriating their medium confidently and immersively, and experimenting more freely with her painting process. *War Frieze*, for instance—which she began working on at the inception of the first, "quickie" Gulf War, but which took her three years to fully complete—was comprised of dozens of small canvases creating a continuous, two-hundred-running-foot piece, with language itself the main form in which this painterly experimentation proceeded. Words and letters are repeated ("Joy" is one recurring figure at the end of the entire work), but their material manifestation is extremely variable: sometimes glazed and cracked, sometimes glossy, sometimes coagulated, and sometimes barely covering the raw linen. Wetness and dryness, thickness and thinness, deliberation and happenstance, scraping and layering, and the general changeability of the figure/ground relationship were occupying Schor much more in this period than they ever had before.

In choosing the words she will paint, Schor often employs her own form of appropriation from the culture around her, selecting words or sentences because of their potential multiple meanings. Thus, in *War Frieze*, Schor represented the words "area of denial," the name of a type of weapon described on *Nightline*, which Schor felt alluded to the body as an area of denial, and even the body of *painting* as an area of denial in the contemporary art world she was engaged in. Schor draws attention to the sentence and opens it up to further interpretation, while at the same time, the depicted words become empty hangers for the aesthetic—vessels whose meaning would compel the viewer to look at them initially, only to then drop away, highlighting the abstraction and painterliness of their form.

After completing *War Frieze* in 1994, Schor turned to a more specific concentration on the meeting point between painting and writing. In the mid- to late- 1990s, she literally collapsed the two into each other, by simultaneously writing color and painting language, in works such as *Flesh*, in which she inscribed the word itself into thickly set, flesh-colored paint. By this point in her career, Schor's command of oil paint's variability became reminiscent of her control of gouache and rice paper, achieved in her double-sided works of the 1970s and '80s.

For Schor, paint on canvas has depth—sometimes literally, but also metaphorically. The body, seemingly set aside in the works of the mid- to late-1990s for a more formal exploration of language, is still here. *Flesh* is flesh, even if it's unattached to an actual body; and even more deeply, oil paint, as well as writing, *are* for Schor the body—albeit a body that is often mediated



A LIFE, 2008, INK, GRAPHITE, AND GESSO ON LINEN, 16 BY 12 INCHES

by language and abstraction. In word installations such as *Personal Writing* (1994) and *Sexual Pleasure* (1998), Schor explored exactly this mediation by painting these titular phrases in her own free handwriting, a letter per panel, and installing the canvases alongside others on which the proper cursive writing that she'd learned at the Lycée Français was painted. Ironically, of course, at the very moment when the unfettered work of the hand is juxtaposed against its institutional counterpart, one realizes that the purported free body here is anything but, as even the handwritten letters are blown up and traced deliberately. Adding an additional layer of complication to these works is the element of paint, in which the body suddenly reappears. In *Sexual Pleasure*, the corporeal possibility of the term is expressed not in the lettering, but in the vibrantly luxurious reds, pinks, and yellows. The first S of one of the "sexual pleasure" iterations is a juicy crimson depression in creamy scarlet paint, another is a bright marigold monochrome, while yet another is a damp trace of red smeared atop a white background.

This visual dialect of the hazy trace continued to play a part in Schor's work of the early 2000s. In pieces that were exploring the concept of repetition with a difference—with the artist's handwriting enlarged and traced twice in ink, one iteration bleeding through, though not dissolving into, the other over gesso on white canvas as well as on paper—Schor was doing some of her most personal work to date. Teaching, attempting to write a follow-up book to 1997's *Wet*, taking care of her nonagenarian mother, and painting, Schor often felt that she was juggling too many balls. She was sometimes concerned she would not be able to complete all the projects she was working on (particularly her second book: at one point, she thought she'd have to just paint the ideas for the book as one-sentence headlines!). This sense of insufficiency was reflected in a series of paintings in which the phrase "There's No Time to Make Art" is repeated; in several other works, the word "Trace" is featured, its meaning reflected in the delicate, ghostly line with which it's drawn. The need to create, Schor suggests, is the need to leave a trace of oneself—no matter how modest.

And, as Schor's essay "Modest Painting" proposes, this modesty is a goal rather than a failing. Painting need not be monumental, flashy, or self-branding in order to leave a lasting impression. Quite the opposite: the

existence of reticent, careful painting that doesn't ostentatiously announce its own importance, helps to "(sharpen) our perception of images in a softer light." In the booming, hyperkinetic art market of the early aughts, this was an especially valid political point.



