

## Judith Schaechter

Maria Porges

1

*The smashed weirdness of the raving cadenzas of God  
Takes over all of a sudden  
In our time. It speaks through the voices of talk show  
moderators.*

*It tells us in a ringing anthem, like heavenly hosts uplifted,  
That the rhapsody of the pastoral is out to lunch.  
We can take it from there.*

—Tom Clark, "Realism"

It has been said that the eyes are the windows of the soul. Why, then, are so many of the figures in Judith Schaechter's works shown with their lids squeezed firmly shut? Some, of course, are dead: Tiny Eva in her coffin, or the King of Maggots, or *Tidip's* girl in what looks like a padded cell. Others are sleeping, like the fallen angel in *Dreaming Angel*, who sprawls, wings akimbo, in a draped and tasseled boudoir. Many, though, seem lost in some private reverie, reflecting on what they have done (the mother who has just flung her child down the stairs) or on what awaits them (the naked woman who sinks, headfirst, into the briny deep). And what are the memories locked behind the unseen baby blues of the child prostitute stumbling down a lonely road, oblivious to the lightning striking close behind her?

Some things, Schaechter seems to be hinting, simply remain unknown—even in an age in which intimate secrets of the soul are paraded daily across the pages of supermarket tabloids and TV's quasi-"news magazines." This paradox serves as a paradigm for the dexterous yet sinister products of the artist's imagination: violent, sometimes terrifying images that are also both cool and beautiful; distorted, anguished figures that inexplicably exude a kind of eternal repose; rude, humorous, nasty, or macabre subject matter, manipulated with such skill and decorative delicacy that the end result is hypnotically, impossibly attractive.

2

*I think I'm a fairly normal human specimen. My main  
interests are sex and death, with romance and violence  
the obvious runners-up.*

—Judith Schaechter

Over the past ten years, Schaechter has figured out how to use a craft—an ancient, traditionally sacred, extraordinarily labor-intensive medium—to make highly contemporary and quite secular, if not to say profane, art. For centuries, stained glass has been used almost exclusively for the fabrication of church windows: patterns of color defined by black that transform a little light into splendid religious propaganda. In this millennial era of anything-goes appropriation, it seems exquisitely ironic that Schaechter has succeeded in inventing an art form related not only to the jewellike panels made to decorate the house of God but to the flickering rectangles of colored light that beckon like sirens in houses all over the world, night after night.

*Sure, I was a voyeur. So was anyone who ever watched  
Doris Day mug with Rock Hudson, or gawked at Bill  
Holden kissing Kim Novak. We're all voyeurs and life is a  
picnic. People have little boxes in their living rooms and they  
sit in front of the boxes for six or eight hours a night and  
goggle at other people living their lives.*

—Earl W. Emerson, *The Rainy City*

Are Schaechter's alarming scenes of physical and/or emotional disaster any more disturbing than those seen on television, purporting to be glimpses of Real Life? Our fascination with other people's pain is as old as Greek tragedy and as contemporary as *Cops*, *911*, or *America's Most Wanted*. Still, as real as these TV series pretend to be, they are as stylized, in their own way, as any play by Euripides. They allow us to experience emotion vicariously. *All the flavor, none of the calories.*



*King of Maggots*, 1984  
 Stained glass, 23 x 13  
 Collection Mosella Schaechter, Newton Center, Massachusetts

Because of the nature of its subject matter, Schaechter's panels have sometimes been identified with the work of politically oriented artists like Sue Coe or Leon Golub. In truth, these glass and metal constructions are much more about formal issues—color, space, the figure—than they are about Life. Fiction, rather than fact. Pulp fiction, maybe, with a hard edge of lewd racism, and big black outlines around the character's wan, ennui-filled faces, but *fiction* nevertheless. These eerily beautiful portrayals of rape, death, and decay are more closely related to the work of Balthus or Giotto than to either Coe's protests against exploitation or Golub's horrific images of torture and oppression. The image, for instance, of a Harlequin raping a little girl in *Rape Serenade* (1990) is riveting, but not because it depicts a real sexual assault. There is a distance between the crying child and the equally distressed clown, as if they are both actors, or models. It is the metaphor, the idea implied by this scene that makes us twitch—and take a second look. Like the Rape of the Sabines, or Leda and the Swan, this is a story being used as an excuse for an interesting composition. Neither a feminist critique of society nor autobiography (although a number of Schaechter's experiences have influenced her work), these pieces are archetypally based reflections on popular culture: Geraldo and Oprah, billboards and MTV, the perverse glamour of crime and violence. In a sense, they are about the weirdness of the times in which we live, when female serial killers can be a topic for a book, a TV show, or even a work of art: *Murder and Child* (1993).

