

**MIRIAM  
CAHN**



# MIRIAM CAHN

30.09.11 – 17.12.11

The exhibition, specially developed for the Foundation, marks the first solo presentation of Miriam Cahn in London. The first two galleries include two “room installations” from 1997 and 2010-2011. The third gallery presents a broader selection of paintings, drawings and photographs spanning Cahn’s career from 1978 to 2011. Most of these works have never been shown before.

Miriam Cahn’s work emerged from a compelling physical experience instilled by the performative happenings of the 1970s and is influenced by the feminist movement of the 1960s. First structured around performances, large black charcoal drawings and interventions in the street, her practice grew to include films, music, photography and the medium for which she is perhaps best known: painting.

## **(Drawing)**

Miriam Cahn studied art and graphic design in Basel (1968-73), she was a drawing teacher and scientific illustrator from 1973 to 1976. Her career as an artist started with her first exhibition at Gallery Stampa, Basel, in 1977, in parallel with her growing involvement in the women’s liberation movement and in feminist performance art.

‘For me, drawing was simply something direct [...]. Drawing was the simplest, the most direct, the most meagre [...] almost like writing down words or thinking. Drawing was also the most physical, because it was the simplest. It began with pencil drawings, then developed further to large formats [...]. That was a decision: against oil painting as “big artwork”. The good thing about black-and-white was you no longer had to choose, it was simply the chalk or pencil and background’. (From an interview in 2001 with Peter Burri, published as ‘Art, Directly’, reproduced in Miriam Cahn, Madrid: Fundacion La Caixa, Madrid, 2003).

Cahn started by working with pen and charcoal drawings, often as in situ installations. She wanted to integrate movement and performance into her practice: ‘[Drawing] was for performance purposes for me. I was convinced that performance was the new thing, but I did not want to put on a performance myself, but to draw in a performance act. [Drawing] always had the character of a performance, both on the floor and on the table’ (Interview with Peter Burri, 2003, p. 186). ‘I draw lying down, crawling, crouched, with black chalk, I dance on white paper and wash the dust from my body

afterward.’ (Miriam Cahn in her artist’s book *What Looks at Me Surroundings*, Darmstadt: Häusser, Darmstadt, 1996).

The photographic series *in die geschichte fallen (tomber dans l’histoire)* from 1979 documents her performative acts of drawing. The series centres upon spaces, rooms and warehouses with drawings on the walls. A subsequent image shows an outside wall marked with drawings.

### **(Colour)**

Miriam Cahn introduced colour into her drawings in a series of atomic bomb watercolours (1985-91), throwing pigments - usually the primaries: yellow, magenta, cyan - and water directly on the surface of the paper: ‘I fling the water with the colours [...], they flow down again (like fallout), get out of my control and mix (contamination)’ (Cahn, 1996). However, a back injury prevented her from continuing to create large-scale works directly on the floor. She therefore decided, from 1992, to shift from horizontality and the friability of charcoal to verticality and the liquid properties of oil. Drawing, however, remains an important part of her production.

Cahn’s oil paintings are uncommon and immediately recognisable. An extraordinary colourist, she uses vivid pink, violet and blue to represent ghostly silhouettes, faces and animals. ‘The first oil paintings, of course, were elementary in their statement, simple only with three colours. For me, colour was always a complication. And because I wanted to work quite directly and physically at first, I intentionally left out colours in order not to slow it down with an intermediate step. That for me is black-and-white.’ (from a conversation with René Pulfer in *Drawing Room Confessions # 3*, 2011). In her first paintings in 1989 the use of colour was highly coded:

Yellow = poisonous, deadly, death, destruction

Magenta = keep, store, warehouse


Cyan = plants, shadows

Mixture = paths, streets, parking spaces, terrain vague.’

(Cahn, 1996, p. 18.)

