

Miriam Cahn

opening reception: Thursday, 16 May 2024 | 6:00 to 8:00 pm

on view through July 11, 2024

OSMOS Address, 50 E 1st Street, New York, NY 10003

open Thursday - Saturday | 12:00 to 6:00 pm

and by appointment

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i close my eyes and crouch/lie on the floor when i draw as a way of working with my body memory. i close my eyes because the classical naturalistic approach has long outlived its usefulness – i close my eyes to be without aesthetic censorship, without control – i close my eyes to be too close, too personal, too feminine, too everything that is scorned, forbidden in art – i reject distance. in the work of art as i understand it, kinship with nature involves thinking, working and acting in new ways when it comes to what plants, animals and landscapes mean to me (i.e. to everyone). my planthood, my animalhood are a political and public part of me, just as my womanhood is a political and public part of me.¹

Grounded in radical feminist thought, Miriam Cahn negotiates ideas of physicality and humanity in her works. Spanning more than five decades, her oeuvre portrays the intensity and chaos of the world in a unique way. Images are combined with words to create a narrative that is as personal as it is political, unfolding in her drawings, paintings, texts, photographs, sculptures, videos and slideshows. As a leading contemporary artist, Cahn is best known for her drawings and paintings, but the exhibition by Meyer Riegger and Jocelyn Wolff at OSMOS is the first to present a rarely displayed aspect of Cahn's oeuvre in a single show: her digital slideshows, prints, photographs, notebooks and engravings. Due to the serial nature of the slideshows and the notebooks as well as the reproducibility of the digital, the exhibition emphasises the essence of Cahn's routine artistic practice, which is performed for just a few hours every day with the utmost concentration: works of art not as eternal, unchanging truths, but rather art-making as a constantly evolving way of thinking that shapes our own lives and therefore as a way of representing

¹ Miriam Cahn, 'VERWANDTSCHAFTEN, ABHÄNGIGKEITEN, UNVEREINBARKEITEN UND DIE ARBEIT KUNST', in *WAS MICH ANSCHAUTEN* (Zürich, 1993), p. 59.

and possibly changing the present. This spontaneous way of working, in which each piece is based on her daily state of mind, is clearly illustrated by the slideshow *das serielle denken* (serial thinking; 2022), which features photographs of paintings by the artist at various stages. Cahn sometimes paints over and changes pictures even after they have already been part of exhibitions. As the title suggests, Cahn is interested in the temporality of succession here. Something has happened between the different iterations of these paintings – thoughts, actions, political events. By altering the pictures, as well as reproducing them digitally, Cahn dethrones the classical genre of painting. The canvas reflects a specific state of mind, not just of the painter herself, but also of the world at a certain time on a certain day. The way Cahn paints is also the way she realises exhibitions: quickly and within a small time frame of usually less than three hours with the utmost concentration.

Influenced by feminism and the performance art of the 1960s and 1970s, Cahn began her work with large-format charcoal drawings of warships, televisions, fighter jets and other traditionally male pictorial themes. She would always draw on the floor, using her whole body, often with her eyes closed or at least so close to the paper that she could not see the overall picture, so that she could work as intuitively as possible, with the awareness – and assistance – of her hormonal cycle. Depending on the point in time at which she creates a work, she labels it either as a *blutungsarbeit* (bleeding work) or *eisprungarbeit* (ovulation work). The way the artist writes her titles – entirely in lower or upper case – corresponds to her approach of resisting prescribed structures. In the 1970s and 1980s, Cahn often made drawings in public space. One such example took place in 1979, when she added her drawings to an unfinished motorway bridge in protest against its construction. The series in *die geschichte fallen (tomber dans l'histoire)* [fall into history] from the same year brings together fourteen black-and-white photographs of her graphic interventions in urban spaces. Cahn deliberately began her creative work with drawing as the genre had always been regarded as subordinate to painting and was often ridiculed. In the early 1990s, at the age of fifty, Cahn decided to abandon the monumental drawings that had made her famous in favour of an equally intuitive style of painting. Since then, Cahn has used painting as a tool to depict her view of the world. Womanhood, gender, love, sexuality, violence, antisemitism, war and flight are recurring themes. She is also always concerned with the way these issues are reported in the media. Cahn describes her Super 8 films and video works as an 'extension of seeing'. In addition to the objects they portray, Cahn's films are often characterised by the sound of her own breathing, the trembling of her hands and the effects of her tiredness on the camera work. In the three slideshows *doppelköpfe* (double heads; 2014) *meine hände* (my hands; 2017) and *gemächte* (manhood; 2017), which are on display in the exhibition, the unsteadiness of the hand that takes the snapshots with the iPad also contributes to the aesthetic of the successive images. Between the individual shots, Cahn alters the sculptures modelled from plasticine – heads, male genitalia and hands – with just a few gestures. In the slideshow

