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HANDEYE

Baby (Not) on Board

BY SCOTT ROTHSTEIN | JANUARY 26, 2012



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Miriam Schaar's antique baby dresses

They seem so sweet, at first glance. Antique baby dresses, white and lacy, with graceful red script lovingly embroidered on the surface. A nod to another time, a time when babies of both genders were presented in delicate frocks and taken to nearby parks in ornate wicker prams. These works seem nostalgic, romantic, even a bit dream like.

But first impressions are often deceptive. The embroidered passages are not sonnets of the joy of childhood or the beauty of a summer day, but statements told to artist Miriam Schaar in response to her decision not to have children. Provocative, judgmental and often aggressive, these remarks motivated Schaar to create an artist's book titled, "Baby (Not) on Board: The Last Prejudice?"

Schaer, a Brooklyn-based multimedia book artist, has exhibited and lectured throughout the United States as well as in Europe and Asia. Currently, she is a faculty member at Columbia College in Chicago, teaching in the Interdisciplinary Book and Paper MFA Program. Throughout her career, Schaar has challenged traditional notions of the artist's book, often making works that seem like complex sculptures. Yet despite the esoteric forms she creates, her works are always built on the theoretical foundation of the book.

"Baby (Not) on Board: The Last Prejudice?" is an example of Schaar expanding the book form; here each dress is a like a page of a manuscript which must be read to understand the artist's intent. Schaar demonstrates that conventional considerations, such as paper, binding or printed type, are not always what defines a book. For her, concept grounds the project to the field of book arts.

Most of Schaar's work references or critiques issues from a woman's perspective. Yet to refer to Schaar as a Feminist artist is insufficient. Her art is more private than political, as if she is granting access to the most private of diaries. About this project, Schaar writes, "Selfish... Neurotic... Irresponsible... Immature... Unfeminine... Unfulfilling... Materialistic... Uptight... Deviant" — all words I have heard to characterize

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my decision to not have children". The words embroidered on these dresses are harsh with comments such as "Your not having children was the biggest disappointment of our life" or "Childless women lack an essential humanity."

By making an intimate matter public, a door is opened for dialogue. Schaer is a prolific artist and exhibits often, yet she has never received the number of responses from previous projects as she has from this effort. This book touches a sensitive nerve and evokes one to reconsider basic assumptions of a woman's role in contemporary society. In a time when Western woman have seemingly boundless options, what does it mean to reject motherhood. ... and, in it's place, live a life of one's own design?

Consistent with past works, Miriam Schaer provokes us to reflect on her experiences when reading "Baby (Not) on Board: The Last Prejudice?" This book is a starting point, a topic presented in fragments of words on white cotton and lace. What appears to be innocent is anything but, as one is asked to consider, as Schaer sees it, "the Last Prejudice."

To learn more about Miriam Schaer, please visit www.miriamschaer.com.

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