

# MIRA SCHOR

4/8/11

CB1

by *constance mallinson*



**LOS ANGELES** Mira Schor once described her use of handwriting as something that “would allow me to paint paint.” In “Paintings from the Nineties to Now,” a small survey that ranged from her signature word and punctuation pieces to recent cartoonish narratives, Schor revealed what “painting paint” involves. In her 2009 book *A Decade of Negative Thinking*, Schor—a writer as well as a painter—prescribed a “modest painting” that emerges not from supersized career goals or a desire for mastery but from the sheer enjoyment of the medium, with its attendant rigors and ambitions. Her own practice aspires to the small, intimate and personal.

Schor’s word paintings are characterized by linguistic playfulness and elasticity. A complex synergy arises from the conjunction of language and abstract gesture. Allusions to variously hued skin, voluptuous folds and juicy orifices merge with the words and punctuation marks—loaded, humorous and poetic by turn. *War Frieze IX* (1992), a multipart, 10-foot-long section from a 200-foot-

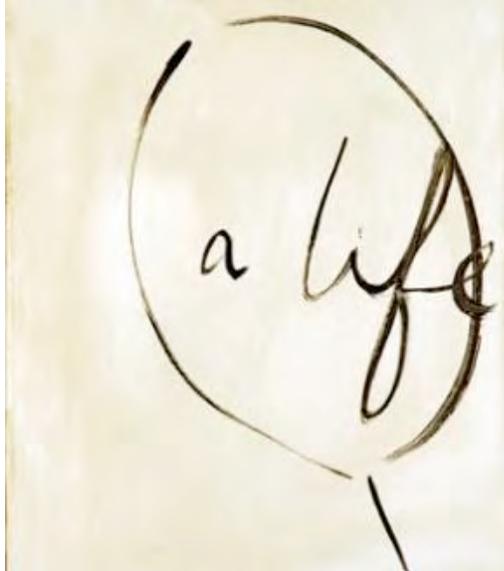
long work concerning the Gulf War, demonstrates Schor’s early fusion of words and paint, as well as the importance to her of feminism, which has informed her practice into the present. Issuing from a breast on one end and a phallus attached to an ear on the other, a red liquid stream outlined in squiggly pubic hairs spells out the word “undue” in cursive. The pink, impastoed, fleshlike ground bears the word like a tattoo. In the Gulf War context, “undue” could describe excessive force; but, given Schor’s predilection for double entendres, it also implies “undo,” as milk morphs into blood, the nurturing breast undone (presumably) by the weaponlike phallus. *In Sign* (2005), the title word is interlaced with Cézannesque swatches of green, beige and yellow paint. Schor’s art-historical roots are manifested in the work’s references to cubistic landscape, graphic design and, in the overall composition, a languorous Matisselike nude.

In a number of paintings from 2008–10, Schor turns from calligraphy to quirky stick-figure self-portraits quickly sketched with a paintbrush. The body parts seen in earlier works yield to depictions of the artist in her trademark glasses reading, walking and writing. She also ponders, as evidenced by thought balloons containing Gustonesque horizontal textlike lines. As always, attention is lavished on painterly process and formal manipulation: wet on wet application; transparent, tinted washes; bleeding marker lines; crusty accumulations of pigment; ghostly pentimenti; errant brushwork. However, in *Blank Slate* (2007) and (2008), bereft of figures or text, the thought balloons become small abstractions, executed in luscious strokes of moody grays, sooty whites, murky ochers and shades of black. The abandonment of explicit imagery or words and a reliance on the expressiveness of the paint itself to communicate leave us searching for clues, meditating on the paintings’ secrets. It appears as if Schor is finally, truly, “painting paint.” *I’m Fine* Photo: Mira Schor: *Blank Slate*, 2007, oil on linen, 16 by 12 inches; at CB1.

# MODERN PAINTERS

## Mira Schor

Published: June 4, 2009



"Suddenly," **Mira Schor's** first one-person exhibition in New York in over a decade, reveals an artist in the process of reevaluating her trademark interests. For well over 20 years, Schor has developed a practice in which language assumes multivalent roles. In her spare but luxurious oil paintings, sentence fragments, single words, and even punctuation are transformed into image by the artist's elegant hand. In her writing, the political agency of text becomes the critical nexus in such groundbreaking works as *Wet: On Painting, Feminism and Art Culture* (Duke, 1997) and *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, the popular journal of artist writings that she coedited with artist **Susan Bee** from 1986 to '96.

