

FRONTRUNNER

A Conversation with Mira Schor



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For the better part of five decades, Schor's practice has pioneered and developed a singular language addressing feminist visual culture with a defiant, political charge. Her work has included major periods in which gendered narrative and representation of the body have been featured; other periods have representations of language in drawing and painting.

Mira Schor was born in New York City in 1950. She received her MFA from the California Institute of Arts (Valencia) in 1973. As a theorist and critic, Schor has contributed to *Artforum*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Frieze*, *Woman's Art Journal*, *Architectural Record* and *Hyperallergic*. She is noted as the co-founder of the journal *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*. As a visual artist, her work has been shown at international venues including The Jewish Museum (New York), the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art (Ridgefield, Connecticut), The Drawing Center (New York), MoMA P.S.1 (New York), Kunsthaus Graz (Graz, Austria), and Kunstraum Potsdam (Germany). She is a recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Visual Arts Fellowship (Painting, 1985), the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (1997), The CAA Frank Jewett Mather Award in Art Criticism (1999), and in 2017 was elected to the National Academy of Design (New York). From 1974 to the present day, Schor has served as a faculty member at NSCAD, at New York University, Brown University, the Rhode Island School of Art and Design (RISD), The Cooper Union (New York), The Banff Centre (Canada) and Parsons The New School for Design, where she continues to teach. Her work is held in the permanent collections of the Carnegie Museum of Art (Pittsburgh), the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Minneapolis), the Portland Art Museum (Portland, Oregon), and the University of Kentucky Art Museum (Lexington, Kentucky). Schor lives and works in New York City and Provincetown, Massachusetts.

FRONTRUNNER is proud to present an exclusive conversation with Schor from her second home in Provincetown. We extend our thanks to Lyles & King (New York), for making this interview possible.



Mira Schor in front of her work *The Painter's Studio* (2020), detail
Ink, acrylic, and gesso on tracing paper
119 x 228 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King (New York)

I did not know about the nature of Provincetown, where you have a studio. It feels like an artist commune, or it looks that way. Is that true?

Commune, no. It's not. But it is still an artist colony. I'll explain why I'm qualifying that. It was quite an extraordinary community for about a hundred or so years, with a kind of a weird mix of demographics. So there were Yankees, you know? Then there were Portuguese people from the Azores, and they worked as fishermen. By the time I got here as a child, they were the ones who repaired everything, knew everything about everything, and they were an incredibly welcoming community. They'd have a big family, then they'd have a few bedrooms. They would rent and were renting to gay people, even though they were a Catholic community. They were welcoming and generous, and that gave a flavour to the town. One early high point in its history was around the time that people like Eugene O'Neill lived here. I live close to the building where O'Neill rented a room, at the time. It was called "Garbage Gables" because for decades it was just a very straight-up drab gray box at the edge of the water.

And Tennessee Williams was there.

I don't know exactly when it became known within certain communities as a place where you could be gay and not be persecuted. So Tennessee Williams came in the 40s. When I got here, there was a real, living art summer community with artists like Jack Tworikov. [Robert] Motherwell and [Helen] Frankenthaler lived here together. The other part of the summer community were psychoanalysts and various academics from Boston and New York who were interested in the arts. It was a very interesting place and a middle-class person could afford to come here for the summer, or if you were a young artist and didn't have any money. Three people or four people could pile into a rundown shack in the back of a Portuguese family's house. Starting in the 80s, condominiums rose, the town began to be gentrified by a new less bohemian generation of second-home owners, and a new gay demographic, no longer the artist but the venture capitalist, no longer the marginal actor but the Hollywood agent. Now, vast swathes of town have no original residents, few winters residents. There are so few children born in Provincetown now that they had to close the high school, the kids are bused an hour up Cape. It means that young artists can't really come here. But there is still art, there are galleries, there is a local museum, There's an excellent artist's residency I'm connected to, The Fine Arts Work Center, which has winter residencies of poets and artists; a sort of post-graduate situation. Very, very nice situation. So that's real.

It does seem to have a dualistic quality. Places like The Lobster Pot sound great, very old school, the fisherman go there. They're the last of their kind.

