

# Lyles & King

For Immediate Release

## **Mira Schor**

*WET*

March 28 - May 4, 2024

Opening Reception: Thursday, March 28, 6-8pm

Lyles and King is pleased to present *WET* by Mira Schor, a thematic survey of paintings, drawings and sculpture spanning 1973 to the present. The works in this exhibition foreground existential and corporeal themes, use abstraction, landscape and the figure to, in Schor's words, "bring the experience of living inside a female body--with a mind—into high art in as intact a form as possible." The show's title "Wet" borrows from the artist's 1997 iconic book of essays, her defense of the medium against the 1990s critique of essentialism and a male bastion of art critics, her insistence on the "goo" of both oil paint and the female body. Varied in approach, the works in this show share a directness of imagery and the written word, and an insistence on the formal as a way to deconstruct cultural and personal histories.

*Masks* and *Dresses* made in 1977 are some of Schor's early experiments with rice paper, a material she felt transmitted the delicacy and vulnerability she inhabited being a woman. These works emerged following her participation in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts, 1971-73, where she studied with Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, but she also encountered Fluxus and Conceptual approaches from artists such as Allan Kaprow and Allison Knowles, who presented her with new models for uniting language, concept, and image. Despite her deep involvement in feminist thinking, Schor found herself attracted to the nuanced and anti-heroic nature of the Fluxists. These material impulses were further developed in the four years she spent teaching at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD,) where she was, notably and at 24 years old, the only woman on a 14-person fine arts faculty.

Starting in Halifax and later in New York, she began folding, tearing, creasing rice paper to make her nearly life-size dress shapes and masks. The *Dresses* are narrow, pared down, asymmetrical, iconic; the *Masks* are simplified with frayed-edge, almond-shaped holes at the eyes and pointed chins. All are rubbed with dry pigment and medium – grays, greens, metallic browns – a muted palette suggesting historic artifacts rather than feminized objects of decoration. Schor's *Dresses* and *Masks* are double-sided: layered pages open like a book or flip upward like a veil, revealing diary entries or dreams written in her distinctive cursive. In this way they present a multidimensional perspective. They elaborate on intimate topics and invite participation by the viewer rather than obscuring the wearer. Schor was interested in the indexical nature of the *Masks* – how she could use pigment to transfer marks from one to another, to create ghostly outlines that bound the pieces together into a cumulative whole. She was also interested in their inconvenience as an art object. Their tactility, fragility, and interiority, her invitation to read them like a book, asserts the personal over the polished and acts antithetically to the white cube.

Tracing her diaristic impulses to the present are three large-scale paintings made in 2023-24. These are hung in conversation with one another and were painted on unstretched canvases like a theater backdrop. The paintings are chromatic red and blue grounds that hold faceless women figures – subjects Schor drew by observing a series of clay sculptures she made as a 10-year-old girl. These simple, unglazed sculptures are dainty women wearing ball gowns, perhaps queens. Molded by hand and of varying sizes, they are an early foray into her fictional world building, and drawing from these figures, 60 years later, lends the paintings a degree of gravity and lived history. In the painting titled *Did I?* a large, blank figure in the foreground is tethered on a red string to a smaller woman below who holds a script asking “Did I?” This seems to be the artist asking – did I do it, did I do what I set out to do (in life? In art? In making feminist art?)

Answering the question is the painting *We did* which depicts a pair of figures, more regal, holding manuscripts. The third painting, *Torn: “It Didn’t Happen”*, presents a split composition, ink black, blood red, with the words “It didn’t happen” scrawled into a full, shadowy moon. This specter, wearing white, is bisected down her spine with a dripping red slit in the canvas that reveals the wall behind. This motif is repeated in recent works on paper, which position the woman central on a page unleashed from the sewn binding of a book. The absolute denial of this last statement – “it didn’t happen” – its vagueness and existential refusal, points to a darker mood. Schor’s use of the autobiographical objects alongside call and response phrases, the repeated utterance of “did,” exemplifies how the artist is able to shift from the personal to the universal and back again.

Schor was born to refugee artist parents – the lived experience of this family history informed her approach to imagery, and germinated her interest in the body, language, feminism, the stakes of war and patriarchy and dehumanization of the Other. Originally from Poland, her parents Ilya and Resia Schor fled Paris in June 1940 days before the Nazis entered the city and were the only surviving members of their respective Jewish families. They settled on the Upper West Side raising Mira and her older sister Naomi among a milieu of avant-garde artists and intellectuals. Ilya was a renowned sculptor and draftsman who became known for intricate Judaica. He received synagogue commissions for Torah crowns and pointers and created wood-engraving illustrations for canonical Jewish texts. Resia made abstract, gouache paintings and later, after Ilya’s sudden passing in 1961, took up his metalwork to build her own career as a jeweler and sculptor of Judaica. Mira grew up going to the Met and MoMA, steeped in art history (later her major in college) and the French language. Her sister Naomi became a pioneer of feminist theory and one of the foremost scholars of French literature and psychoanalysis. Mira, who developed her own interests in critical theory, has maintained a dual practice as artist and writer publishing in *Artforum*, *Art Journal*, *Tema Celeste*, among other outlets. She co-founded and edited *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* with the painter Susan Bee which they published in print from 1986-1996, then as an online editorial project until 2016.

