

ART & DESIGN | ART IN REVIEW

Mira Schor: ‘Voice and Speech’

By ROBERTA SMITH APRIL 26, 2012

Marvelli Gallery

526 West 26th Street, Chelsea

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Mira Schor’s small, sharp, quirky paintings have been thorns in the side of the medium for more than three decades now. Sparely cartoonish in style, at least partly feminist in intent and always linguistically inclined, they can evoke the elliptical eyeglass paintings of Michael Hurson and the prankish, word-punning early paintings of Neil Jenney that were grouped, in the long-ago 1970s, in a short-lived trend called New Image Painting.

Ms. Schor’s latest efforts are among her best yet. Abjuring largeness and portentous brushwork as before, these works tackle more directly the immense subject of creativity itself and diagram it in ways both pointedly humorous and expansive.

Their main character is a seemingly female stick figure whose rectilinear head could symbolize a blank canvas, page, screen or thought balloon. She appears against robustly worked monochromes of white, yellow or green that are equipped with occasional doors and windows, and imply rooms, studios or gardens of one’s own, available for private cultivation. The single red painting, a lightly hallucinatory work titled “The Song of the Cardinal,” suggests nature as a source of inspiration.

Usually Ms. Schor’s protagonist is seriously engaged. She wears a pair of glasses and holds a blank square (a book or laptop). Around her, additional squares that could be paintings, signs or more thought balloons float words and ideas.

In one painting the figure occupies a yellow background flanked by squares that read: “the Self,” “the Work,” “the World.” In another the contrasting concepts are “Silence,” “Noise,” “Speech,” “Voice” and “Matter” (a black sack), while “Visual Pleasure” lurks underground. And several works contrast the words “Speech” and “Voice,” implying that beyond language skills lies the quest for a distinctive, personal mode of expression.

The spritely, comfortingly literal-minded symbolism at work here may be especially comprehensible to artists, writers and other so-called cultural producers. Ms. Schor hardly tells the whole story of creative labor, but she lays out its essential elements: the isolation, reading, thinking and percolation that enable a Voice to emerge. At once poetic, lyrical and oddly real, her paintings give rare and sardonic visual form to the life, and the work, of the mind.

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