There are fewer fishermen left – there are fewer fish due to overfishing and global warming – and far fewer of those people that, I felt, gave the flavour to the town. I inherited my house from my mother who bought it in 1970. It's harder to find people who appreciate an old house and know how to keep it from falling into the ground. My parents were European artist refugees. They came to New York and after one hot summer, they just were not going to spend the summer in New York anymore. This is in 1942. Sometimes they would go visit friends who had jobs, musicians who had jobs someplace in the Berkshires. Then they started to share houses with other artists or friends on Long Island. They started to look for summer communities in the North East. So, we spent all the summers of my childhood in different places, including Woodstock. We ended up in Provincetown because three sets of friends were summering there and the

adjoining communities, and it just clicked. I was seven, and completely fell in love with it. I have a letter that my mother sent to my older sister, Naomi, who was in camp. She didn't join us the first few weeks. It was in French and she said, "*Mira se sent bien dans sa peau*" – "Mira feels good in her skin here." I just loved it. I would say in the two months a year that I've spent here since 1970, I've probably done 50% of my total work, altogether.



Mira Schor in front of *War Frieze* in her studio at Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation, 1993
Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King (New York)
Photo credit: Sarah Wells

Do you have any desire, any pull to be or to go to France? Do you have any sort of tether?

I have much less than my sister Naomi Schor had. Although she was born in New York, her first words were in French. She made her life around French literature and French theory. She spent a lot of time in France, I was more grounded in America. Once I graduated from the Lycée Français de New York I started using French less and I've spent much less time in France than my sister did. But my thinking is very much structured by my classical French education.

Your gallerist Isaac Lyles, back in 2015, told me, “I’m interested in this artist named Mira Schor, and she’s amazing. She’s a three decade-plus artist. She’s Jewish. She has this incredible, visceral quality to her work.” And I said, “Wow, sounds to me like Betty Tompkins.”

We're linked because of our representations of language but the language we focus on is very different. I like her work a lot. I didn't actually know about her work until about 15 years ago. I saw her earlier work at a show in the Mitchell Algu Gallery, when he was still in Chelsea. I loved it!

Well, anyway, it's interesting hearing about Isaac as he encountered me. One day in May 2015 I got this email out of the blue from somebody I've never heard of saying, "I must say I'm in awe of your work and would love the opportunity to meet you." I just thought, "You've never seen my work, I know you've never seen my work, for sure." To this day, he swears that he had heard of me, but I never believe it. But he did hear of me, obviously. A friend, a woman I barely knew, and he were on a train going to Yale to see the graduate MFA show, looking at the work of young artists. He had just gotten the lease on his first gallery space on Forsyth Street. He said, "Well, is there anybody that you think that I should see?" She said, "Mira Schor." He picked up on it. It's just been a really, really, really productive, great development in my life. I mean, my individual gallery representation record is very sparse, you know. I had a very good relationship with a guy, who was very similar to Isaac, called Stuart Horodner who had a small gallery in Soho in the early 90s, Horodner Romley Gallery, they represented Jack Whitten and had hosted a powerful early on-site performance by William Pope.L. Stuart was (and is!) a great guy, intelligent, really understood my work, and just had a very creative relationship with artists and a real sense of community. I had two shows there. But

then his partner in the business decided to retire and he was the money guy. Stuart didn't like the idea of working in a big gallery where he would be subject to their programme so he went into museum and art center leadership, the university museum is his specialty. After that, I didn't have a show for about 11 years. Young artists, maybe not now, but certainly in the 90s and late 80s, were sort of expected to get a show in a gallery. Especially in the 90s, artists who were a little younger than me just seemed so business-wise and understood what the relationship should be. I learned from them, their attitudes were interesting to me, how to deal with dealers. My case just had a very different trajectory.

Do you think that the expectations of young artists should be realigned or should be shifted now because of the current state of the creative world? Do you think that the challenges are different? Same?

I think that it's hard to say. I think that they're the same, in some respect. In other words, if you go to a graduate school with any kind of reputation or if you're focused on the art world, there's still an idea that you're going to participate in the gallery scene. My students are also very focused on residencies though the pandemic has suspended everything for a year and a half, or two years. But I don't know what they're looking at to think, "Well, this is where I want to be or where I'd like to be." They see Instagram, they understand that, and they understand that kind of media relationship to being an artist.

A commercial media relationship, you mean?