### **(Painting)**

In Cahn’s practice there is a strong rupture between the charcoal works, which were done on a horizontal surface – drawing on paper on the floor – and the vertical application of paint to the canvas. In contrast to the solid chalk, paint as a fluid medium also asks for a different technical treatment, a readjustment perhaps of internalized movements. These shifts influence the physical relationship of body to surface. In Cahn’s paintings the body is not only the object of contemplation, but also the medium through which the artist’s corporeal





images are expressed.

The room installation RAUMICH räumlichich, 2010-2011, installed for the first time at DRAF, consists of ten paintings. Each painting shows a body, is a body, a portrait of women. The figures are about life-size, confronting the viewer with their nudity and their frontal gaze, yet at the same time, partially disappearing into abstraction. An arm will slide behind a rectangle, limbs wash out into colour. Here, colour is used to highlight as well as to melt shapes into one. While we immediately recognize the human figures, their surroundings remains unfocused; with the canvas mostly cutting off below the knees there is no ground for them to stand on.

For Miriam Cahn, painting is not more 'final' than drawing. A painting to her is just as momentous, as intuitive. She often starts working without knowing precisely what the finished surface will look like, but rather with an internal image in mind, a dream-like image. In her paintings of human figures some body parts (often hands, breasts or genitalia) may be clearly depicted and looking life-like, while others are left as outlines, as if their details had been forgotten. 'Before, I would write dreams down. But I do not try to paint the dream like a film. Rather, I imagine myself back in the dream again, and strange things occur.' (Interview with Peter Burri, 2003).

### **(Feminism)**

The drawings Cahn performed on the floor at the beginning of her artistic career - sometimes with eyes closed - had a feminist dimension, questioning the notion of the artwork as a self-enclosed, autonomous object and the romantic ideal of the artist as (male) genius. 'I worked on the floor: still less control, no standing back in painter poses and "correcting, improving" until it became the masterpiece, the "best", the masculine-oriented "genius". I worked on the floor to forget everything, to see nothing, to be close to the personal, the feminine, to everything forbidden or taboo in art: I rejected distance. I rejected the assertion that art is gender-neutral. Slowly, over the years, I found my own rhythm: about three weeks work, one week rest.' (Cahn, 1996).

Cahn famously declared: 'Mein Frausein ist mein öffentlicher Teil' (My femininity is my public part)', elaborating, 'I work with feminine energies: "ovulationworks" during my ovulation, "menstruationworks" before my menstruation.' (Cahn, 1996). But the artist condemns clichés about women and art: 'I hate symbols and vulgar psychological clichés: woman is not nature, not unity, anima, Ur-mother, not the dark, the raven, not the symbol of death, the tree, not that of life and the horse, not symbol for freedom. Raven is raven, tree is tree, woman are I myself (i.e.: everyone) and the horses do whatever they feel like anyway.' (Cahn, 1996).

### **(Exhibitions and Installations)**

Cahn's exhibitions are most often installations in which she creates an entire room of drawings and/or paintings, or she decides to hang works from different times in dense and rhythmic arrangements, producing extraordinary visual surroundings. On some occasions, she has run a line of works along the four walls of the gallery or installed a shelving unit in which her drawings are archived, making it possible for visitors to handle them. By allocating her works into different series she has not only created a private index, dividing the paintings into cycles, but also demarcates direct positions, which—in the whole and especially when they are hung together—interact with each other as autonomous bodies of work.

When exhibiting, Cahn often chooses to show older works next to newer ones. Even if a work was made decades ago, the perception of it happens in a moment, in the now. That is what interests her. 'For me it's an old work, an old space, now. How should I explain this? History when it functions has no patina. (...) I've never, simply never in my life looked at history as something past. History is formed of layers, but it all belongs together. (...)


One can also quote oneself. That happens actually more and more. Self-quotation is not routinely doing the same thing; it's a deliberate repetition of certain things today, now. It's not simply to copy, but to think about what history means in one's own work.' (Cahn, 2011).

