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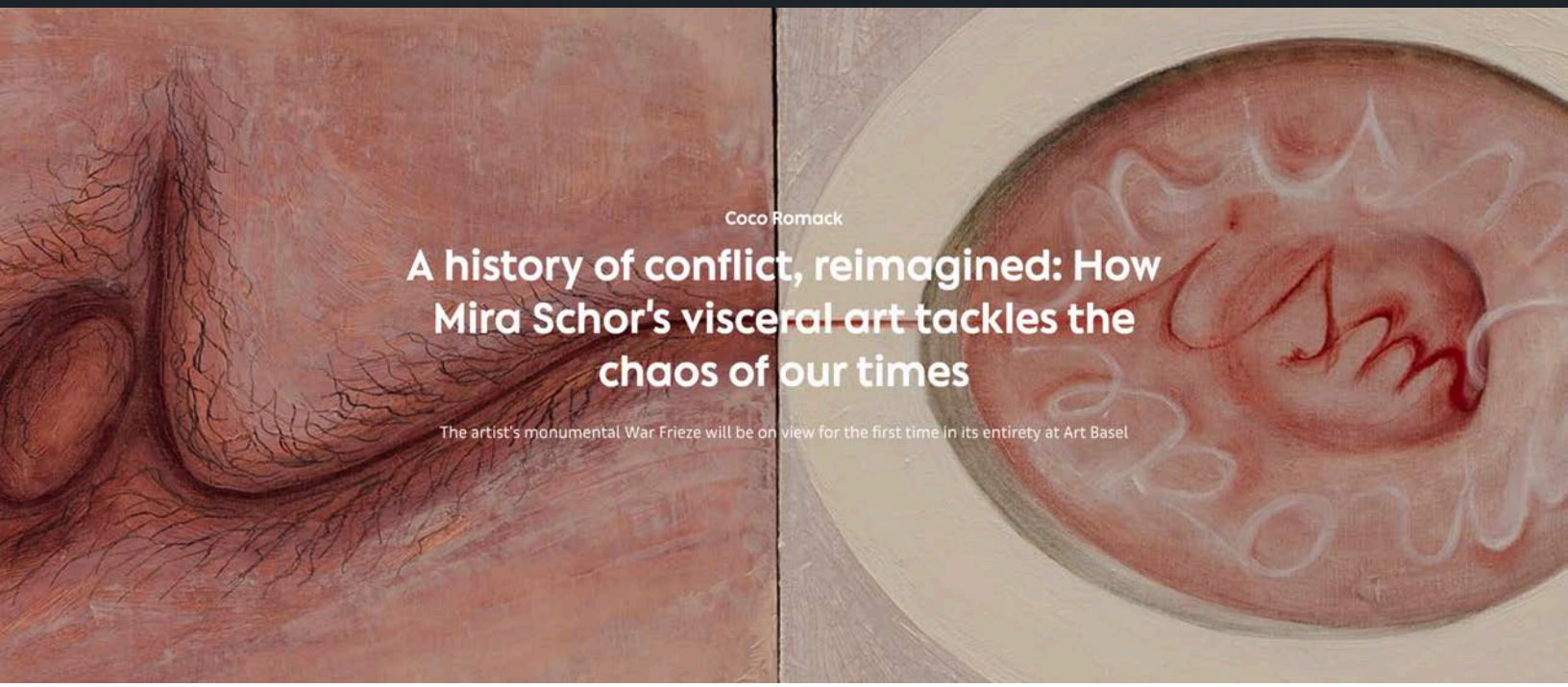


Coco Romack

A history of conflict, reimagined: How Mira Schor's visceral art tackles the chaos of our times

The artist's monumental War Frieze will be on view for the first time in its entirety at Art Basel

Mira Schor made her magnum opus *War Frieze* (1991-1994) in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Named after the decorative bands that stretch around classical architecture, the piece is a singular narrative composed of many smaller paintings of sexual organs and appropriated language of war, linked by threads of rendered bodily fluids. When these are seen together, *War Frieze* seems to extend endlessly, pointing to the ever-churning slug of patriarchal violence. It is a monumental work that questions the notion of monumentality, carrying with it a critique in content, form, and scale.

