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Miriam Cahn What looks at us



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Miriam Cahn (Basel, 1949) lives and works in Stampa, Switzerland. Her artistic production, prominently featuring painting and drawing, but also including other media such as sculpture, installation, video and photography, explores social topics related to her objection to all forms of oppression and reaction to current political issues, including gender-based violence, migratory conflicts, and armed conflicts. In dialogue with the European feminist movements of the 1970s, the body remains central in her work, both as a subject and as an artistic medium. Miriam Cahn's work has been duly recognised over the years, receiving awards such as the Käthe-Kollwitz-Preis (Germany, 1998), the Prix Meret Oppenheim (Switzerland, 2005), the Basler Kunstpreis (Switzerland, 2013), and the Goslarer Kaiserring (Germany, 2024). She represented Switzerland at the Venice Biennale (1984), participated in Documenta 14 in Kassel and Athens (2017), and her work was presented at the 59th International

Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, *The Milk of Dreams* (2022). Various solo exhibitions include *READING DUST* (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2024), *ma pensée sérielle* (Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2023), *MEINEJUDEN* (Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, 2022), *ME AS HAPPENING* (The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, and Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, 2021), *I as Human* (Haus der Kunst, Munich, Kunstmuseum Bern, and the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2019), *everything is equally important* (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2017), *körperlich/corporel* (Centre culturel suisse, Paris, 2014), and *Miriam Cahn* (Fundación "la Caixa", Madrid, 2003). Her works are held in numerous public and private collections, such as: MoMA – Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw; Kunstmuseum Basel; and the Pinault Collection, Paris.

Miriam Cahn's (1949, Basel) artistic practice encompasses several media, with emphasis on drawing and painting, but no less important ventures into photography, sculpture, installation and video. The body as a domain with various thematic resonances, but also as a creative medium (kindling and adding to certain ways to look, draw, paint...) is the core of the artist's imagery.

Influenced by the feminist attitudes and reflections of the 1970s and 1980s, Miriam Cahn's work was consolidated through a radical approach to the roles and images associated with and imposed on women in contemporary society and down through art history. In this context, of note are her paintings of female nudes: vulnerable bodies, sometimes with their faces covered or on the way to becoming disfigured, exposing breasts and genitals or signs of ageing, but also women who are pregnant, breastfeeding, bleeding or giving birth (according to the artist, a theme strangely absent from the history of painting). These bodies are often represented from the front, suggesting women's gazes are being returned, now staring back at and challenging the gaze (and the voyeuristic legacy) of those who contemplate them.

Miriam Cahn's paintings and drawings are characterised by a vigorous style, quickly executed and sometimes schematic. In her paintings, she uses a peculiar palette of colours (between delicate pastel shades and radiant brightness) to intensify the subjective and enigmatic effects that can be seen in her figures, very often with blurred outlines and frequently phantasmagorical. Isolated in their unique, raw intimacy, these bodies negate the idealised stereotypes of feminine beauty normally portrayed to satisfy men's gaze and desire. In this way, Cahn has been building disturbing visceral

imagery aimed at redeeming the female body from a historical culture based on power structures where the prevailing patriarchal dominance continuously leads to objectification, control and subordination of women, their bodies, their emotions and unique subjectivities.

In her more recent works, Miriam Cahn has extended her exploration of the human body to the relationships between violence and (sexual) aggression, power and gender and racial supremacy. There are repeated gestures of stamping, punching, subjugating, raping, as expressions of a world taken over by human cruelty and by unimaginable horror. While her early career included elements of protesting the war in Vietnam (bombs, planes, tanks, weapons...) or the fear of a nuclear war, Cahn now looks at the drama of migration, refugees, the drownings in the Mediterranean, subjects that recall the persecuted peoples of Europe and the resurgence of xenophobia and neofascist movements, or the unrepresentable tragedy of the ongoing war in Ukraine, revealing anguished and furious attention. The artist confesses: "I'm very angry," and admits that this "anger is a good motor for art."

The works of Miriam Cahn do not seek to simplify or moderate perceptions of reality. On the contrary, the artist deliberately provokes and encourages visual and mental confrontation. An example of this is the painting *fuck abstraction!*, 2007/22+12/12/23, conceived in the aftermath of the media coverage of the massacre in Bucha (Ukraine) and the reports of the rapes committed by Russian soldiers. It is a painting that portrays the barbaric act that preceded the slaughter, the sexual subjugation by a faceless man (the ruthless dominant figure devoid of a

human face) of a smaller figure, of another man kneeling with his hands tied – like in other paintings in this series, these bodies are not depicting children, but merely bodies weakened and oppressed before a heinous brute force. As the artist says, "This painting deals with the way sexuality is used as a weapon of war, as a crime against humanity. The contrast between the two bodies represents the bodily power of the oppressor and the fragility of the oppressed, kneeling and emaciated by war." It is a pornographic image, not because of its explicit sexual content, but because it is a raw exhibition of the infamy, the moral obscenity with which men use their superiority to harm and destroy other bodies.

In a creative attitude that favours a combination of reflection and emotion, intuition and freedom, the work of Miriam Cahn is a manifest reaction and critical resistance to contemporary geopolitical events that call fundamental existential dimensions into question. In this way, her works reject the passive and aesthetic delight because they target the spectator, appealing to their sensitivity and conscience. The corollary of this disquiet, in the face of the unrepresentable and the unspeakable, led Cahn's most recent paintings to a denial of depiction, replaced by written words or sentences that act as statements, manifestos, about her usual subjects and also about herself.

This is Miriam Cahn's first solo exhibition in Portugal. The works in the exhibition include paintings, drawings, photos, videos and sculptures produced between 1978 and 2024. The distribution and positioning of the works in the different rooms were decided by the artist, who understands the set-up of the exhibition as an important moment in her creation and authorship. It is an exhibition

that traces a journey through the works of one of the most remarkable artists of our time, whose work challenges the conventions of art history and the way the artist or any other individual chooses to relate to the devastation of the world we live in.

João Pinharanda and Sérgio Mah
Curators



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1 *unser fröhling*, 2004/2020/2021+30.4.23
Oil on canvas; 166 × 200 cm

2 *könnteichsein*, 25.7.22
Oil on canvas; 55 × 70 cm

3 *o.t.*, 1981
Charcoal on tissue paper; 63 × 101 cm

4 *rennen*, 27.5.05
Oil on canvas; 120 × 66 cm

5 *boxen*, 6.8.13
Coloured pencil on digital print from scan;
26 × 20 cm

Miriam Cahn
What looks at us
26/06/2025 → 27/10/2025

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Angela O'Driscoll (Spell)

With the support of the Swiss Arts
Council Pro Helvetia

MAAT Patron






Publications

To be published during the exhibition,
the catalogue *Miriam Cahn - What looks
at us*, with texts by João Pinharanda
and Sérgio Mah, Patrícia Keller,
António Guerreiro, and the artist.
It also includes numerous
reproductions and views of the
exhibition.
Soon available at MAAT Shop.

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