### **(Performing)**

Although known mostly for her black-and-white drawings and vivid colour paintings, Cahn has also experimented with performance, film, video and sound. Whatever the medium, she is concerned with the intensity of the instant, and not with matters of conservation or duration:

'The chalk and charcoal drawings are still perfect, and the less one tampers with them, with restorations, the more perfect they are. Naturally, paper goes to seed with time. In this sense, they were not intended for eternity. An oil painting doesn't last forever either, despite what is claimed. Colour also goes to seed with time, I really don't care.' (Interview with Peter Burri, 2003).

In this sense, Cahn's practice is closely linked to performativity, understood as a moment of intense concentration leading to an event: the painting, the drawing, the photograph. 'I do not know beforehand whether it will be a person or an animal. That just happens somehow. Of course, there is a decision shortly beforehand, now I am going to make a face or a landscape.' (Interview with Peter Burri, 2003). But performances – that is to say live events performed or orchestrated by the artist and presented in an artistic context – have been rare. The most recent ones are *36 female monkeys*, 1994, and *Short Pieces*, 1996.





## (Political)

War has been a central motif in Cahn's work: Beirut (1982), Iraq (1991) and Sarajevo (1992). Cahn actively engaged with the Bosnian War when it broke out in 1992, starting a series of works on canvas and paper, speaking with people in Sarajevo, reporting on the situation in Switzerland and helping refugees. In 1995 she exhibited at the Obala Art Center in Sarajevo. Her first series of oil paintings, *Verarbeitung (Processing)*, from 1989, depicts an aerial view of a specific "industrial" site. In addition to Chernobyl, Cahn has painted the Pentagon, Auschwitz, nuclear plants and test sites (Savannah River, Hanford, Rhode Island, Pantex), as well as chemical and pharmaceutical plants (Ciba, Sandoz).

On another occasion Cahn was involved in anti-nuclear demonstrations against a proposed nuclear power plant near Basel, which ultimately led to the project being abandoned. Yet, even though Cahn has participated as a concerned citizen in many political and social actions, it would be inaccurate to pigeonhole her work as strictly 'political', in the same way it would be inaccurate to call it autobiographical. Her work is not meant to illustrate a thesis or help a cause; it is political insofar as it reflects the position of an individual who is inscribed by the dynamics of her society. Hardly any of Cahn's works relate directly to a political cause.

This is particularly clear with her room installation *Schlafen* (1997) at DRAF: it comprises of thirteen paintings of lying figures of different sizes. The lying figure in Cahn's imagery has often been associated with the war and its disasters; nonetheless the reading of these paintings remains ambiguous, dead or sleeping, man or woman...

An important exception, apart from the Sarajevo works already mentioned, is the outdoor installation/performance she created in Basel in 1979, through drawing chalk figures onto a motorway bridge, some of them aggressive figures for a male-dominated world: 'The action on the motorway in Basel was more purposeful. I assigned myself the political task, so to speak, of appropriating this highly disputed motorway that was planned for the middle of a residential area. [...] The initial idea was a protest, but with the first stroke I also fell in love with the motorway [...]. I was interested here again in setting the softness of my material against the hardness of the concrete. [...] This work was indeed illegal and one of sheer delight.' In fact, Cahn was arrested 'in flagrante' as a consequence of this act, leading to an official record. She could not have been more pleased, as her arrest also resulted in a precise and public record of the work, even if the actual drawings were erased: in the police files, the local press, and through official photography. As she says, 'The action is

