

# Les Femmes Folles

WOMEN IN ART

APRIL 3, 2015 *with* 3 NOTES

*tags:* MIRIAMSCHAER. MOTHERARTISTS. WOMENARTISTS. ALTERNATIVEMATERNALS. LES FEMMES FOLLES. WOMEN ARTISTS. WOMEN IN ART. CONTEMPORARY ART. CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS.

**MIRIAM SCHAER, ARTIST**



Miriam Schaer: "The Presence of Their Absence" Photographic Inkjet Print, 40 x 60, 2014

Interdisciplinary artist Miriam Schaer is currently exhibiting in 'Gendered Journeys: the Art

*and Activism of Melissa Potter and Miriam Schaer* in the Tower Art Gallery at the State University of New York at Brockport, and *'Alternative Maternals,'* a group show in conjunction with a conference on Motherhood and Creative Practice at London South Bank University opening in June 2015. She generously shares with LFF about being around art by women as a child in Buffalo; how she got into book and fiber arts; her trip to the Republic of Georgia and the craft workshops she held there for women; her recent work "Babies (Not) On Board;" feminism and so much more...

**LFF:** Where are you from? How did you get into art/?

**Miriam Schaer:** I'm originally from Buffalo, New York, and I've been making things as long as I can remember.

Growing up, Buffalo's beautiful Albright-Knox Art Gallery was my home away from home. Seymour Knox II, the art-collecting son of Seymour Knox I, an F. W. Woolworth mogul, had already enlarged the small gallery (and added his name to it) by the time I started going there. He had so many women artists in his collection that I didn't realize the art world had a 'female' problem until I went to art school at the Philadelphia College of Art (now University of the Arts).

The Albright-Knox's galleries included work by Louise Nevelson, Frieda Kahlo, Joan Mitchell and Marisol, among other women. I saw its Eva Hesse retrospective when I was in high school. It changed my perspective by showing me that any materials could be used in the service of art. In my last year at Philadelphia, where I concentrated on fiber-art studies, I discovered artist books. Moving from Philadelphia to Manhattan, I discovered the Center for Book Arts, and began taking classes. Soon, I began working in the bindery of the Watson Library, the central research library at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, which provided an education in craft techniques and history of the book.

**LFF!** Tell me about your inspirations, process.

**MS.** I consider myself an interdisciplinary artist, by which I mean principally a book artist who also works in photography, installation, and sculptural and editioned books. I usually develop some sense of what I'd like to say, then find the best way to say it. I'm drawn to narrative, and always looking for the story, though rarely expressing it in a linear form. I like to think I make work to find answers to questions that rarely have answers. But more often my pieces are in

response to events in my life or in the world.



Miriam Schaer: "Your child is the best art you have ever made. You don't need to make any other art work" 2012

**LFF!** Tell me about your current/upcoming show/exhibit/book/project and why it's important to you .

**MS.** I have a two-person show, *Gendered Journeys: the Art and Activism of Melissa Potter and Miriam Schaer* in the Tower Art Gallery at the State University of New York at Brockport, that's just closing and a group show opening in June 2015 in London. *Gendered Journeys* focused on two trips I and a couple colleagues made to the Republic of Georgia. With support from the Soros Fund and onsite assistance from the Women's Fund in Georgia and other local women's groups, we held workshops in the small towns of the rural Kakheti region and in Tbilisi, the capital.

In the workshops, we taught women how to use felt, a traditional Georgian craft material, to make products they hadn't tried before, like artist books (for self-expression), banners (for public expression) and festival masks. We also began to understand Georgia's potential for creating craft-based economic opportunities, especially as a skills exchange was an important part of the project.

In June, I'm participating in *Alternative Maternals*, a group show in conjunction with a conference on Motherhood and Creative Practice at London South Bank University. At the conference, I will present a paper about society's prejudice against women without children, and discuss how my recent artworks — especially *Babies (Not) on Board: The Final Prejudice?* — explored this theme and led to projects dealing with my late mother's dementia.

For *Babies (Not) on Board* (<http://www.miriamschaer.com/babies-not-on-board/0>) I hand-embroidered actual critical comments about childless women onto baby garments, then dressed realistic dolls in the garments and photographed them in various situations. When I showed the doll portraits to my mother, then in an assisted living facility, she strongly responded to the dolls. So I bought her one — and began to photograph her, the doll — which she treated like a real baby — and myself relating to each other. The project resulted in *The Presence of Their Absence*, an artist book; *w(hole)* an installation in *Alternative Maternals* a group exhibition in Berlin, summer, 2013; a portfolio of photographs, and other projects still in progress.