Instead of the fleshy semicolon or succulent nouns we have come to expect from Schor, the dominant image in "Suddenly" is a graphic speech bubble. A loose, narrative relationship among the 25 oil paintings, which tend to be small, begins to develop, complete with "pauses," or extra space between works to bracket humorous sidebars or emphasize important "thoughts." The sequence begins with

*Marker* (2008), in which interlocking bubbles form a tombstone inscribed with the name schor, and ends with an astonishing pair of pictures titled *I'm Fine* (2008) and *Portrait of My Brain* (2007). In between, the artist uses her mutable speech-bubble shape to track the endless and often painful fluctuations of lived experience: from the scratched-out, blackened face of *Anonymity to the gritty*, Gustonesque *Black and Grey Thought* to the ephemeral *As a Cloud*. The nuanced range of feeling generated by Schor's mute and often brutally funny "self-portraits" feels hard-won and new. They form a poignant counterpoint to her many years as one of the most articulate feminist voices in the artworld.

*"Mira Schor" originally appeared in the Summer 2009 issue of Modern Painters. For a complete list of articles from this issue available on ARTINFO, see Modern Painters' [Summer 2009 Table of Contents](#).*

## Mira Schor

05.09.10



Mira Schor, *Reader*, 2009, ink and gesso on linen, 16 x 20"

*Recognized for her contributions to painting theory and to feminist art history, the painter and writer Mira Schor has a new book available from Duke University Press. Here she discusses *A Decade of Negative Thinking* and her new blog, *A Year of Positive Thinking*.*

**AM I A NEGATIVE THINKER, AS THE TITLE OF MY BOOK SUGGESTS?** I don't think so, although it may seem that way because I speak out when I suspect that other people are just drinking the Kool-Aid. It's necessary to dig beneath press-release culture, and not just take the promotional sound bite as gospel and let it go viral into art discourse. So I decided to give myself the test or the experiment of *A Year of Positive Thinking*. There are so many things that I love in art, film, art history, and political history, which help me to be an artist; I really want to share that part of my experience.

I've been doing a lot on Facebook, posting links to things I think are beautiful, funny, moving, inspiring, while venting on various political issues that make me angry. The blog will be a battle between the two sides of my personality, maybe like Cassandra and Pollyanna. Cassandra tells truths no one wants to hear. But it's good to keep in mind that Pollyanna actually does the same thing: She's not at all the sweet, cloying kind of character we think of when we use the name in a disparaging way; instead she's more like a realistic, grounded character in a Kurosawa movie, albeit via Disney—she confronts with a generous curiosity the repressed private griefs of the inhabitants of the little town she has come to live in, as an

orphan.

My father, the artist Ilya Schor, died when I was eleven. The Archives of American Art asked my mother for his papers sometime in the 1960s, when I was a teenager. My father didn't do that much writing, but they said they were interested in *everything*—the ephemera of his life, art supply bills, that kind of thing. I helped put some of the material in order. At that time they did microfiches. Later, I was an art history major in college and I studied with H. W. Janson for one semester, which was in some ways very tedious and in others very interesting and an honor. It also pretty much persuaded me not to pursue art history! One of the things it taught me is that classic art history is actually doing things like researching Donatello's laundry list—you know, his receipts, where he lived when. I decided to study art in graduate school instead of pursuing art history.

I've been an inveterate self-documenter since I was a child. For example, I preserved carbon copies and early Xeroxes of all my letters from when I was a twenty-one-year-old grad student in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts and working on Womanhouse. I read them at the F-Word conference at CalArts in 1998, and I've included some of them in *A Decade*, in a chapter titled "Miss Elizabeth Bennett Goes to Feminist Boot Camp." I'm kind of amazed at how articulate and outspoken I was as a twenty-one-year-old, and how much the character of my writing voice was already in place. It's at times highly critical, but also passionate and politically engaged.

If I don't paint over a period time, I start to go crazy. Painting is a primary language that I need to "speak" and "hear" in order to survive at a very deep level of my existence. I love the process of drawing and painting, and I love creating images, but I can't imagine not writing—it would be like not thinking or speaking.

— *As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler*



# The Thing Itself: Mira Schor + Bradley Rubenstein, part 1

December 30, 2011 - 10:28 — bradleyrubenstein

Mira Schor is a painter and writer living in New York City and Provincetown, Massachusetts. She is the author of *A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics, and Daily Life* (Duke University Press) and the blog *A Year of Positive Thinking*. She is an associate teaching professor in MFA Fine Arts at Parsons The New School for Design. She is represented by CB1 Gallery in Los Angeles and Marvelli Gallery in New York City where she will have a one-person exhibition in March 2012.

**Bradley Rubenstein:** You grew up in New York City. Your mother was an artist; your father was an artist; you were exposed to art at an early age, both at home and in the museums. Can you remember when you decided that you were going to be an artist?