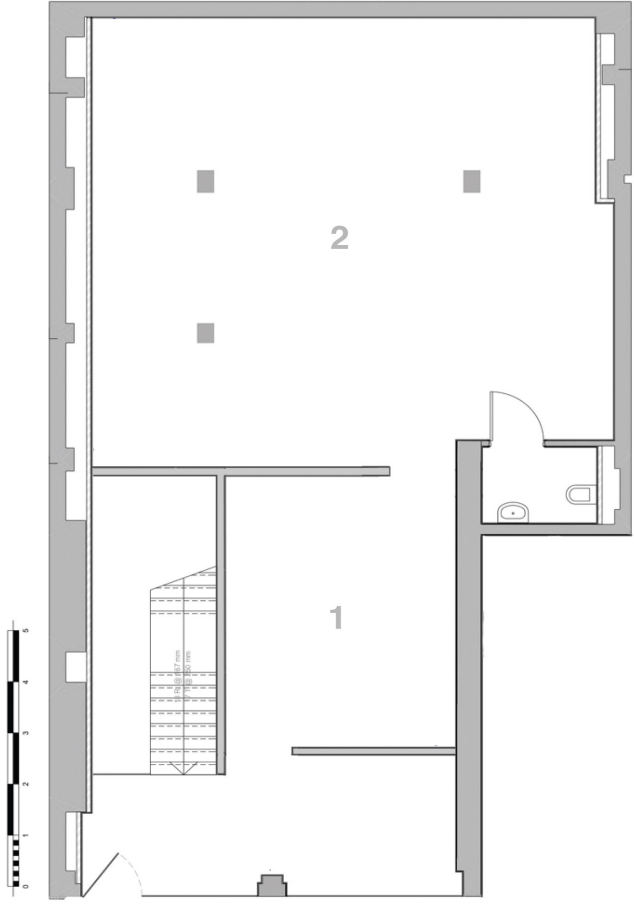
documented in the best possible way'. (All quotes from the interview with Peter Burri, 2003).

**(C.V.)**

Miriam Cahn (b. 1949, Switzerland) lives and works in Basel and Bergell (GR), Switzerland. Her works are included in the collections of museums all over the world. Significant solo exhibitions were held at the Kunsthalle Basel, Musée la Chaux-de-Fonds, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Haus am Waldsee in Berlin, Kunsthaus Zurich, Kunstverein Hannover, Musée Rath in Geneva, Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt, Museum of Modern Art New York, and Cornerhouse Manchester. She was included in Documenta 7 in 1982 and represented Switzerland at the 41st Venice Biennial, in 1984.

Most of the texts are extracts from *Drawing Room Confessions, Issue #3*, dedicated to Miriam Cahn, completed by Sabina Müller. The exhibition is curated by Vincent Honoré. Miriam Cahn is represented by Elizabeth Dee in New York, Meyer-Riegger in Berlin and Jocelyn Wolff in Paris.







## **Ground Floor:**

### **Room 1**

1 - *Schlafen* [sleeping], 24.11.-23.12.97, oil on canvas, room installation. Courtesy of the artist and Meyer-Riegger Gallery, Berlin.

### **Room 2**

2 - *RAUM-ICH / räumlich-ich* [ROOM-ME / spatial me], 2010, oil on canvas and wood, room installation. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, Paris.

Individual works clockwise from left:

2.1 'au travail! (heute ich)' [at work! (todayme)]

2.2 'gefühllich' [feelingme]

2.3 'weggehich' [leavingme]

2.4 'gelblichich' [yellowme]

2.5 'unklarich' [unclearme]

2.6 'zukunftsangstich' [futurefearme]