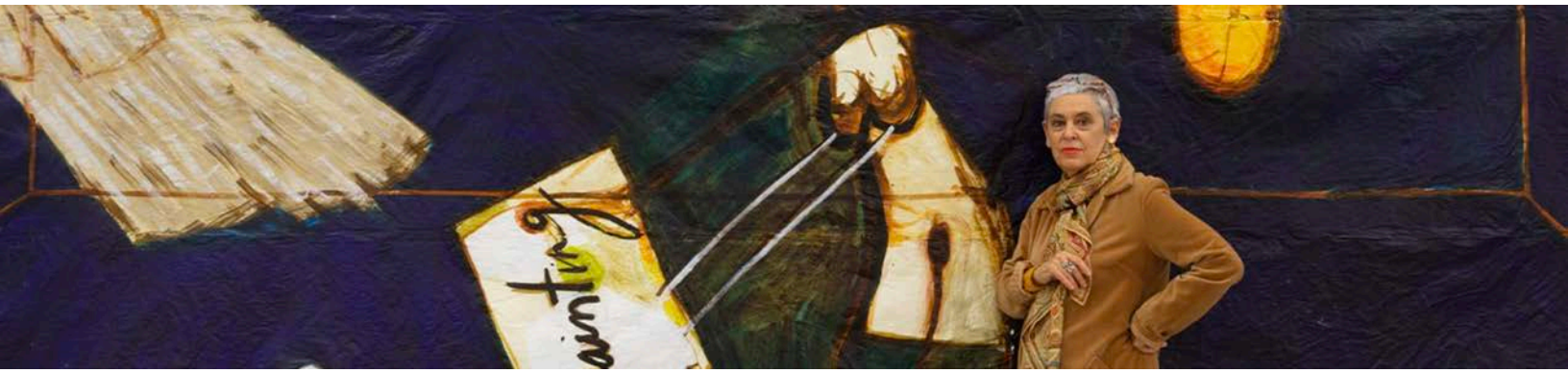
Schor, 71, recently returned to live in the home where she was raised, a sunny top-floor apartment located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She's made some minor changes to the space, transforming the largest room into a modest painter's studio, and kept other key elements intact. Near the kitchen, in a narrow chamber barely wide enough to accommodate a twin bed, sits a wooden desk cluttered with rolls of tape, mugs exploding with rulers and sharpened pencils, and rusting steel pliers of various sizes. The room was once the office of her father Ilya Schor, himself a celebrated artist and jewelry maker. It remains delicately preserved, like *A Goldsmith in his Shop,* a painting by [the Dutch artist Petrus] Christus,' Schor says.

Mira Schor in front of War Frieze in her studio at Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation, 1993. Photo by Sarah Wells.

Like her father, Schor has developed many of her seminal works, including parts of *War Frieze*, from domestic spaces animated with cherished objects. Since the 1970s, she's made visceral narrative paintings that pull from the body an intimate interior vernacular, often explicitly so, and throughout periods of time when prejudice about gender was, harrowingly, the norm. 'I felt that women were filled with language, not just as chitter-chatter, but ideas, ambitions, and philosophy,' she says. The flesh-like peach canvas *Slit of Paint* (1994), a vulva whose clitoris has been substituted for a semicolon, makes this concept literal. Schor typically works in series and on small canvases, utilizing the movement between segments to signify the flow of power in society. Stringy lines of breast milk, blood, or semen morph into scrambled cursive text appropriated from men's fragrance advertisements or abortion legislation. And yet, despite her brash subject matter, these compositions are deceptively beautiful; for Schor, painting is a tool to enrapture and ensnare, a 'synergetic honey-trap for contemporary discourse,' she writes in her 1997 essay collection 'Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture.'

Mira Schor, Slit of Paint, 1994. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King, New York City.