**Mira Schor:** The precise moment was during a 19th-century art history class in college. I majored in art history at NYU. The professor was saying something like, "Monet wanted to..." and I thought, "How do you know what Monet wanted?" I realized then and there that I identified with the "wrong" side of the slide projector: the artist, not the art historian. So that career choice fell away, and the only one that was left was to be an artist. I had shown interest and talent for drawing, painting, and sculpture all through my childhood. I was always serious about it and worked rather like I do now, in series, in which I would work a subject, form, or style until I was bored with it. I did many very lively little clay figurines when I was about ten. I was influenced by the Ashanti weights and pre-Columbian art my parents had collected. For a while in my teens I thought I wanted to be a fashion designer, so I filled sketchbooks with ink and wash designs, imitating the style of the *New York Times* "Women's Page" fashion reporting, which was all done with ink sketches in those days. I got pretty good at it, but when it came time to think of designing as a career, I realized I just liked to draw (and to own beautiful clothes!) but wasn't interested in learning how to actually make clothes.

I received encouragement from my parents and a lot of exposure to art through their work and their love of art. I was brought up in art and to some extent in the art world. I sensed then that there was a distinction, and I still operate under the terms of that distinction today. Making art and thinking about art, art ideas, art history -- that's one thing. The art world and career -- that's another.

On the door of my father and mother's small studio in our apartment in New York City is an antique metal shield on which my father had painted in oil the tools of the goldsmith's trade, a saw and hammer. The tale of the goldsmith's floor was one of the foundational metaphors of our family: In the workshop of a goldsmith, gold dust is husbanded carefully, but it sifts into cracks in the floorboards. When the goldsmith moves, the floor is burned to recover the accumulated gold mass. My parents, Ilya and Resia Schor, would often say, "We have gold on the floor, and we don't know how to pick it up." That can be understood as a

metaphor for the precarious finances, career disappointments, and the frustrations of creating something fine and not being able to capitalize on it into material prosperity, which are all part of an artist's life and were certainly part of what I learned as the daughter of artists. But most importantly, this story speaks of artwork that is not concerned with commercial exploitation. My parents often did work on commissions, from private collectors or religious institutions, but they each pursued the truth of the work rather than its marketability; indeed, they could never figure out how to mass-produce or design for mass consumption, or how to market themselves and their biographies, even though necessity often indicated that they should try to do so.

On the other hand, we did live in a house filled with treasures. When my father would finish one of his Torah Crowns, for example, he would come out of the studio wearing the human-sized, bell-laden crown on his head, its bells tinkling. He had a remarkable face with high cheekbones and wildly upslanted eyes that would be alight with joy at his wondrous creation. I had seen the work made; the work had deep religious meaning, and it was an art object filled with joy and generous with visual and narrative pleasure that even a child could enjoy and appreciate. What a wonderful introduction to art and art making!

I think I was always going to be an artist, but I still had to make the decision to be an artist for myself and take the consequences.

**BR:** What was the most significant experience you had at CalArts? Looking back, do you think your experiences there really defined how you approached being an artist?

**MS:** CalArts was the most significant experience I had at CalArts! The total atmosphere of that school at that time in the L.A. of that time. There was a unique multiplicity and parity of avant-garde positions all freely available and in the air. I had a dual experience at CalArts, and both aspects of it are equally important and deeply formative. I was in the Feminist Art Program my first year, and that was certainly the single most important experience in terms of determining much of my political involvements and critical focus since. But I am also very influenced by the Fluxus movement and the conceptual art movement that, with their anti-object and anti-market orientation, were very strong at CalArts. People like Allan Kaprow, Emmett Williams, Alison Knowles, Simone Forti, and John Baldessari taught there. I also had a wonderful advisor, the sculptor Stephan Von Huene, whom I worked with after I left the program. He was then doing sound sculptures that were beautifully crafted wood music-making machines with piano roll type of movements. He was really supportive of the intimate personal revelation I was trying to put into my small gouaches. One didn't necessarily have to work with each artist; they gave a "flavor" to the entire institution. You could pick up the Fluxus ethos on the way to lunch, passing Simone Forti doing something blindfolded in a hallway. Their conceptual yet playful and somehow whimsical attitude toward art made a great impact on my work.

There was a goofy spirit at CalArts then that is best expressed in *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* -- subversive but in a sweet, slightly anarchic rather than nihilistic manner. Paul Reubens, then Paul Reubinfeld, was at CalArts at the time I was there. Later the school became more earnest about conceptualism, more dogmatic about theory, and ever more savvy in terms of careerism, as the times changed in those directions and the history of the school was rewritten to make the success of some of my contemporaries, such as David Salle, seem like manifest destiny. And, surprise, surprise, the very existence of the Feminist Art Program was erased almost totally until, after the Northridge earthquake, a student was assigned to go over some books that were being junked. Lo and behold, she found copies of the catalogue for the *Womanhouse* project from 1972 about to be discarded. Students

researched the existence of the program and organized a major conference. Now, the history is surely forgotten all over again.