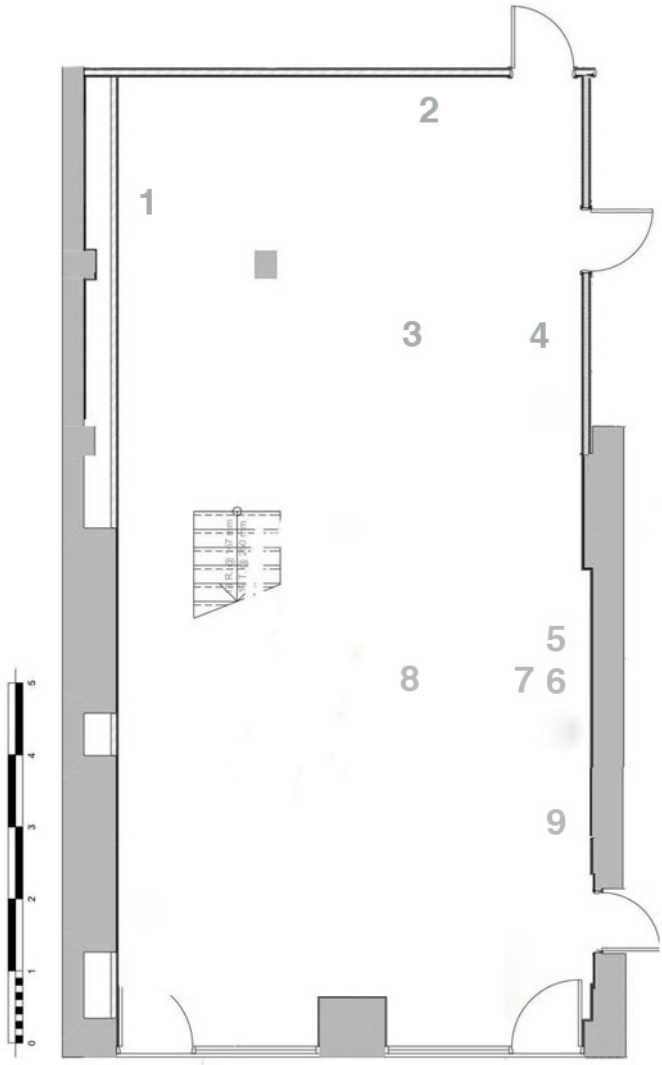
2.7 'gnadenlosich' [mercilessme]

2.8 'nichtmutterich' [notmotherme]

2.9 'zukunftsich' [futureme]

2.10 'ich als mann' [me as man]





## Lower Floor:

1 - *Umgebung* [Environment], 29.11.2010, pencil, pigments on paper, oil on wood, photograph. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Jocelyn Wolff.

2 - *Denkendes Tier* [Thinking Animal], 3.3.96, oil on canvas. David Roberts Collection, London.

3 - Vitrine with notebooks and drawings, all works courtesy of the artist and Galerie Jocelyn Wolff. Clockwise from top left:

a) *d.k.l.l.*, 1997, charcoal on paper, 11 pages.

b) *das klassische lieben* [the classical loving], 1987, pencil on paper, 48 pages.

c) *das auge des betrachters träumen / zitatenheft* [to dream the eye of the beholder / notebook of quotations], 2010/2011, pencil and pigments on paper, 48 pages.

d) *o.t.*, 17.3.78, pencil on paper, 68 pages.

e) *L.I.S. rechts + links* [L.I.S. right + left], 19.12.87, chalk on paper, 32 pages.

4 - *Familie* [Family], 15.+17.5.11, oil on canvas. David Roberts Collection, London.

5 - *unheimlich / ZENSUR* [unhomely / CENSORSHIP], 1.+17.11.10, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Jocelyn Wolff.

6 - *o.t.*, 29.6.95, oil on canvas. David Roberts Collection, London.

7- *blume an meinem fenster* [flower at my window], 29.6.96, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Jocelyn Wolff.

8 - *in die geschichte fallen (tomber dans l'histoire)* [falling into history], 1979, photographs. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Jocelyn Wolff.

9 - *haupt- + nebenhaus* [main + side house], 22.+23.4.05, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Jocelyn Wolff.





## About The David Roberts Art Foundation

The David Roberts Art Foundation is a space dedicated to research and critical dialogue. It is directed and curated by Vincent Honoré. The David Roberts Art Foundation Limited is a registered charity in England and Wales (No. 1119738) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (No. 6051439) at 25 Gosfield Street, London, W1W 6HQ. It is proudly supported by the Edinburgh House Estates group of companies.

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