From behind a pair of frames striped with candy colors, Schor – who teaches part-time at Parsons School of Design – speaks lucidly and pointedly about her practice. Her feminist perspective was shaped very early on. Schor was 11 years old when her father died in 1961, and in his absence, her mother, Resia Schor, took up his tools. ‘She began to work in metal and really found herself as an artist,’ Schor recalls. ‘She would make dinner for me, and then she would go back to the studio for a couple of hours. So, I had this really inspiring model as a young teenager and as a young woman, of watching my mother work.’ Settling in the United States in 1941 after fleeing the Holocaust, Ilya and Resia filled their home with politics and a rousing activist spirit. After her husband’s death, Resia’s table continued to be a gathering place for new ideas, and a welcoming forum to voice them. ‘There were these massive, long discussions at the kitchen table for hours with my mother, my sister, and her friend, [the scholar] Nancy K. Miller, who was a feminist,’ she says.



It was from her sister, the literary critic and scholar Naomi Schor, that Schor learned about the now-legendary Feminist Art Program helmed by the artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro at CalArts in Santa Clarita, California. She moved across the country to enroll in its inaugural MFA in 1971, away from her mother's kitchen table and the museum halls she had spent her childhood exploring. The alien Californian landscape would profoundly mark the art she made at the time, her 'Story Paintings' (1972-1973) on gouache capturing surreal, erotic trysts nestled within the succulents and palms. Her stay at the school was 'life-determining,' a time, she says, that helped her establish a 'political point of view, not just in what the politics were, but being active in a political sense, publicly.' The collective energy of the women's liberation movement took root, but so did the influence of other significant art movements. Schor was particularly marked at the time by the anti-commerciality of the experimental group Fluxus and the conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner's text-based declaration of intent showcased at MoMA's controversial 'Information' show in 1970.

'[That show] was quite a shock to my system, but it opened a door,' she says, recalling the works that compelled her to begin incorporating language into her practice, albeit cautiously at first. 'That's been a frequent mechanism in my life as an artist, that I respond, at first, very critically to something new. But the things I respond to the most critically ultimately become part of me.' By the time Schor began work on *War Frieze*, she had become widely respected for her critical writing, in part for her role as co-editor of the magazine *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* with fellow painter Susan Bee. Where her earliest works communicated deeply personal experiences and desires in thick washes of paint, the pieces that emerged in the decades that followed dealt with external politics, often incorporating news-clipped and altered text for critical examinations of power, including the misogyny intertwined with the history of the medium.

To that end, *War Frieze* is a definitive achievement, and it is especially potent among Schor's oeuvre as it aims to instigate physical action. Extending for over 200 feet across various 12-by-16-inch modules, the viewer's own body is encouraged to follow a linear thread. Schor, who had witnessed the wave of protests against the atrocities of the Vietnam War only to see the tolls of American imperialism in the Gulf War, set out to make an 'endless painting about endlessly circular militarism and aggression,' she says. But the work evolved to become a signpost for various other forms of top-down injustice: fluids shooting from a chubby penis attached to an ear might eventually lead the eye to a scribbled appropriation of the phrase 'Undue Burden,' referencing the wording of a Supreme Court abortion decision, seemingly spelled out in blood. '*War Frieze* is a little bit like a run-on sentence,' Schor says – and in fact, she has never seen the work installed in its entirety. That will happen for the first time next month at Art Basel in Basel, where the piece will be presented by New York's **Lyles & King** gallery in the Feature sector.

Mira Schor, War Frieze, 1991-94. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King, New York City.

Though understandings of the gendered body have evolved in the 30 years since Schor began painting this masterwork – as have the dominant goals of today's feminist movement – *War Frieze* maintains its sting. In truth, the language of oppression hasn't changed tremendously since. That's perhaps why many of the same symbols populate the artist's compositions today: the floating dick in *The Painter's Studio* (2020), or the squiggly script reading out the title of *This Is Not Political* (2020) might be traced straight back to *War Frieze*. 'In this most recent period, I just use anything from the history of my work,' she says. 'Whatever it is that I need to put into a painting, that goes in.' History is wont to repeat itself, until the cycle is broken, the sentence properly punctuated. For now, 'the critique of patriarchal power as an underpinning of our society continues,' Schor concludes.

Mira Schor is represented by **Lyles & King** (New York City), who is presenting *War Frieze* in the Feature sector of Art Basel's Swiss edition.

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