

46 Shades of Woman

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Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory—but in future we must, for convention's sake, say “her” for “his,” and “she” for “he”—her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle.
—Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*

Typology of Women, a series of 46 silhouette works on paper by German-born, Bridgehampton-based Bastienne Schmidt, is gathered in the artist's sixth monograph published last year. The orange-hued cutouts of various “types” of female forms condense personal and collective histories, ideas, memories and motifs with no intent to confirm or deny specific identities.

The use of the silhouette conveys some initial specificity. One recognizes the profile of a pregnant woman, the dynamic shapes of a dancer, gymnast and swimmer, or Archaic and Classical forms that relate to Schmidt's upbringing in Greece and Italy watching her archaeologist father. However, the artist proceeds to draw within the outlines of these orange forms—faces, figures, scribbles, patterns—transmuting any initial determination, leaving us to decipher meaning in the ambiguous details contained within and conforming the whole.

It's possible to consider the figures' extruding children to portray women as carriers, reaffirming Schmidt's intent to identify and arrange shape and space. But there are also hybrid silhouettes, like a pistol with female legs, which deter finite readings of any individual form and broaden interpretations of the series altogether. In the end it is the viewer's personal experience—historical, geographical, political, social and emotional contexts, or what Schmidt refers to consistently as identity and sense of place—that serves as the interpreter to each form's message and significance.

In the book, the images are accompanied by two short texts that elucidate and expand perceptions.

The Subversive Silhouette, by Mimi Thompson, describes Schmidt's sources, references and process pertaining to this series. She notes the artist's formal and conceptual consistency, such as her use of line to define form and space, and parallels with Schmidt's Home Stills series of photographs, where the silhouetted figure also appears. "After looking at these photographs, full of life's domestic details, the viewer feels he or she is observing a figure surrounded by clues," Thompson writes. "The subject's everyday activities seem specific, but also full of indeterminate symbols."

Schmidt confirms that the Home Stills are not self-portraits or personal depictions, rather open-ended narratives allowing the viewer to step into a woman's—any woman's—life. Similarly, the Typology of Women silhouettes portray a manifold "femaleness" at once vague and distinct, and assigned further significance through color. "Orange is a strong, powerful, gutsy color. It puts us [women] in the foreground," Schmidt said.

Chapter two from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, serves as the second text. It relates to Schmidt's work in its argument for a literal and figural space for women in a field (world) dominated by men. "Where men are the experts on women," Schmidt said, drawing parallels to contemporary events and issues. Woolf examines how men portray women in literature and is baffled by their contradictions with the reality of women's lives: "And if I could not grasp the truth about W. (as for brevity's sake I had come to call her) in the past, why bother about W. in the future?"

Motherhood and homelife totally reshaped Schmidt's work practically and pragmatically. She ceased traveling around the globe as a photographer—often capturing intensely graphic images in precarious locales—but continued to develop a strong point of view close to home. Her subject matter changed, but the content became no less complex and, in fact, gained depth in its exploration of identity and sense of place. She concluded, "You can go full circle as a woman, as an artist."

What is the truth about women? Schmidt dedicates her book to "all the women in the world, especially to those whose voices have not been heard." Those voices must be expressed and considered for a future where individuals are recognized, not for geographic origin, nationality, ethnicity or religion, outward appearance, dress or makeup, nor by comparison to the opposite sex, but for their true selves. As with Orlando, who contemplates on her real identity, Bastienne Schmidt incites us to think about the different selves that compose us, to realize that we are conformed not by one, but by all of them.

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Esperanza León was born in Caracas, Venezuela, and raised in East Hampton, New York. She obtained a Bachelor of Art in Art History at the University of Toronto then moved to Venezuela to pursue museum studies and develop cultural and visual arts projects while working in museums and theatres, until her return to East Hampton in 2000. Since 2001 she has directed Solar, dedicated to promoting art and design from Latin America. She has organized and curated more than 70 exhibitions and contributed to exhibition catalogues and written for publications such as *The East Hampton Star*, *The Southampton Press*, *LI Pulse*, and *Hamptons Art Hub*.