

# Mira Schor: Paintings From The Nineties To Now

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*I chose handwriting as image when I had arrived at the portal of that end zone of painting, monochromatic abstraction. I no longer wanted to represent, in the sense of picturing the body, except through the bodily qualities of oil paint itself. In a sense, I was searching for the equivalent for me of Cézanne's apples, something simple that would allow me to paint paint.*

Mira Schor, "Poetry Plastique," 2001'



## Mira Schor: Making Thought Material, Painting (the Act of) Painting

by Amelia Jones

Mira Schor is the paradigmatic artist of what I call the *material trace*: the enactment of thought, memory, and perception (that which makes us human) through bodily gesture into a visible creative product that in turn conveys the energy of making to viewers, simultaneously (as with live performance) or later in time (as with painting or performance documents). As she notes in this epigraph, she paints in order to “paint paint,” or—as I would slightly revise this to encompass the radical fleshiness of her practice—her practice enacts *painting the act of painting*, thereby extending but radically updating the classic modernist project of addressing in each medium the characteristics of the medium itself (to paraphrase Clement Greenberg).

Each canvas Schor produces (it is tempting to call them “objects” rather than “pictures” because of their conceptual and material density and visceral reference to bodily fluids, flesh, and other aspects of embodiment) activates an awareness as we experience it of the complex thought, movement, gesture, and emotions that we might imagine motivated the

sensual appearance of its stroked, pitted, gouged, smooth, or otherwise brushed surface. This is not to say there is a transparent relationship between what we apprehend and the “intentions,” as this term is commonly understood, of Schor as an intellectual, artist, and person in the world. The extraordinary force of her paintings is precisely their evocation of intentionality in the *phenomenological* sense of the willing of action and expression through bodily movement—and their simultaneous eschewing of simple “communication” as a strategy of artistic expression.

This willing of expression is literalized in her recent fresco-like paintings of a schematic figure (a stand-in for the artist as a gestural cipher of mark making, her signature feature large glasses) going through the paces of thinking, walking, “speaking” (or failing to speak), swimming. In *Read, Think, Walk* (2009), the stick figure walks from left to right holding a book, her thought bubble filled with echoing lines of text. The flatness and almost cartoon-like quality of these paintings imply narrative but are first and foremost *visualizations*

of a kind of phenomenological intent to enact and activate painting, precisely, as a viable and vibrant mode of bodily and affective expression on its own.

There is irony in Schor's dual roles as one of the most important living artists engaging with painting as painting and as a feminist intellectual fascinated with words and narrative (made clear through her writing practice as well as her paintings of words and punctuation); this irony is brought to the surface with these works of a figure enmeshed in the signs of narration, but in a fundamentally visual register.<sup>2</sup> In very recent 2010 works Schor paints the single words "voice," "speech," "noise," and "silence" on single canvases, literalizing the rich field of possibility released by the crossing over of the visual (haptically rendered in gestural paint) and the linguistic. This insistent mode of expressivity is a key element of Schor's passionate life-long commitment to a feminist practice. As she has noted, after studying in the early 1970s Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts, "I wanted to bring my experience of living inside a female body—with a mind—into high art in as intact a form as possible."<sup>3</sup>

It is this activation of living experience through the gestural inscriptions of paint on paper or canvas that marks Schor's practice as one of the most profound explorations of painting itself as a practice that can be active, subjectifying, and durational rather than simply a passive reflection of an external "reality." Schor's paintings instantiate what Henri Bergson described in his philosophical work a century ago as the durational nature of all perception and the inexorable link between perception, memory, and affect. Seeing Schor's work is to be assertively invited to feel a range of emotions and think a range of thoughts provoked by their material appearance as inextricably tied to their "content"—we *imagine* a connection to this other person, a making subject gesturing in space before this moment of apprehension. Because of this quality of density and gestural texture, looking at Schor's paintings is always a process of *feeling* them. There is little chance of escaping from the paintings' referral back to an actively thinking and making body—and any knowledge of Schor's brilliant writ-

ings about painting confirms this expressed (and thereby invited) coextensivity of thought, feeling, and action across her variously articulated oeuvre. Her paintings of *language* from the past two decades confirm this confluence between thought, gesture, and materialization.

