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Essay by Michael Wilson



IRIS SCHOMAKER: *Book Of Dreams*

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“I mean, how many dreams do you have where you read in a dream?” In Richard Linklater’s 1991 feature film *Slacker*, the first character we meet — an unnamed young man played by the director — engages in a meandering one-way ‘conversation’ with an impassive cab driver. “Man, there was this book I just read on the bus,” he relates. “Well, it was in my dream so I guess I wrote it or something. But, man it was bizarre... it was like the premise for this whole book was that every thought you have creates its own reality, you know?” The speaker’s incredulity is understandable; dreams do tend to be focused on action, or at least on unexpected conjunctions of image and object. In this context, reading seems an oddly static, introverted activity; far from revealing something about the reader/dreamer, it veils them in an extra layer of hidden meaning.

The figures in Iris Schomaker’s paintings and drawings are often shown reading, seemingly unaware of or uninterested in the viewer’s curious gaze, sunken into themselves, dreaming with eyes open. Seated or reclining, they appear relaxed, but not in a way that allows us an easy point of entry. Their faces are blank, further keeping psychological readings at bay and positioning the subjects as not only anonymous but also inscrutable. And the books they hold are unidentified too—specific interpretations of the works must, therefore, originate with the viewer. This is consistent with the artist’s reductive approach to figuration, her continual crossing and re-crossing of the border between representation and abstraction. She is interested not in particular individuals (or books, or animals, or places), but in the *idea* of those things, and in what happens between the viewer and the image.

Schomaker paints on wood panels and oversized sheets of paper, displaying the latter unframed and stapled to the wall so that they begin to fuse with the gallery space.

She begins by sketching in charcoal—leaving a web of linear traces that map the search for a finished form—then applies thinly brushed layers of acrylic gouache, or watercolor. She makes use of rubbing and sanding throughout to maintain an even surface, finally adding an oil-based varnish. Her palette is dominated by black and white, to which she adds touches of cool blue and green or, in some works, stronger notes of red or yellow; she also makes use of ‘empty’ white space, paring things down still further by purging the scene of extraneous detail. This also introduces an association with winter, as if the unmarked areas of the image were not gaps but rather blankets of fresh snow, masking—as those books do their readers—a whole world beneath.

In some of Schomaker’s recent works, human figures are accompanied by those of “spirit animals,” entities possessed of symbolic power that at once compliment their companions and unsettle the otherwise tranquil atmosphere of the settings in which they appear. The artist has discussed her works as icons, using the term not in its religious sense, but instead as a way to describe the attempted portrayal of that which is otherwise ungraspable, the manifestation of ineffable mystery in visible, physical space. The animals—the idea of a totemic creature originates with Native American spirituality and defines a special kinship based on protecting and ultimately merging with their partners—form part of this process. Schomaker concentrates on animals such as cats and horses, with which we enjoy a close and longstanding relationship, and on others such as foxes, which while not domesticated, retain an archetypal and mythological association with people (the fox is, she writes, “a wild animal that you would not expect to be close to a person. It is special longing to be friends with a fox”).

Schomaker’s animal subjects, like their human counterparts, are not presented as specific individuals, and the artist’s source material is sufficiently heterogeneous and obscure that specific sources are impossible to identify. From photographs and reproductions clipped from books, magazines and newspapers—alongside disparate literary and musical sources (1960s jazz is a current favorite)—she distills a certain kind of image, incorporating it into a certain kind of composition—one defined by formal pattern as much as it is by subject. In its rhythmic visual simplicity, her work echoes aspects of ancient Chinese and Japanese drawing and printmaking, and the different but related selectivity that distinguishes 1960s and ’70s Minimalism, and the art of the graphic novel.

In his 2012 essay on the artist “Figures Emerge,” critic, curator, and musician Domenic Eichler points to some other possible precursors, an “alternative genealogy” running



from American figurative painters of the 1970s such as Joan Semmel and Sylvia Sleigh to German painters of the late 1990s like Antje Majewski and Katharina Wulff. “In this context,” he suggests, “Schomaker’s painting is also implicitly feminist,” arguing that the work of these artists contains a critique of normative gender roles. Further, Eicheler identifies in the figures an alternation between tension and reflection, a “tête-à-tête between the personal and the political.”

Concentrating on the stylized aspect of Schomaker’s figures, we could add some other names to this list. Think, for example, of the flattened forms and cool atmosphere of images by Alex Katz, or the studied lack of affect in Brian Calvin’s. Then there are the many depictions in recent art of obscured or featureless faces, from Gerhard Richter’s *Betty* (1988) to Michael Borremans’s *The Promise* (2016). And returning to the artist’s depictions of animals, we might also consider Anne Imhof’s incorporation of live falcons and turtles into durational performances that explore, through action and gesture, the state of being a “non-person.” Together, such elements clear space into which viewers may project their own interpretations. As Linklater’s character continues, enlarging on the premise of his imagined book, “it’s like every choice or decision you make... the thing you choose not to do, fractions off and becomes its own reality, you know, and just goes on from there, forever.”

By *Michael Wilson*





























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