



KEEP AN EYE ON THE BOWL: THE ART OF JOAN SCHULZE

October 7 - December 30, 2021

Curatorial Reflections

On view at Ruth's Table Gallery, *Keep an Eye on the Bowl* exhibition is a celebration of selected works from Joan Schulze, an internationally acclaimed mixed-media quilt, collage and fiber artist.

As a contemporary artist, Schulze bridges abstraction and minimalism, fine arts and crafts, East and West. Named a "pioneer of the art quilt movement," Schulze has revolutionized the field of fiber arts with new quilting forms and techniques, embrace of digital tools and processes within the traditional craft form, and non-conventional visual language fused with her poetic verses, modern art, and broad cultural influences from around the world.

The title of the exhibition, *Keep an Eye on the Bowl*, is a reference to the Schulze's Bowl Series, her ongoing series of quilts inspired by an antique Chinese tea bowl gifted to Schulze as an expression of gratitude for her teaching and exhibiting at Shenzhen University in China. This body of work immortalizes the precious object and pays homage to the culture it comes from.

The bowl itself goes back to the Tang Dynasty (618 to 907 AD) rule when Ancient China experienced a time of peace and prosperity that makes it one of the most powerful nations in the world. This time period is sometimes referred to as the Golden Age. Schulze's flirtation with the bowl as a subject deepened by her engagement, introspection, and cultural immersion with Eastern philosophies, Zen and Buddhism, Haiku poetry, and other cultural traditions, inform and drive her endless creative experimentation.

While the output is awe inspiring, this unique poetic quality of the work draws the viewer and provokes awareness and appreciation for the culture that is rich and sophisticated. In the modern climate, we cannot but reflect on social justice, societal divisions, and rise in hate crimes targeted at the "other" throughout our country. As a civil and multi-ethnic nation, we must strongly reject hate and bigotry to be replaced with fairness and tolerance.

With a penchant for technique and technology, Schulze has always included non-traditional practices in her work, experimenting with and melding new quilting forms and techniques, fabric dyeing processes, printmaking, embroidery, machine sewing, collaging techniques, and photography.

Named a pioneer of "alternative photographic processes", Schulze has developed a distinctive image transfer method of her own, evident in this exhibition through a series of her collage works. She applies glue onto photographic images and attaches the paper to the fabric. Once the paper is carefully peeled away, the image remains on the fabric. Through variations of this application process, the fabric may assume various qualities and look either smooth or textured, opaque or transparent.

According to Schulze, the completion of a quilt is a long process, during which creative experimentation comes in and so does chance. Images in her work are created using photocopy processes and Xerox transfers that give her the upper hand to manipulate, recompose and distort photographs. The process goes back and forth from the originals to re-composed copies until she prints the drawings onto fabric and paper to become parts of her quilt or collage. It is natural to find an affinity between Schulze and John Cage, a Zen Buddhist minimalist who composed his music by flipping a coin and consulting the I Ching. Editing and working with paper copies, juxtaposing and overlapping images, Schulze builds a larger composition. Layering the pieced drawings over batting and backing, the elements are then ready to quilt.

The lines formed by intricate piecing and photographed-photocopied drawings are then complemented by the added stitched lines. These visual elements play with your eye and perception and create interactive moments that make you wander, discern and engage in its messages. In Joan's words: "I see these drawings as lines of poetry. Each line supports the other. When all the stanzas are finished the drawing asserts itself." It is Schulze's way of melding two inseparable parts of her identity - as a poet and a visual artist.

On a number of occasions and upon completion of a quilt, Schulze would write a short poem. These are insights that reveal her intimate thoughts of the moment. A case in point is

Meditation-Place (2008)

meditation on form
a state of mind
when distance
equals X

or

Two Bowls (2006)

inside and outside
revealing
a state of mind
complex
contemplative
like a morning fog

Schulze's poetic lines are enhanced by graphic details, calligraphic markings, repeating images of inconsistent quality, and other seeming imperfections that Marcel Duchamp saw as beauty. One of the striking examples presented in this exhibition is *A Long Time Ago* quilt executed in a dramatic black-and-white palette with images of a rotating bowl against the backdrop of crumpled newspaper pages and dark smudges that suggest residuals of ashes from a smoking kiln. Duchamp would have approved of Schulze's kind of imperfections with delight.

A number of quilts in this collection offer a different direction, where colors stand out and influences from contemporary art are visible. Schulze is drawn to artists who are in line with her own aesthetic sensibilities. In passing, she mentioned fondness for Agnes Martin's minimalism along with her interests in Eastern philosophies, an appreciation for geometric abstraction and a distilled earthy palette of beiges, greens, grays, and creams.

Schulze also favors Robert Rauschenberg, a restless inventor and risk taker who is hailed for his ability to marry seemingly incompatible fragments and abstract forms that do not adhere to a pure aesthetic heterogeneity. No wonder reviewers have called Schulze "the female Rauschenberg" for she too has broken many traditions with as much risk, rebellion and ingenuity for more than four decades.

For Schulze, quilting is about having an open mind and an eye on experimentation. The idea of improvisation is a continuous thread present throughout her work. She takes risks and chances in plotting her quilts, a free style that is open and spontaneous, a core characteristic of Schulze's approach to her craft and poetry.

In *Keep an Eye on the Bowl*, the ancient tea bowl acquires a new meaning within the context of our times. It is no longer just paying tribute to her host and the traditional function of tea ceremonies perfected by Zen masters. Schulze quilts and collages represent a break from traditional craft form in pursuit of reinvention. With the strong drive for innovation and experimentation, Schulze succeeds in blurring disciplines, invents and borrows techniques that pave the way to her claiming the title of a trailblazer. Just like the ceramic bowl and her poetic roaming that are immortalized in her work, so is Schulze's legacy. It endures.

Hanna Regev, Curator
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