In the early 1990s, expanding on her much earlier student work ("story paintings" that included Schor as a character, enacting her first interpretation of the feminist dictum "the personal is political"; and scumbled, writerly marks on delicate rice paper, often collected into dress-shapes, ghostly replacements for the lost explicit body of Schor), Schor began painting the sexiest, most "alive" punctuation marks imaginable—slyly opening the door to the soon-to-come word paintings. A semicolon becomes



a luscious carved red "wound" surrounded by folds of scraped tan and brown "skin"; or, in *Mirror in Flesh* (1994), a larger semicolon has a face-off with another (one held floating in a large white oval, like the albumen of an egg, the other hovering in a small white oval patch), both surrounded by pubic hair-like upward brushstrokes. The stuttering force of punctuation becomes embedded in bodily hollows and a raucous suggestion of sex, the hesitation of the semicolon literally interrupting the expanse of the surface of the image, which evokes nothing if not the undulating, sensual (painted) flesh of bodily encounters.

And so with the word / painting *Flesh* itself (1997), I am not surprised to find myself immersed in a field of pink “skin,” the limpid layer at the top of the paint can or the mottled side of a thigh, the pink expanse scraped away by a bloody red line spelling (indeed) “flesh.” Here, the words of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty become inevitable framework for my opening into the painting; he notes, there are things “to which we could not be closer than by palpating [them]...with our look... the gaze itself envelopes them, clothes them with its own flesh...; vision is question and response.... The openness through flesh: the two leaves of my body and the leaves of the visible world....”<sup>4</sup>

Paintings such as *Flesh* enact a sense of the originating gesture—the “intentional” mind/body, in phenomenological terms, that moved in space in such a way as to result in these juicy, joyous or wound-like scumbled marks on canvas (thereby pointing to what Merleau-Ponty terms “the world as flesh”). Such works also clearly activate my embodied response in return, giving me an opening to attach to (or reject) another “subjectivity” so expressed in paint. This is not to say, again, that the painting somehow delivers the “subject” Mira Schor to me, nor that it transparently conveys what she has said or written that she “intended” to convey with the painting. It is to say in phenomenological terms that her works—rather than simply being directed towards illustrating something in the world or the heavens (as with conventional Renaissance to modern “mimetic” painting) or towards interrogating the limits of painting itself (as with modernist abstraction)—call forth visceral, embodied memories and thus encourage emotional responses in viewers.

This idea of calling forth points to Schor’s own theorizing in her 2010 book, *A Decade of Negative Thinking*, about the purported “destruction of subjectivity” both within the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century and in some postmodern art theory and practice. Here she develops a compelling critique of recent painting practices, for example, that appropriate earlier strategies (in this case, Gerhard Richter’s “blurring” of photographic imagery in his blur paintings from the 1960s onward) while evacuating them of their relationship to specific histories and moments of embodied response to cultural extremes (again in Richter’s



case, a pointed response, in works such as *Uncle Rudi*, 1965, which depicts his uncle in a Nazi uniform, to the German past).<sup>5</sup>

Looked at within her own critical framework, Schor’s paintings violently reject such facile appropriations of stylistic tropes. Her practice (as well as her written theory) evinces a profound understanding of a range of modernist and postmodernist artistic strategies—and a measured and intelligent choice of which to develop towards Schor’s own stated feminist critical goals. Schor’s painting process—her painting the act of painting—most importantly deploys methods that impress upon our eye a haptic sense of her (former) “presence” as a painter, the gesture as encoded and conveyed in layers of oil paint or stripped away washes, when she is using gouache or ink, of carefully and joyfully applied pigment. She activates through these materializations of her highly refined and intelligent “intentional arc” (in phenomenological terms) the investment of viewers (albeit synaesthetically engaged ones).