### 3

*The devil is in the details.*

— Proverb

Of course, Schaechter's work draws on more conventional, high-art sources as well, ranging from the German expressionist Max Beckmann and Japanese printmaker Hokusai to the Pre-Raphaelite Richard Dadd, Gauguin, Courbet, and even Anselm Kiefer. Still, any postmodernist appropriation that takes place in these pieces is mediated by one of the slowest, most painstaking methods of making work imaginable (especially in an art world that, courtesy of

Duchamp, has come to accept skillful shopping as part of the artistic repertoire). Schaechter begins with a drawing—interested, perhaps, in a gesture, or the depiction of a particular texture, feeling, or effect. Pieces of glass, some consisting of a layer of color fused to a clear or lightly tinted matrix, are cut, ground, carved, sandblasted, etched, painted, and then put together with strips of lead or copper foil over a period of days and weeks. In some parts of the composition, so many layers of glass are required to create the desired effect that the final work acquires a distinctive, three-dimensional physicality, like a Della Robbia bas-relief.

For Schaechter, it is both the tedium of this process and the continuing technical challenges and hurdles that the medium presents that have sustained her interest. In each work, she tries to find something new to learn: a way of manipulating color or pattern, perhaps, or a special technique. In *Feeds on Fire* (1992), for instance, she tackled the challenge of depicting flames and smoke. A leaping, white-hot conflagration studded with the charred skeletons of buildings and trees frames the figures of a woman and her pyromaniac daimon. In other works, she has developed various ways to convincingly create the illusion of water, both in motion and at rest. *Caught in a Flood* (1990), for example, captures the play of light on the turbulent waves. In *Voice of a Sinking Ship* (1994), the flat, relatively decorative appearance of the massive breakers that dominate the upper panel suggest the influence of Japanese prints. Below, however, this stylization gives way to a more naturalistic depiction in the exquisite dappling of pale reflections on the woman's skin, combined with the serendipitous bubbling and subtle shifts of color in the bluish glass.

Despite her insistence that the techniques she employs have existed for hundreds of years, it is clear that Schaechter has gradually personalized them into a repertoire uniquely her own. Forms are modeled through addition and subtraction, as combined layers of clear and colored glass are selectively etched away, often in delicate, parallel strokes reminiscent of egg tempera. Only rarely is paint of any kind used, however. In *Memories of a Child Prostitute* (1994), the astonishing range of tonalities visible in the translucent, bluish glow of the young girl's skin is achieved entirely through the layering of etched glass.

Silver stain, which appears as yellow, has been used to highlight her lips, hair, and dress, and black vitreous enamel heightens the dramatic contrast of light and dark. All other areas of color, however tiny or precise, are cut or etched from the glass itself.

#### 4

*Even though she thinks herself nearly a woman  
and feels certain there's nothing delicate about her,  
the girl partly sees the moth as like she is:  
a creature fluttering towards its own destruction.*

—Stephen Dobyns, "The Moth"

A sense of overwhelming detail is present in most of these pieces—a splendid, opulent excess suggesting a kind of horror vacui. Flowers, vining plants, and insects abound, filling every corner with color and pattern even as they serve as memento mori, reminding us of the briefness of our existence by presenting us with a spectacle teeming of things that live even shorter lives.