**BR:** Your working method has changed a lot since then. You are concerned with issues such as the materials and craft of painting ... also the idea of tradition and the history of art. What changed your direction or focus?

**MS:** I am not sure that my working method has changed as much as the way my work looks. If you look at one of my "story" paintings from CalArts and a recent painting of the word "trace," you might wonder if the same person did it. The first is a narrative painting in which a personal story is set out through self-figuration. The scene is set in a landscape whose forms are distillations of landscape and nature forms but whose forms are also related to the way the figure is drawn. I was skinny, and I liked to paint skinny cypress trees and pointy cacti. The second is of a word retraced a few times on a flat white ground, but basic characteristics of form and material are there in both: narrative, whether depicted or literally written; small scale; water-based media; and a certain way of using line. It is like the gloves are different, but the hand is the same.

There has always been a strong narrative and discursive impulse to the work. I first started using language as image in my work at CalArts. The language was more poetic then; I chose words I thought were beautiful. Later the language was autobiographical. Now the words are less personal and, in a sense, I let them choose me. I just wait for the right ones.

I was always interested in tradition and art history. I think that what has changed is only the illusion that I understand more than I did before. But I've thought that at every stage of the game. The biggest change is perhaps in what oil paint can do.

**BR:** The images of words or phrases that you paint seem perfectly logical to me. You write, you paint, you paint what you write. But your earlier works, which I also like, for example, "the penis paintings," are more image-oriented, figurative. Did writing and editing *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* have an impact on your painting?

**MS:** I'm glad that my painting of language seems logical to you! You know the typical conversation: "What do you do?" "I'm a painter." "Oh, what kind of paintings do you do?" (abstract or realist, figure or landscape?) "I paint language."  
"..."

I had used language as image before I ever wrote about art, and at the same time, the critical writing and editing had a great impact on the image paintings you're talking about. The penis paintings were done at the same time as I was researching and writing "Representations of the Penis." At this same time, a book review piece I wrote called "Researching Visual Pleasure," in which I reviewed Barnett Newman's *Collected Writings*, was simultaneous with and instrumental in my beginning to simplify my painting surfaces toward a flatter surface. This is also the moment when I began to shift from representational images to handwriting as the image.

The biggest impact writing as a process had on the work is that I learned that writing must be edited. The need for editing is imbricated in the text itself and springs out at you even if



you didn't intend to do it. All you need is to set a text aside for a week, and what needs to be done to it jumps off the page. The media I had painted in and worked with until that point were immediate and didn't allow for much reworking: gouache, dry pigment on paper. But finally by the early '80s, I was pushing gouache to its limits, doing very large gouaches on 36" x 72" rice paper sheets and painting it to the limits of its capacity for impasto. The fragility of paper and the various media I used were no longer a proper metaphor for self, so finally oil, which I had avoided up until that time, was the necessary medium. I made my way into it through about a year of pushing the sculptural aspects of the paper objects I had been working on. Then I started to paint in oil, and I had started writing and editing at the same time. I found that writing's organic necessity for editing gave me the patience and courage to use the capacity for alteration that is unique to oil. So just in the sense of process, my writing and doing *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* led to my ability to engage with oil.

The "penis" paintings were part of the last works that contained recognizable figural imagery. I sometimes miss having that kind of representation in my work, but I worked through those embodied representations over about seven years and moved on. The penis/ear/breast/language/punctuation mark paintings were part of a time when I was learning a lot about psychoanalytic theory and when the body was the arena for political discord, over abortion and AIDS. Gender was topic A. I am not convinced of any similar subject at the moment -- or any that would take the form of a figurational representation.

You can't imagine the shit I had to deal with, doing those penis paintings. People would read all their inner conflicts about masculinity and femininity into the paintings but never give the paintings or me credit for provoking such strong emotions. I experienced the downside of using controversial imagery; some people get famous, I just got told I was doing something wrong. The work would remind someone of how much they hated their father, and then they would tell me it wasn't well painted. And they were just looking at a slide! On the other hand, I really had fun seeing men roll their eyes back when I would talk about "my penis paintings." A woman saying "my penis," that really got people going, but actually I felt very happy and optimistic when I did that work, evidently characteristics that I ascribed quite positively to masculinity!

I see certain things in popular culture that I might want to interact with, things that relate to my "story" paintings -- the spiky forms of some of the strange dark cartoons on afternoon TV or something like that. It seems that every few years or so the art world produces another woman artist doing small autobiographical personal paintings with a surrealist touch. I moved on from that kind of work, so I tend to think of it as a stage. I don't feel the same need to put myself physically into a painting as I did then. My work doesn't serve the same purpose for me. Then it was necessary for me to use my art to tell people what was going on in my life. The work was a form of ventriloquism. Now the work is the work. It is not so personal, or, rather, what is personal has changed. I can't quite envision a way to represent myself as a figure in painting. And I don't really see myself doing that or going back to the tight painting techniques that calls for. Right now I want to move toward a looser, wilder, more entropic approach to painting.