doppelköpfe in particular, these minimal changes result in faces becoming visible in a wide variety of expressions, and it is sometimes surprising how dramatically this simply formed head can change from one image to the next. The potential of the human hand to exert violence on other people or living things, as well as to ultimately create images of this violence, is impressively negotiated here in a new way. Just as in *das serielle denken*, only the end result is visible; the in-between, the act of shaping itself, remains invisible. Cahn's notebooks – four of which are on display in this exhibition – are not to be viewed as preliminary studies or collections of ideas, but as works in their own right that are just as important as her works in other media. Recurring themes in her notebooks include pornography and violence, stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, as well as the female cycle, feminine energy and fertility.

Life and its fragility are at the centre of Cahn's work. Cahn renders this visible through the bodies of animals and people; sometimes the figures also resist conventional categorisation as human or non-human. In her generally unsettling works, Cahn unites two extremes: the vulnerability of the human condition and the inherent human potential to exert destructive violence. Through the power of her pictorial expression and the intensely luminous and vibrant colours of her oil paintings, however, the bodies and living beings that are humiliated, fleeing or even mistreated appear dignified and empowered in their own right. As the author and philosopher Caroline Emcke writes:

“Miriam Cahn's aesthetic strategy [...] is to re-humanise people fleeing. Their subjectivity is restored. Even the gesture of the greatest despair [...] still radiates strength in her work. It is a gesture of rebellion, not self abandonment.”²

However, as Emcke goes on to write, the concept of 'dignity' is one that has become detached from its original meaning in everyday language and is now used more to uphold conservative norms relating to sexuality and a hierarchical gender order. This distorted meaning of 'dignity' has nothing to do with Cahn's works. Rather, they show bodies

“in all their forms, all their temporalities [...], bodies that age, bodies that bleed, bodies that are penetrated, bodies that are aroused, bodies that sleep. [...] They are naked, sore, lustful, tired, but above all they are uncovered. They are women giving birth, women touching each other, delving into each other [...], they are men taking or being taken, bodies intertwined, immersed in each other.”³

Instead of concealing or suppressing, Cahn's works present physicality straightforwardly and without shame, thus creating a liberating effect. It is the 'touchable' dignity of vulnerable beings that Cahn renders visible. Her works are not determined by rules about how to look at a body, but by the sensual

² Carolin Emcke, 'Antastbare Würde', in GEZEICHNET (Milan, 2022), p. 38.

³ Ibid., pp. 39-40

pleasure of observing and recognising physicality in all its possible forms and, as Emcke points out, in all its 'temporalities' too. The body is not only spatially imagined, but also temporally, in all its genesis and decay. In reflecting on temporality, Cahn's figures from her late painterly oeuvre intersect with the digital slideshows, prints, notebooks and engravings shown in the exhibition. The focus on digital, reproduced, overpainted and serial images undermines the idea of the completed masterpiece in painting and emphasises Cahn's serial thinking. The exhibition thus presents Cahn's oeuvre as an enduring, evolving way of thinking and living based on her furious female gaze that defiantly stares at us, and this world, from her works.

- Alicja Schindler

For more information, see our website: osmos.online

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