In *Fragile* (1989), a little girl sits on a wood floor, surrounded by a ring of butterflies. Around this scene, however, is an ominous-looking border of cobwebs and spiders. Closer inspection reveals that the delicate, deadly filaments of web are echoed in a tracery of cracks covering the little girl's face and limbs. It is as if she has just been shattered by the impact of falling, or a blow. The profusion of pattern throughout the whole image—the flowers and vines on the walls, the wood grain on the floor, even the vivid multicolored butterfly wings—contribute to an intense, claustrophobic feeling of panic. There is simply no place for the eye to rest.

This over-the-top sensibility is part of what creates both the look and the feeling of Schaechter's work. These seamy compositions suggest that we admit to our most secret, sexually charged thoughts and weirdest fantasies—like the pyromaniac protagonist of *Feeds on Fire*, whose expression seems close to orgasmic ecstasy, or the sexy slut of an angel passed out in a puddle of her own urine in *Dreaming Angel*. The death-in-place-of-sex Victorian atmosphere that Schaechter invokes, of small, airless, overstuffed, and overupholstered rooms, is further accentuated by her organization of space. Suggesting simultaneously a

(fearful) longing for the eternal and a horror of confinement, the perspective in these pieces is often manipulated to increase the emotional impact of the image, as in *Murder and Child*. The terrifying steepness of the stairs in the panel on the left horribly accentuates the spectacle of the dead infant lying on the hard, hard floor. Ironically, in the panel on the right, the walls frame the murderous mother like a Madonna, even as the blood drips from her handcuffs.



*Death in the Flesh*, 1989  
Stained glass, 17 x 30  
Lent by the artist, courtesy Snyderman Gallery, Philadelphia

## 5

*I see a red door, and I want it painted black.*  
—The Rolling Stones

Schaechter's exploitation of black—not only in the use of glass, or paint, but in the form of the dark lines of metal that knit her pieces together—has similarly grown and developed over time. In early works such as *King of Maggots* (1984), the leading seems simple and pragmatic, based mostly on either the separation of colors or the straightforward formal decision to create a gridlike background and border for the large central figure that dominates the shallow space of the composition. A work like *Death in the Flesh* (1989) demonstrates a much greater sophistication, not only in the construction of an eccentric yet believable perspective but in the use of line for purely dramatic effect. The heavy, curving supply hoses for the I.V. and the oxygen echo the dark delineation that encloses the woman's wasted body as it lies in such piteous repose.

The grisaillelike darkness of a rich profusion of patterns and textures almost overwhelms the composition of more recent works. In *Walker on Path*, a wave of sunflowers, depicted as flat black silhouettes against the brilliant pinks and blues of the sky, crosses the panel from one side to the other. Their sharp, windswept angle accentuates the woman's stooped posture as she leans into what must be a howling gale. Her clothing, consisting of nine separate patterned fabrics, streams out behind her as she staggers along a path made of countless tiny, multicolored stones and shells.

It is in *Voice of a Sinking Ship* (1994) that Schaechter breaks through to an extraordinary exploitation of the dramatic contrast between dense, dark detail and, for her, a new compositional element: empty space. Sullen, roiling waves, further complicated by the overlay of rigging from the foundering vessel, dominate the top third of the composition. But beneath the water's surface, in a seemingly vast field of pale blue, a single figure floats, bare save a rope around her ankles.

The simplicity of this piece prefigures the artist's most recent works, including *Memories of a Child Prostitute*. Virtually devoid of busy detail of any kind, it shows a young girl, the road she stands on—indicated only by loosely brushed streaks of gray—and a lick of white lightning. Nothing more. Even the pattern of the child's fishnet stockings seems oddly muted. The moment portrayed is the very instant when her purse string breaks and dumps its contents on the ground, yet the composition still has an odd serenity, more dream than nightmare.

## 6

If these highly romantic, perversely antipornographic works were nothing more than the product of remarkable technique or, on the other hand, just a collection of extraordinarily strange, aggressively difficult images, they would not be half as interesting. Instead, they are that rare bird, the product of both sides of the brain: a sharp intelligence, moderated by the strange, inexplicable dance of intuition. Schaechter once revealed that she likes to draw with the TV on—not so much to watch as to let it distract the rational process that so often gets in the way of dreaming. Perhaps that is why the eyes of so many of her figures are closed as if in sleep. Maybe they are dreaming, too.