**BR:** I view art making as an essentially social, not political, activity. As I see it, social is how you function in the world with other people, political is how you function in the world with other people to get them to do what you want.

**MS:** That does make political sound sinister. Actually I think all art has political content or valence, whether intentional or not. I think of my work as political not because I want people to do what I want, but because it is done in response to the political content of other

art, and by that I include, for example, the political meaning of the pure aesthetics of modernism. I find it possible to get sustenance from art for its "purely" aesthetic qualities and at the same time to function in art with a political perspective.

**BR:** You published your second book with Susan Bee, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism*. What else are you working on besides your painting?

**MS:** I'm working on the book I mentioned and on a whole group of paintings that are intimately related to the book, just as the book is intimately related to my painting. I've written about half, but the writing has been extremely difficult, very slow and tortuous. I'm trying to write differently than before, more personally, and with a much broader theme -- two themes really, painting and the role of the past in an ahistorical time. I've written one chapter essay called "Modest Painting," and I'm working on a really ambitious essay that examines the affectlessness chosen by much contemporary art and embodied in some familiar visual strategies, like blurring, by tracking these back to Gerhard Richter and then tracking the sources of his aesthetic decisions in the Holocaust and the Second World War. One of my works on paper related to this essay is a gray blurred text that "says," "*Why does the Past always have to be grey and out of focus?*"

**BR:** When I first moved to New York in the mid-'90s I thought it was a really great time and environment -- there was no style or movement to follow, the money was pretty much gone, and galleries opened and closed pretty quickly. The celebrity-ness of the '80s was kind of out of vogue for a while, and suddenly it seemed that you could try to do anything you wanted. You really anticipated that way of thinking in your career, allowing yourself to change style, developing other aspects such as teaching and writing. Was this something you set out to do from the beginning, or was it just the "zeitgeist," like it was for me?

**MS:** I never have had the belief in the art world that it demands. The art world I was brought up in had its careerists and even its youthful stars, but nothing like the 1980s commodity culture notion of career, professionalism, big money. Anyway, I had a run of beginner's luck in the early '80s with a couple of shows, and then all of a sudden I didn't have a gallery, and a friend of mine said, "Now you can do anything you want because no one is looking at you." The rhetoric of Western individualism is that the artist does what he wants, but often artists lose sight of that, or have their sight narrowly focused on what they think the art world wants. I thought that I already was doing what I liked, but it is true that my dealer had liked to think of me as someone doing quaint mystical landscapes, whereas I



wanted to pursue the sculpture and was going back to the more feminist aspect of my work. So my friend's advice was very good, and I really did go through a lot of changes in the next few years. *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* was the biggest other thing I did, and that was both against the zeitgeist of the great big hype art world of the '80s and part of the zeitgeist of the interest and excitement around critical theory in the '80s. Susan and I could do it because we had nothing to lose; we weren't interested in wielding power or in commodifying our critique or in growing into an institution. We also had the tradition of small magazines and poetry journals behind us.

**BR:** This year has gotten off to a difficult start, and I understand that your older sister, Naomi Schor, died suddenly in December, but what are your plans for the coming months?

**MS:** I want to finish writing the expository text of the book and then develop the presentation of its visual content. I want it to have a high visual quotient. I'd like to produce it in several incarnations, from straight text with pictures, to an artist's book of the drawings of elements of the text, to a CD with enhanced visuals including video clips.

After September 11th, people wanted to know if it would affect my work, and I felt that my work was already about loss. But the death of my sister has made me question art making in a more profound way. At the moment, human relations seem more important. But I have begun to get back to work. She had wanted a painting of mine in which the word "joy" is painted with a very gritty, fleshy, and shitty-brown paint, but it was in fact the last painting of a larger multi-canvas installation, so I substituted another *joy* painting. Now I am painting the word *joy* in as dark and contingent a manner as possible. That is the only way I can think of to re-enter art making after the loss of such a primal figure in my life. - *Bradley Rubenstein*

Figure captions:

"Small ear," 1989, oil on canvas, 20"x16"

"Joy (for Nomi)," 2002, ink, oil, rabbit skin glue, gesso on linen, 24"x28"



## The Thing Itself: Mira Schor + Bradley Rubenstein, part 2

March 10, 2012 - 20:28 — bradleyrubenstein

Mira Schor is a painter and writer living in New York City and Provincetown, Massachusetts. She is the author of *A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics, and Daily Life* (Duke University Press) and the blog *A Year of Positive Thinking*. She is an associate teaching professor in MFA Fine Arts at Parsons The New School for Design. She is represented by CB1 Gallery in Los Angeles and Marvelli Gallery in New York. The exhibition *Mira Schor: Voice and Speech* opens March 29 at Marvelli Gallery at 526 West 26th Street, 2nd floor, New York, New York, and runs through April 28.