Schor worked exclusively on paper until 1985 and this show highlights the multiplicity of her drawing practice – her drawings are driven by a complex base of art influences and modes of

inquiry. Defining herself as a painter who is a conceptual artist, and as a painter at the heart of whose work is sculpture, her approach differs to those of her CalArts peers and friends of the time who aligned more with the Pictures Generation. In this show, an early series titled “The Story Paintings” is represented by *The Two Miras*, 1973, a gouache self-portrait that depicts topless Mira facing her doppelganger in a succulent green landscape. The artist’s nipples are rendered in a deep rose color, matching the blood stained hands of second Mira, who stands with her back facing the viewer. Narrative dissolves into formal play as Schor repeats certain visual motifs across bodies of work. In works from the early 1980s, she uses pigment and expressive linework to evoke archetypes of landscape – shadowy forests or swelling storms – and the figures inhabiting these spaces are often reduced to geometric shapes and created by stencil. *Red Petal*, a large work from 1984, depicts a dark figure, arms raised in exaltation, with red spilling out the abdomen. This figure is based on a skate egg case, a natural flotation device produced by skates and sharks to contain and nurture a fertilized egg. While its leathery black shell and pronged appendages protects life, to the artist the egg case conveys a maternal fierceness and a sense of wonder, as well as another image to develop in her lexicon.

Oil paintings from the late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrate Schor’s ability to merge representation of the body and text painting with political references. Schor began making dick paintings at the height of the AIDS crisis, responding to the conservatism of the time. She transformed her line work into bodily fluid or phrases; her female figures or self portraits became faceless silhouettes or disembodied parts; landscape forms breasts or phalluses. Schor made *Pardon Me Ms.* in 1990 as a response to the US invasion in Panama – the nonchalance of the event’s NPR reportage struck her. In it she heard an unquestioned acceptance of American hegemony and patriarchal might. The nearly ten-foot painting depicts an anatomical dick and condom painted in an infrared palette, emerging menacingly from a disembodied ear, positioned between a smaller ear on a multi-panel, horizontal painting. On the tip of the phallus sits an American flag dripping its colors like blood or ejaculate pooling into the ear. This combination of imagery is repeated in *For Which it Stands*: a thick, red penis is flanked by ears and flags and a money sign replaces the flag’s stars. Oil paint, which she adopted after years of working with gouache and dry pigment, provides Schor with a richness of color and luminous rendering capabilities. With it she channels the realism and specificity of Rogier van der Weyden, a Northern Renaissance painter who made devotional altarpieces, while delivering exaggeration, absurdity, and a transgressive attitude into the lineage.

Embedding language into paint is the primary objective of *War Frieze*, a 195 running foot wide work composed of 12 x 16 inch canvases Schor created in the early 1990s and intended to hang as one continuous work. The work borrows phrases from the news and other sources, connecting gendered body parts, painted in a cursive slant next to sperm and other body-like forms. *War Frieze XIII: Margin of Safety*, 1994, refers to a term related to cancer surgery: when doctors seek to remove cells beyond the actual tumor in order to create a margin of safety. The painting depicts a breast with the words flowing out from the nipple on a flesh-pink canvas, but of course Schor is more interested in the metaphor implied rather than the medical procedure. The larger *War Frieze* includes the term “Undue Burden” lifted from the Supreme Court decision on

abortion; another segment makes reference to the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill hearings. When read together as one punctuated sentence, these events list acts political, cultural, and otherwise, enacted around and against women's bodies, yet painted in a way that verges on the abstract, creating emphasis and movement through a quiet examination of power.

Abortion access, a woman's right to choose, is a political cause Schor fought for both then and now. In the early 1980s, attending a lecture by the art critic Leo Steinberg on his research for *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, Schor was struck by early Renaissance iconography of the impregnation of the Virgin Mary represented by the word of God entering her ear. Insemination through language – and related, the power of speech to subjugate – became a conceptual nexus point for Schor to tie her writing and political convictions to depictions of the body. *The Impregnation of M*, 1987, deals with this in a multi-panel, vertical format that measures 112 inches tall. In the painting a black, cannon-like form emits smoke or a divine light while ears transmit and receive golden rays. She handles the concept of impregnation through painterly language and touch, as well as scaling the painting in a monumental way that verges on the ecclesiastical. In contrast *Slit of Paint*, 1994, draws you nearer. Its 12 x 16 inch surface is raked with flesh-colored oil paint whose vaginal lips part to reveal a semicolon incised into the painting in the place of a clitoris, further emphasized with a glaze of brownish red. The semicolon is a mark of punctuation that joins two independent thoughts, suggesting complication and the need to further expound. It's a succinct way to link together the many modes Schor has employed throughout her practice – using the female body and mind to inspire new forms, postures, defy language, elicit material pleasure and discomfort, and strive toward transcendence.

Essay by Emily Davidson

Mira Schor (b. 1950, New York) lives in New York. Her work has been included in exhibitions at Centre Pompidou-Metz, Metz, FR; Bourse de Commerce - the Pinault Collection, Paris, FR; Musée d'art contemporain de la Haute-Vienne, Rochechouart, FR; The Jewish Museum, New York, US; The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, US; MoMA P.S.1, New York, US; the Neuberger Museum, Purchase, US; The Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, US; Hauser & Wirth, New York, US; David Nolan, New York, US; PPOW, New York, US; MendesWood DM, São Paulo, BR and many other institutions and galleries. She is the author of *A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics, and Daily Life* (2009); *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (1997; both Duke University Press); and of the blog *A Year of Positive Thinking*. She is the co-editor of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*. Schor is the recipient of many prestigious awards including a Guggenheim Fellowship in Painting, a Pollock Krasner Grant, the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award in Art Criticism, the Anonymous Was A Woman grant, and the Creative Capital / Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. Schor is represented by Lyles & King, New York and Marcelle Alix, Paris.