Yes. To some extent. The people that I'm dealing with the most closely right now are, on the one hand, a little bit career savvy. I want to specify that it's always just a small part of the demographic that you're the most familiar with at any given moment. For example, the most recent interactions that I've had have been with young artists who went to graduate school, they had their eyes wide open, nevertheless, they were expecting to have shows, gallery representation. Some of them are discovering the difficulties, but then others are discovering being very successful. But then, there's always reasons why that's happening at any given moment. So in that sense, it looks very much the same as the world that I had been living in. . The challenges over time are the same. I just recently posted on Instagram a few excerpts from "On Failure and Anonymity," an essay I wrote in 1985, which is included in my book *Wet*, where I write that, "The basic fact of the artist's existence remains that no one asks you to do whatever it is that you do, and just about no one cares once you've done it. Art in our era is a self-generated activity, and the marketplace is for most artists just a transient delusion." The

response, the sense of recognition on the part of people who saw this was striking, and even though I wrote it I am still subject to the hopes and the heartbreaks of the roller coaster ride a career can be.



Mira Schor
War Frieze (1991-94)
Oil on 146 linen panels
12 x 16 inches (each), 12 x 2336 inches (total)
Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King (New York)
Photo credit: Charles Benton

Is there anything that you think is missing that you would want, not just your students, but for younger artists who are entering that fray? Is there something you would want them to know going in, if they didn't have their eyes wide open?

Again, because the demographic changes all the time, I think it's important to have examples before you of other artists and the struggle that goes into continuing an art practice over five years, ten years, twenty years. In my case, I'm being

reminded for many reasons that it's been 50 years that I've been an artist. I'm friends with people who have been artists for sixty years. The sort of patterns of struggle and a little bit of enough success to keep you from, you know, just giving up, these remain the same. The necessity to have friendships, but also to grow out from what you developed as your initial social circle. That's something I think a lot about, because I've really experienced a number of stages of being an artist. Your world will expand in art school, then it will contract, and then you have to work harder to create an art world around you that is supportive and interesting. And then again and again, if you stick with it.

Every situation you're in has its own micro-politics and a different view of the world. I sometimes feel that my students would gain a lot, for example, from looking at old art, which they tend not to do. They don't see it as something that is food for the ages. I've taught a class called "Mining the Museum" for Graduate Students. I go to museums with them. What I'm looking for is for them to be aware of when they suddenly focus on something, the smallest detail of a work. I'd read in the *Times* years ago, in the Science section (and I was never able to find it again) that when you see something that interests you, your pupils dilate. You're not aware of it. It's like a sexual reaction. I wanted them to try to be open to that. Not going in there thinking, "I am a such-and-such artist, and I only look at work that is going to speak to my particular current identity." This is more like, "No, you walk around and suddenly you see the texture of an Egyptian statue and your eyes open wide, and then you go do something else in your studio. Not that you start carving into granite!" It's that you have a form, or materiality, or a time that opens up your work and goes beyond your fixed identity as an artist. In our culture now, I think young people feel that they have to categorise themselves and have a kind of rubric. They stick to it. Art students, and probably in other fields, are taught to write a statement. "I am this, I am interested in this." It's very, very hard to open that up for them. They're terrified of moving into something that would be unmarked, or that would be contradictory. I see a fear of breaking away into something that would be unmarked because they're having to market themselves. Basically, it's commodification. It's the sense that they feel that they have to commodify themselves. But I don't think that all of them would accept that word because the best of them are trying to really achieve something beyond that.

Or it sounds like they're being stratified into various sectors. Like being like a fly caught in amber, you know?

Well, there's not always a fight. Many participate in that stratification. This connects to an essay I wrote a few years ago called "Fail!" It came from the

assignment that I would give, usually in the fall of the second year of graduate school, I think. It was very codified to a specific moment in this very short lifespan of a graduate program. I would say, “The assignment is to fail, whatever it is that you think that is.” Then I would get emails during the week saying, “Is it OK?” They were afraid to fail wrong! What I specified in this essay is that the process of graduate education is, within essentially eight months and eight months. That moment that I chose, that I specified, was like the last time they were going to be able to fail because then there’s the pressure to have their graduate show which they live and die for.