**Bradley Rubenstein:** I feel that the art and the politics of the artist come together pretty seamlessly in your work, but in your most recent paintings there is more of a sense of introspection, despite the use of language, etc. They are really contemplative self-portraits. Am I far off the mark on this one?

**Mira Schor:** It's true. The work I've done since my mother Resia Schor died in 2006 has been deeply marked by that loss. It is an individual, private grief within a world where terrible loss is a constant, as we look at events in Syria today and around the world. Mine is a private individual loss, underpinned by larger historical forces. I'm the last of my immediate family on a family tree that my mother and sister composed in the 1990s. That piece of paper has been a major driver of the work I've done since 2007, beginning with my thought-balloon paintings. My mother remembered about eighty named or specific individuals from her family and my father's, going back to the 19th century. I counted that nearly half had perished in the Holocaust. At the bottom of the paper, at the end of this chain of human beings, my sister placed her name and birth date and mine. I feel a responsibility to all these lives, to my parents' artwork, and to the stories of their lives, which include the war and the Shoah. So this is cause for introspection, which in itself for me is a kind of joy.

At the same time, I'm a politically minded person, always drawn to oppositional ideologies and polemics. Interiority and exteriority occur sometimes in the same work, or works in a series shift from one frame to the other. I speak of two "politics": what's happening in the world, and art politics -- examining which definitions of art are hosts for different types of power. So in one painting I did last summer, a figure lies under a tree and looks at words hanging from the tree, words on time and space: "here/then" and "there/now." I was reflecting on the question posed by an e-flux book I was reading, *What is Contemporary Art?* I felt that the real question suggested by the book was, "Where is contemporary art?" and that the answer is that the contemporary, the now, is not *here*, where I am -- in the West, in the tradition of painting -- but *there*, in new global sites and new media. But I can only continue to paint, in the place I occupy, "here." Another painting in the series represents the same figure asleep with only the word "time" hanging from the tree, so now

"time" is not just historical time or timeliness, but also the time one has on Earth to work and express -- the temporal sword of Damocles.

In another new painting, the same figure sleeps under a series of cartouches that spell out the words "the dreams of all of us." I was trying to figure out how to express in my newest work the effect of Occupy Wall Street. This gets at some of the basic problematics of political art: Do you represent? Do you illustrate? Do you perform? I already was painting these sleeping dreamers, and then I was touched by a comment made by the student of a friend, which she posted on Facebook. The student (whose name I don't know, but I'm grateful for the eloquence) wrote, "In abstraction, one might think of Occupy Wall Street as a 'Sleep-In.' What fascinates me about this particular conceptualization is that it implies using the body's faculties for repose and rest(oration) in an artistic form of activism.... The use of the shutdown of the body to attempt a shutdown of the system is not only a startling symbol (metaphor), but also a deployment of the one thing that capitalism has not yet fully infiltrated: our sleep. It metonymizes sleep with resistance."

This was such a beautiful idea. I have a lot of trouble sleeping, but love to and need to sleep; one of my favorite scenes in the movie *Orlando* was the long sleep from which Orlando awakens as a woman. As he sleeps on, doctors are summoned, they examine him, and finally, with great and deliberate pomp, they declare, "The Lord Orlando is sleeping." I often think of that line with longing for such an epic and transformative sleep. Meanwhile the tents and all the apparatus of sleeping at OWS was the unglamorous (and courageous) nitty-gritty basis of what they were doing and maybe what drives authorities craziest. They are (they were) lying outside at night, vulnerable, *for us*, and collectively they were *dreaming for us*.

**BR:** It is interesting; when we started this interview, you were talking about doing figurative work again. How do you see what you are actually doing now as being different from how you pictured it would be?

**MS:** It was funny to read now what I said in our earlier interview, "I can't quite envision a way to represent myself as a figure in painting." Now most of the recent paintings are inhabited by a sketchily drawn figurative avatar of self, wearing glasses. I think I couldn't imagine it because all my earlier figurative work had been pretty tightly painted one way or another, and my goal was to move toward a more painterly expression in oil paint. For example, my figurative and narrative *Story* paintings from the early Seventies were painted really differently than I do now; then, I literally filled gouache color into line drawings. And the body I represented at age 22 was a lot differently imagined than the one that appears in my work now: then it was that of a girl growing her sexuality; now it is a barely gendered, barely embodied person walking around, sleeping, watching, reading. Some people have read my current avatar with its blocky head and large glasses as a walking camera rather than a human figure. But, in fact, there's a chain from narrative drawings I did in childhood to the current figuration. And painting language, which remains central to my work, is in part another form of figuration, though with a certain objectivity and power derived from the power of "speech" over "voice" or embodiment.