As she has moved in recent years away from the explicit word content of her paintings from the mid 1990s to 2006 towards paintings of muteness (signalled by the blank thought bubbles described above), these points are no less compelling. For me, Schor's "silence" in recent works—the gorgeously puddled paint thought bubbles of *I'm Fine* (2008) or the scratchily rendered "blankness" of *Empty Mirror*—express human grief as an emptiness that is full. She has written in *A Decade of Negative Thinking* about a series of losses that have shaped her relationship to art and politics (from her parents' families, annihilated in the holocaust, to the loss one by one of her father, her sister, and her mother, to her experience living blocks away from the crumbling World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001).

Given these published narratives, and my own long-standing friendship with Schor (begun in the early 1990s), it is difficult for me not to experience the quiet of these thought bubbles as part of a process of learning to sit with this loss. In a manner resonant of the yogic idea of staying in the moment, the pictures seem to speak a silent speech that is calm and thoughtful; they seem in a way more loquacious than the wordy pictures of the mid- to late 1990s. They talk to me in ways that open up wells of unspoken feelings about my own losses: hence the stringent and reductive blue-white plane of *Influence* (2008), punctuated by a washed out ochre outline of a thought bubble, the slightly unsteady movement of the artist's hand conveyed in its uneven texture and its coherence ruptured by an aggressive vertical stroke of thick white paint, descending from the

top of the painting, speaks volumes. It speaks of flatness, abstraction, yet a reference to (and refusal of) verbal content; it whimpers of a subject both contained and ruptured, both "moving ahead" (finding new things to say) and stuck on a spit of pain, looking towards the past.

These works, then, which are intimate in size—a number of them only 12 x 16 inches (the largest 24 x 28 inches), are exemplary to some degree of what Schor herself has called, in her eponymous essay in *A Decade of Negative Thinking*, "modest painting." They may look to be low key and unassuming. But, when engaged with the full range of haptic sensation that they elicit, the paintings can open to complex worlds of affect as well as what Schor in "Modest Painting" champions as ambition for painting itself rather than career ambition. By making thought (and feeling) material, they achieve a kind of exchange of potential meaning, feeling, and experience that only non-explicit modes of communication can attain.

Reading her art critical writings one is made acutely aware that Schor's paintings, like her writing, are thus a wilfully assertive gift that demand a viewing/engagement that is intelligent and fully invested politically *and* intellectually *and* emotionally. Schor's art works in particular deploy the material means of painting to enact the coextensivity of the body and mind—and the coextensivity of thought, materiality, and feeling. Schor's art works enact in painting the rigorous feminist conceptual and political project that she articulates in her writing. As painterly paintings of the act of painting, they make thought material by making the gesture (the sign of the body's having been there, labouring and manipulating materials in space) visible *and* materially evident. In the age of overly explicit representation (reality television to tweeting to contemporary "relational" art, which literalizes social exchanges in art contexts) this is an epic achievement.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mira Schor, "Painting in the Stroke Strike Zone," in *Poetry Plastique*, Charles Bernstein and Jay Sanders, eds., exhibition catalogue, Marianne Boesky Gallery and Granary Books, Inc., NYC, 2001, 66.

<sup>2</sup> On the tension between words and the haptic quality of paint in Schor's work, see her August 23, 2009 radio interview with Charles Bernstein, published as "Close Listening," *Provincetown Arts* v. 25 (2010-11), 42.

<sup>3</sup> Schor, "Preface," *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), viii.

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining -- The Chiasm," *Visible and the Invisible* (1964), tr. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 131-2.

<sup>5</sup> Schor, "Blurring Richter," *A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics, and Daily Life*, (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 163.

Front image: *Flesh* (1997). Oil on linen, 12" x 16"  
Inside spread (left to right): *Read, Think, Walk* (2009). Oil on linen, 14" x 18"  
*Semi-colon in a Flesh Comma* (1994). Oil on linen, 12" x 16"  
*Mirror in Flesh* (1994). Oil on linen, 12" x 16"  
*Sign* (2005). Oil on linen, 12" x 16"  
Right panel: *The Idea* (2010). Ink on gesso on linen, 24" x 28"

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