Mira Schor
NY Times Intervention, Straight to Hell, August 9,
2020 (2020)
22 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King (New
York)

Two things I wanted to discuss. One was that we both share Jewish heritage. For me, that was something I brought up frequently in my conversation with Deborah Kass. How Jewish you can be in terms of putting yourself in the shoes of an artist or creator? Can being Jewish become a part of you, or shall it remain separate? The second was your New York Times interventions. I've felt a different type of anguish over the last five years because I've not been in the U.S. since the last regime. I had the same guttural reaction as what you wrote on top of those headlines. What's happening to this paper? Why are they becoming wilfully blind to the dangers that exist? Or is some invisible writer being dictated to? What's happening here that inspires these very necessary interventions?

During the Trump administration, there were two factors at least behind the Times coverage. One was a general trend towards greater conservatism of the generation coming into leadership, which was essentially the yuppie and millennial. The other, from what I understand, is that they got rid of a lot of copy editors and there's no night staff. A lot of the issues I annotated were morning editions, first editions. A lot of people would respond to my critical interventions and say, "Well, actually, they changed it in the second edition, or they changed it online," the thing that I had pointed out. That's because, I gather, there's no one editing at night. There's no copy editor, no copy desk. They fired a lot of the people previously involved with the production of the paper. But the part that alarmed me the most is that, I think, they were terrified. They were very intimidated by the Trump Regime. So, there was some conservatism, less staff, less experience. On top of that, they were being threatened by somebody who was very, very dangerous. It's the first thing I look at when I get up, and sometimes I just can't have breakfast until I've corrected the situation.

Now, to [something] you wanted to talk about. The relationship or the importance of Judaism. I was actually quite struck when you said that.

In a good way? Bad way?

Well, I was just surprised. It doesn't come up that often. I have written a lot about the artworks by my parents, Ilya Schor and Resia Schor. It's obviously very important on a historic level, a philosophical level. At the same time, I think I have a very unusual background related to Judaism than many of my American Jewish friends.

Recently, my mother's work was being shown for the first time in Warsaw since she left in 1938, after she finished art school at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts and joined my father in Paris. I recently did a lecture on my father's work for a Polish audience for the first time. I think my father's work and my mother's work are exceptional and I don't say that just because I'm their daughter. I'm also a very critical person and there's nothing quite like my father's work in 20th century Judaica or Jewry, or whatever. My mother's work I admire also as much, and her work is very, very different than his. Both worked in Judaica, my father more consistently and deeply than my mother, both also made beautiful jewelry, interesting sculptures, and beautiful paintings.

My parents were very sophisticated Europeans, coming from humble backgrounds, but they came from an exceptional generation. Of course, most of their generation were killed. My parents were completely secular in their life practices. I did not learn Hebrew. My sister and I did not go to Sunday school. We barely celebrated Jewish holidays, except for Passover. Not at our house, at others. I loved it. I mean, it's super important to me. Meanwhile, my father was making the most exceptional Judaica. He created unique objects such a small group of amazing silver Torah Crowns, commissioned by a few synagogues in the US. He illustrated Abraham Joshua Heschel's books, *The Earth is the Lord's* and *The Sabbath*, which are translated in many languages, have remained in continuous print for over seventy years, always with the original design and my father's wood-engraving illustrations. I open those books and think, "Yes, I inherited something ineffable." The word "ineffable" is something Heschel uses to describe the mysticism of the Hasids. At the same time, I inherited this very European-oriented art background, an interest in craft, and so forth. Very different than the second, third-generation American Jews who were my father's clients. As it turns out, he was fortunate not just to survive the Holocaust but to be working in America at a very particular moment in the history of American Jewry. My parents came in '41, they arrived just before Pearl Harbor. The American Jews they met were stable and integrated into American life. They had money so that they could look back to their roots without any of the shame their immigrant grand-parents may have held. The Holocaust made them feel tremendous guilt and they wanted to connect, to help. And here comes my father, who really had this deep relationship to Hasidic culture, yet was a sophisticated, European man, very charming, and all that. That's very different than the traditional image in American film and literature of the Jew born in Brooklyn, lower-middle class, people whose parents maybe had jobs in the clothing industry, or whatever. Not to be critical of that standard American narrative, but just to say, my parents were not like that. When I met with a rabbi who was going to officiate at my mother's funeral, he immediately imagined a kind

of 1950s Molly Goldberg type of stereotypical “Yiddishe Momme.” My friends and I were like, *no*, she looked like Ingrid Bergman, was very elegant, and had a kind of powerful self-containment!

