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Cahn, Miriam, *überlebende (undarstellbar)*, 13.6.1998, Öl auf Leinwand, 130 x 90 cm (Objektmass), Privatbesitz, 2001

Documentation level

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Name

Cahn, Miriam

Dates of birth and death

* 21.7.1949 Basel

Municipality of origin (CH)

Basel

Nationality

CH

Brief biography

Malerin und Zeichnerin

Fields of activity

Zeichnung, Performance, Objektkunst, Malerei, Aquarell, Kreidezeichnung, Installation, Film, Video

Lexicon article

After studying graphic design at the Basel School of Design from 1968 to 1973, Miriam Cahn worked as a drawing teacher and scientific draughtswoman; she has been an independent artist since 1976. She participated in the anti-nuclear and women's movements; these activities included acting as a delegate for the OFRA women's organisation at the Warsaw Peace Congress in 1976. From December 1979 until January 1980 she was involved in a nocturnal art campaign, creating wall drawings on a motorway bridge under construction north of Basel. The protest campaign was discovered by the police and led to a court case. Despite her focus on the themes of violence, death and war, Miriam Cahn was soon recognised as an artist. Her first exhibition (1977, Galerie Stampa, Basel) was followed by numerous solo and group shows, rapidly extending throughout Europe. In 1982,

Miriam Cahn was invited to *documenta 7*, but withdrew her contribution before the opening due to the curatorial intervention of Rudi Fuchs. In 1984, she took part in the *Venice Biennale*. Miriam Cahn lived in Berlin from 1985 to 1989, when she returned to Basel. Awards: 1978/79, artists' atelier of the Canton of Basel-Stadt, Paris; 1985, DAAD Scholarship, Berlin; 1988, Prix de la banque hypothécaire Genève; 1996, semester working in London, Zuger Kulturstiftung Landis & Gyr; 1997, Karl Ströher Prize; 1998, Käthe Kollwitz Prize of the Academy of Arts, Berlin; 2005, Prix Meret Oppenheim. In 2013, Miriam Cahn was awarded the newly created Basel Art Prize. The artist lives in Bregaglia (Canton of Grisons).

Until the mid-1980s, Miriam Cahn concentrated on drawing, exclusively in black and white, using chalk or pencil. On the one hand, this enabled her to distance herself from the supremacy of painting, as represented for centuries by male artists. On the other, drawing – in the sense of the incomplete, the sketchy – suits her impulsive, agitated working methods. At the centre of these works stands the artist's exploration of the female role model – as the title of the Basel protest campaign, *mein frau sein ist mein öffentlicher teil* (being a woman is part of my public persona), suggests. From a feminist point of view, Miriam Cahn calls into question the social pressures brought to bear on the female sex. She explores the idea of equating femininity with passivity and forbearance, and masculinity with action and aggression, by allocating a world of motifs to each gender. Ships, terminals, skyscrapers and missile silos embody the masculine, while beds, tables, houses, pushcarts, torsos and heads stand for the feminine. Miriam Cahn represents personal experiences of pain, illness and death (in the cycle *WACH RAUM*, Wake-up room, 1982; *DAS WILDE LIEBEN*, Wild loving, 1984), at the same time raising awareness of social conditions. For example, she addressed the inhumanity of the war machine during the Gulf and Balkan conflicts of the early 1990s, and published her radical position in writing – in the exhibition catalogue. Her exploration of a theme frequently continues through cycles of several drawings (*frauen raum*, women's space, 1983) or is expanded into huge formats. The intensity of expression is oppressive, almost painful. The paper is covered with extensive strokes achieved by lunging movements, or is covered so densely that it becomes completely black; in their expressiveness, these drawings contain the traces of the artist's performance-like use of all her physical strength – Miriam Cahn usually draws on the floor, often with her eyes closed.

Around 1989, painting gradually came to the fore. Concern that she might fall prey to formalism, as well as a newfound interest in colour, expressed in the 1986/87 cycle of watercolours, *Atombombe* (Atom Bomb), brought about a

reorientation. Furthermore, back trouble made it impossible for the artist to deploy all her physical strength when drawing, as she had done to date. In her paintings, the explosively expressive lines of the drawings are replaced by the explosive energy of colour, which becomes the de facto bearer of emotion. In intense combinations of pink, red, blue, yellow and green, the artist imbues her pictures with fiery radiance and makes her subjects glow as if from within. Her technique is usually pastel-like and cloudy, the contours frequently blurred, lending the motifs a strangely alien physicality. Identification with the female figure remains a central theme, but the representation is now ambiguously modified; changes in society have also brought changes in the state of womanhood. While gender takes centre stage in a series of *Liegende* (Reclining Women), as in [stilwechsel \(katzenäugig\)](#) (Change of Style, Cat's Eyes, 1999), in most works, women appear as hermaphroditic creatures with both male and female characteristics (*Unklar – Unclear – or strenge freundin* – severe girlfriend). Their representation reflects the contradiction between naturalness and civilisation – another central theme of Miriam Cahn's work. The theme also manifests itself in the landscape and in plant life ([unter schnee atmen](#), breathing under snow, 2001) as well as in animals, which appear as admonitory creatures (*fleischtier*, flesh animal, 2003) or as humanoid hybrids (*muttertier*, mother, 1998). In all these works, beauty and calamity, strength and vulnerability lie close together. This could be interpreted as the expression of an existential theme, but ultimately Miriam Cahn is always concerned with socio-political issues (picture cycle *meine juden*, my jews, 2012).

Miriam Cahn is known primarily as a painter and a draughtswoman; her exploration of other media usually remains in the background. Yet she has also worked with film and video (including *LESEN IN STAUB (strategische orte) alltagsarbeit*, READING IN THE DUST (strategic places) everyday work, 1986) or has taken part in performances (*Kurze Stücke*, Short Pieces, Bonner Kunstverein, 1996). Since the 1990s, she has also produced photographs that she presents as series or combines with paintings as diptychs (*kriegshund*, war dog, oil/photograph, 2000). However, the emphasis remains on painting and drawing, in which Cahn's artistic signature is particularly manifest – independently of the mainstream. The autonomy and expressiveness of her oeuvre make Miriam Cahn one of the most important representatives of Swiss art in recent times.

Works: Aarau, Aargauer Kunsthaus; Basel, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Museum für Gegenwartskunst; Kunstmuseum Bern; Davos, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner Foundation; Frankfurt a. M., Museum für Moderne Kunst; London, Tate Modern; New York, Museum of Modern Art; Nuremberg, Museum für Moderne Kunst; Rapperswil, Kunst (Zeug)Haus; Kunsthaus Zürich; Zurich, Collection of Prints and Drawings of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology; Kunsthaus Zug.

Elisabeth Grossmann, 2013
Translation: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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