"Then suddenly came a storm or maybe disaster": from 2001 on, Schor began reusing this early snippet from *Book of Pages* in a truncated form. The word "Suddenly," painted on canvas in a handwriting identical to that used in the earlier work, became an emblem of a state of being that Schor knew intimately from childhood, but that was reconfirmed to her by the events of that year. As she wrote in *Negative Thinking*, "I read once that people who lost their parents as children always have a certain attitude called 'and suddenly.'" Coming from a family of Holocaust refugees and losing her father at a young age had made "shocking loss (seem) familiar." But the events of the first half of the new decade proved especially trying. September 11 came first—a disaster that Schor witnessed at close range, as her Tribeca loft is located only fourteen blocks north of the World Trade Center towers. Three months later came Naomi Schor's sudden death from a cerebral hemorrhage; and, finally, in 2006, Resia Schor's passing. Schor was now "the only person left of (her) beloved and interesting family."

Schor described to me how she felt as she was grieving, first over her sister and later over her mother: "People would ask me how I was, and there were literally no words for me to express how I was feeling." When saying and meaning prove useless, what does an artist who has been engaged with language in one form or another since the inception of her career do? Schor began painting empty speech bubbles, reflecting the sense of "deep existential loneliness" that she was experiencing. The summer of 2007, after her mother's death, she worked in Provincetown, not only on canvas, but also in notebooks, once again using small-scale paper sheets as intimate spaces for exploration of new territory. Employing mostly black and white, with sudden flashes of yellow and orange, these works were in some ways the exact antithesis of *Book of Pages*. Woman was no longer full of words, but completely devoid of them. Oftentimes, the rounded forms Schor painted are blacked out, like heavy lead balloons; sometimes they're filled with abstract lines (perhaps a darker version of the speech of Snoopy's little friend, Woodstock the bird); and sometimes they're ghostly white. In the ironic *Portrait of My Brain* (2007), yellowish gunk aggressively, thickly, shades a speech bubble on a black background. The mind has now become a depository for useless matter, an abstraction that does not open up to utopian possibilities but is rather a type of endgame.

By the summer of 2008, Schor was slightly less overwhelmed by grief, and language began to creep back minimally into her compositions. Before their respective deaths, Resia and Naomi had attempted to trace their family's lineage in the form of a family tree. That summer, Schor resumed that project from her own perspective. Listing the names of her many deceased relatives and pinning them to the wall, she then formalized the memory of these people, most of whom she never knew, a family lineage of which she was effectively the only remaining descendant. Instead of actual names, now Schor's speech bubbles began to contain the handwritten words "a life."

This might seem a grim project, and in some ways, it was. These people had lived once, and they were no longer living. Most devastatingly for Schor, now Ilya, Naomi, and Resia were gone. But at the same time, by repeating those words over and over again, Schor was not only affirming that "a life" was something that had happened and was worth commemorating, but also that *her* life would go on. Toward the end of that same summer, Schor painted the work *Cool Guy*, in which a brownish balloon links up to another, white balloon, sporting a pair of comically large, brown sunglasses. The sprouting of a buoyant human figure out of blocked brown sludge reflects how Schor's sense of humor and hope could emerge even from the most melancholy of circumstances. The fact that this work was meant at least in part as a portrait of Barack Obama, also signals an opening up to the world and its possibilities beyond personal devastation. Once more, Auschwitz and Portugal negotiated a productive if not completely easy partnership.

In 2009, Schor began painting the full figure for the first time since her "Story Paintings" of the early 1970s. In paintings on paper and canvas, in ink and slicks of oil paint, she imagined herself as a stick figure—head



A WALK, 2009, INK AND GESSO ON LINEN, 16 BY 20 INCHES

and body combined—striding across a white expanse often dotted with pitfalls. In *A Walk*, she creates a sense of movement by drawing her line several times, in different-colored inks, each slightly separated from the other and bleeding through layers of gesso. This time, the bespectacled figure is no longer Obama, but a skirt-wearing stand-in for Schor herself. A figure in peril, she is surrounded on all sides by foreboding, darkened speech bubbles, one stick leg almost stumbling into an open grave lying in her path. Again, this would be a disheartening painting if it weren't for the comic, near-slapstick element here. The square-headed Schor, her glasses oversized, her face featureless, is as blank as a Buster Keaton/Harold Lloyd hybrid. But the character's vulnerability, coupled with her obvious momentum forward (who knows—maybe she'll evade the trap at the last moment?) make us root for her, laughing a little as we dab at a secret tear.

Because this is the thing about Schor. "A life"—and, more to the point, an intensely *creative* life—will keep on being lived. Paintings will get painted; writings will be written. And if the prone, swimming figure of a woman in the multiple landscape paintings she made this past year sometimes looks as if she's dead or dying, in fact she's just floating on her back. She's looking up, contemplating the gorgeous Provincetown sky through her dark glasses, feeling the warm sun and the green slickness of the water on her skin, and thinking of an idea for a new essay or a new painting, or, perhaps, of a new balloon to sprout out of her self-portrait.

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IILYA, MIRA, AND RESIA SCHOR, PROVINCETOWN, 1957