When I started painting in oil, in the Eighties, I was as scared as any intro-painting student by the uncontrollable aspects of oil paint, the fear of "mud." At first I couldn't figure out how to achieve the freedom that I had gained using pastel and dry pigment on rice paper in my work from the early Eighties, but once I gained some control over oil, the goal has been to *lose* control. The process is sort of a throwback to Abstract Expressionism's ethos of "finding

the painting" or of the painting as an arena for an action, though that ethos is grafted to a conceptual program. Desperation is a good motivator -- when you really feel you have nothing to lose because the painting seems so bad. A work needs at some point to become unmoored from intentionality, and the path to that is engagement with materiality, even if you have a conceptual frame.



**BR:** When we talked in your studio while you were working on these pieces, I mentioned Plato's Cave -- which you had already written about -- but maybe Walter Benjamin is closer to these works. He wrote about the Truth content with regard to art: "The transformation of material content into Truth content makes the loss of effect, whereby the attractiveness of the earlier dream [of Renaissance or Medieval art] diminishes decade by decade ... in which all ephemeral beauty is stripped off...." It sounds contradictory, but your paintings are both very beautiful and steeped in the arcana of painting, but they seem to be in the process of shedding a tradition of painting, getting down to the elements of what makes a painting a painting.

**MS:** Thanks for that perception, both parts of it, but particularly the idea that I'm shedding a tradition of painting while trying to get at the elements of what makes a painting a painting -- sounds good to me. But what you are seeing and saying is something that must be said by others than myself. What I can say is that my identity as a painter has always been caught, in a generative way, between the traditions of painting and the proclamations of the death of painting, of the object, of the individual artist, of private studio practice -- everything that has become the *doxa* of contemporary art.

When, in my late teens and early twenties, I first declared that the works I was doing were paintings, they were absolutely not accepted as such because the work was small, gouache on paper, figurative, and autobiographical; early on what I was doing was dismissed as illustration. This was at the tail end of the dominance of Greenbergian formalism. So right off the bat I was propelled by rejection of my claims for my work, into a place outside of "painting." Feminism clarified the underlying ideologies to me and made me understand more clearly what I had intuited before, that what I was doing was a political act, was artwork with a political valence, even when it did not have the overt markers of "political art." Then, conceptual art's use of language helped release me from a bond of admiration to the great traditions of painting and from a bond to figurative representation; it provided a portal to language as image. These shifts all took place in my earliest years as an artist.

A bit later the work was really more sculpture made of paper than painting, but I still called myself a painter. It got more complicated when I went through a phase of saying that I was a painter for whom sculpture was at the heart of my work and then that I was a conceptual artist who was a painter. But all these identifications really do exist simultaneously. I'm always bringing something from one faction or identity into the other, in ways that have generally made both sides uncomfortable and that give my paintings maybe a sense of, as Mike Minelli recently wrote, "not resting easy on the wall." Maybe that's what you are picking up on when you say I'm shedding the traditions of painting while trying to get to the heart of it.

In a number of the paintings I've done during the past year, my little avatar of self

contemplates the displacement of pictorialism to other media than painting. "The Displacement of Pictorialism" was the title of a piece that was going to be a chapter in *A Decade of Negative Thinking*, but I never finished it. Whenever I find myself in a darkened gallery or museum space looking at a large video projection on the wall, I think of how the painting that once would have occupied this space has been displaced because it is no longer seen as a contemporary interlocutor; its physicality is cast aside, only to be replaced by a projected image on exactly the same square footage. The only change is the displacement of faith in one medium to another, not the circumstance of pictorialism. What's the diff? Or, what the fuck? I think that's why I'm so interested in the objectness of painting -- painting as a "thing." So my little figure sits under a tree and looks at two cartouches hanging from it: one says "sociality"; the other says "The space where painting was," and a heavy ball, like an overloaded wasp's nest weighing down the tree branch, contains the word "matter." Meanwhile, the painting itself is a small oil sketch/ink drawing, so it is itself barely a painting -- somewhere between an oil-assisted drawing and a cartoon.

**BR:** We spoke about Ad Reinhardt's cartoons and what if Reinhardt had tried to merge his passion for satirical art commentary in his cartoons, and his reductive passion for painting, into one highly contingent work. But maybe that's stretching it; you may feel that the work itself is closer to Guston in style and spirit, with a touch of Indian miniature painting, and some of Florine Stettheimer and Remedios Varo thrown in, in your diffident and studious figures. But my take is a little different: with Reinhardt and Guston there was a definite separation between text and image; I see your painting and writing concerns becoming synthesized. There isn't as great a distinction between where one begins and one ends.