**LFF!** Do you think your city is a good place for women in art/writing/etc? Do you show your work elsewhere/is there a difference in how your work is received?

**MS.** My life is a tale of two cities. I'm based in Brooklyn, New York, and I commute weekly to Columbia College Chicago, where I am a Lecturer in Book and Paper Arts. I produce work in both cities, and both cities offer opportunities to show work in a variety of venues. My pieces about childlessness have drawn the most response I've received so far, as they seem to hit sensitive nerves on both sides of the issue.

**LFF!** Artist Wanda Ewing, who curated and titled the original LFF exhibit, examined the perspective of femininity and race in her work, and spoke positively of feminism, saying "yes, it is still relevant" to have exhibits and forums for women in art; does feminism play a role in your work?

**MS.** Of course, feminism's still relevant. Anything to the contrary is the gender equivalent of climate change denial. I consider myself a feminist artist, and see the influence of feminist art as widespread, acknowledged or not. More than shaping my art, feminism shapes my perspective, and my belief that part of our job is to remind the art world about the influence of women in the art world and the need to expand our opportunities.

**LFF!** If you could make one wish for art/writing/etc today, what would it be?

**MS.** Simple, I'd wish for the ability to keep making work far into the future, and the opportunities to continue to show and share it.

**LFF!** What do you think is the most important issue facing artists/writers—and/or artists who are women—today?

**MS.** For women, a prime issue is getting their work widely seen and exhibited in major art venues, including museums and other institutions, and getting a fair share of reviews in mainstream art media.



Miriam Schaer: "Ida number 8" Digital C print, 8 x 10, 2014

**LFF!** Ewing's advice to aspiring artists was "you've got to develop the skill of when to listen and when not to;" and "Leave. Gain perspective." What is the most helpful advice you have received?

**MS.** Most helpful advice I've received? That would be: To ask permission is to seek denial. As for developing the skill of when to listen, that's baloney (putting it politely) when applied to women. Women have been told to sit quietly and listen for centuries by men unable, often unwilling, to listen to them. Better to speak up – and lean in, as Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg writes – than be left out. My own advice, to women and men artists both, is to just keep working, and sending the work out into the world. Trust your judgment.

<http://www.miriamschaer.com/>

**Motherhood and creative practice: Maternal structures in creative work**

School of Arts and Creative Industries, London South Bank University, London, UK, June 1-2, 2015. Keynote speakers: Mary Kelly, Faith Wilding, Bracha Ettinger. Conference Organizers:

Elena Marchevska and Valerie Walkerdine

<http://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/motherhood-and-creative-practice>

More info and to register for the conference:

<https://www.lsbu.ac.uk/whats-on/motherhood-creative-practice>

Alternative Maternals, June 1-8, Curated by Laura González, Ph.D:

<http://www.lauragonzalez.co.uk/>

Glasgow School of Art, Scotland

Artists in the Exhibition: Deborah Dudley (USA), Linda Duvall (Canada), Jeca Rodriguez Colón (Puerto Rico), Miriam Schaer (USA), and Valerie Walkerdine (UK).

Catalog for Berlin iteration of the show-there will be a London version coming soon:

<http://www.magcloud.com/browse/issue/774748>

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Les Femmes Folles is a volunteer organization founded in 2011 with the mission to support and promote women in all forms, styles and levels of art from around the world with the online journal, print annuals, exhibitions and events; originally inspired by artist Wanda Ewing and her curated exhibit by the name Les Femmes Folles (Wild Women). LFF was created and is curated by Sally Deskins. *LFF Books* is a micro-feminist press that publishes 1-2 books per year by the creators of Les Femmes Folles including **Intimates & Fools** (Laura Madeline Wiseman, 2014) and **The Hunger of the Cheeky Sisters: Ten Tales** (Laura Madeline Wiseman/Lauren Rinaldi, 2015). Other titles include **Les Femmes Folles: The Women 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014** available on [blurb.com](http://blurb.com), including art, poetry and interview excerpts from women artists. A portion of the proceeds from LFF books and products benefit the University of Nebraska-Omaha's Wanda Ewing Scholarship Fund.