There’s something unique I feel about how I ended up synthesizing their experience, the Judaism that came through them without some of the trappings, though which now I sometimes kind of wish I had. It’s hard to be directing my father’s estate, be responsible for his career, and not read Hebrew, for example. I’ve been told by people who specialise in Judaica, “Your father’s choice of the texts he engraved into his works are incredibly scholarly and refined choices.” I can’t even read them, I don’t know anything.



Ilya Schor
Torah Crown (1958)
Silver
Collection of Temple Israel, Boston
Courtesy of Mira Schor

I came from a background where I was already almost fifth generation Jewish-American. Both of my parents. From a very early age, my sister and I had a strictly religious education, almost conservative. There was burgeoning community activism about going to Israel, and sending their kids to Israel. By the time I got to university, that had all been pancaked into being secular, just culturally Jewish. I joined a Jewish sisterhood at Florida State University in 2004, before any official Jewish sorority ever existed on campus. Even in such an environment where Jews were such a small minority, I'd never even experienced any kind of pushback or overt anti-Semitism until I moved to England.

You know, that's interesting. I would say that until I was fifteen, I never had encountered direct anti-Semitism. It was in a summer school, some WASPy, suburban guy apparently said something about my being Jewish. That is the extent of overt anti-Semitism that I experienced. But one of the first truly anti-Semitic statements I ever heard was from a British boyfriend of a friend of mine, a middle-class guy, just casually said something like, "Oh yeah, he 'Jew-ed' down the price of something." I'd never heard that expression before. So I'm oddly familiar with that.

I believe that the vast majority of American Jewry under the age of 18 is becoming increasingly secular, or that Orthodox communities are becoming more concentrated and less integrated. Would you have a message for them? How would you relay your own experience to them in filtering through their artistic experience if there is such a thing?

I'm not sure I can come up with something. I think my answer to almost everything for young people is to learn history and also to embrace complexity. When I was a child, I went to a French school. I read French children's books from the 19th century. There are many, many ways in which I read a lot more 19th century literature than I did 20th. One time, this elderly lady, who was like in lieu of a grandmother (also a refugee), came in to see how I was doing. I said to her, "You know Ida, I know I'm Jewish, but in my heart, I'm a good Christian." But on top of that amusing anecdote is the fact that as an artist, I'm immersed in the history of Christian art. Every year around Easter/Passover, I watch PBS specials like *From Jesus to Christ*. I just think it *is* the greatest story ever told because it's one story, and Judaism is incomprehensible in that respect. It's like a hundred million stories and so when I say embrace complexity, it's to understand that you can be Jewish, but you can also understand Christian values. You can be white and have at least some tiny understanding of Black experience, and vice versa. Not

everything is black and white, bad and good. I think we're very fractured in that way. I think that social media has made it hard to have that complexity. But all of that relates to just reading history. Of course, it's not my religion, but when I'm looking at art representing Christianity, I'm perfectly capable of forgetting in that moment that the Jews were persecuted by Christians. I just think the art is incredibly beautiful. It's incredibly moving and it's mine. It's just as much mine as anybody else's. And I think of that way about culture. I think right now, there's very much of "mine and not yours."

I follow religiously, as it were, the daily e-mails of the historian Heather Cox Richardson. She's so good and she's so good for this moment. I sometimes find her on Facebook when she's doing this biweekly talk that she gives. The way in which she goes into the deep history of something that we think is just existing now and seeing it in very dark terms is just so important. That's the kind of thing that I would wish people in their 20s or teens would read. I feel that way about the Holocaust. To me, that has marked my whole life. The fragility and betrayal and cruelty and so forth, everything about that stays with me. But I know that now, most young people are not taught about the Holocaust and they don't really know what it's about. At one point in the 90s I would screen parts of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoa* for my students (because of what it is about, but also because it's a film masterpiece). I wouldn't attempt that now.

When you see young artists and you see what they want to achieve – even if it just means making a living, to support themselves, it also means being conscientious about the world around them. What gives you hope?

What gives me hope is that there are really good human beings in the world. The legend of the "36" in Judaism is that you need 36 good human beings to redeem the world, "hidden righteous ones." They do not know that they are among the 36, they simply are. I'm just always in awe of how good people can be, and how hard people can work. I don't think people are valued for that, but that's the whole point in a way, it's that you do it because you are it.