**MS:** At this point I feel I just have to get to whatever I want to, and that means disregarding artificial distinctions imposed by others. I see that too in the way I approach writing now. For a long time I felt I had to write to a certain academic standard so that my arguments were solidly enough grounded in research and theory that they might be taken seriously in the arena I aimed them at. It was a necessary discipline at the time, but I don't feel I have to do that now. In my blog, *A Year of Positive Thinking*, I develop an idea in a kind of pressure-cooker method, and there's a free flow between research, politics, artworks, and some of my own photographs and drawings related to the subject at hand. I try to be as thorough as I can, but I'm working to the speed and range of the web.



Similarly, in the recent paintings I'm really speeding up the relations between theory and practice, reading and painting. A number of key paintings have been done in the following manner: In the summer I lie under my favorite tree and read books on contemporary art and theory. Usually I look for books that articulate views seemingly oppositional to my own. I thrive on the resistance they offer, though last summer, in addition, I read some writings and lectures by Philip Guston, as well as a book on his late work, and also the wonderful writings of Morton Feldman. I always keep a notebook near me when

I read because I find it useful to engage in a kind of parallel thinking: reading makes me think and write, but not necessarily directly to the specific text (those annotations go directly into the margins of the book). I also have a pile of small sketchbooks, ink markers, and pencils next to me (and some chocolate chip cookies and ice tea -- as you can see, I'm describing Paradise). I sketch to the readings and against them, responding as immediately

as possible to my embodied sensations as I lie there, to the text as to the unseen birds chirping loudly in the tree above me. I try to capture the sense of myself lying there, reading and thinking without regard for any kind of representational correctness, in the aim of a more important accuracy, like an internal gesture drawing of a state of mind/body. Then I spring up, run into the studio, and as quickly as I can, I transfer one of these drawings to canvas in what I call oil-assisted drawings, Then these produce the further challenge of how to keep the spontaneity of drawing intact while continuing the conversation in paintings that begin and end with oil on linen only.

**BR:** You've given your upcoming show at Marvelli Gallery the title *Voice and Speech*. I see layers of meaning in it -- voice is to speech as seeing is to looking. However, one must also master speech in order to have voice.

**MS:** Yes, exactly. A couple of paintings feature those words. I was inspired by an idea put forward in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. His theme is that there exists a knowledge that precedes theory and that retains "voice" even when "speech" attempts to subsume it. It is the same knowledge that causes the city dweller to inscribe living patterns of usage onto the fixed grid of the planned city; it's the knowledge of the folkloric, of craft. He writes, "In turn, 'the voice' will also insinuate itself into the text as a mark or a trace, an effect of a metonymy of the body...a transitory figure, an indiscreet ghost, a 'pagan' or 'wild' reminiscence in the scriptural economy, a disturbing sound from a different tradition, and a pre-text for interminable interpretive productions."

I may be creatively misreading de Certeau -- other writers from this period reverse the meaning, giving "speech" the meaning I'm giving to "voice" -- but "voice" and "speech" are what I do: the feminist project of bringing the "voice" of living inside a woman's body with a mind into the "speech" of art, as co-editor of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* with Susan Bee giving visual artists a public space in which to participate in "speech," as a writer bridging the gap between the "voice" of painting and the "speech" of art theory, as a painter of language bridging the gap between two systems of knowledge and returning "speech" to "voice." I'm always seeking to valorize "voice" while giving "speech" to "voice."

**BR:** I am looking forward to seeing your show. I am sure you are too. I think that seeing your new pieces is going to be quite an event, especially in New York, at a moment when painting, serious painting, is really needed. Any thoughts?

**MS:** It feels like an interesting moment for me to have this opportunity to show my work, when the art world may be reconsidering or reflecting on excess, and values may be shifting. I hope my work's mix of materiality and thought, interiority and politics, has an emotion that is tuned to the time.

I'm looking forward to installing the show. The works are small, and the space is imposing, with long walls and high ceilings, so right now I'm thinking about how to present the individual paintings while establishing visual rhythm and narrative structure. My work always has a narrative and discursive aspect, so I'm interested in my shows having an underlying narrative, though not at all an overt one, but one that somehow is communicated to the viewer as a subtext that may be intuited: each painting is an individual work, and represents a thought, yet is part of a larger thread of thought.

In this group of work there are a few major themes or progressions along an idea: the idea of contemporary art, painting and theory; the idea of time; the idea of the dream of social change. There are a couple of connections I want to make to slightly older paintings of

individual words. Having some sense of sequencing and chronology matters, though it's possible that a less narrative or more metonymic sequencing will work best in the space.

But I'm most interested in the narrative I don't know about yet, in what will become apparent when the work is up. I'm interested in what the paintings will tell me about what the next paintings will be. The world and my daily life will always suggest "subjects," but the works themselves suggest directions in investigating painting itself. - *Bradley Rubenstein*