

## The Subversive Silhouette

At the start of her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir asks, “What is a woman?”<sup>1</sup> This question begins a wide-ranging discussion of the female sex, and, by illuminating how competing ideologies sometimes join the same team in order to deny women their rights, she reveals the tendency of our culture to exalt women when convenient yet dismiss them when it’s not. De Beauvoir wrote this book in the late 1940’s, at a time when some baby nurseries tagged the bassinets of newborns with either “It’s a Girl!” or “I’m a Boy!”<sup>2</sup> Objectifying one sex and subjectifying the other, our culture set separate paths for each gender. We are still examining what it means to be a member of either sex, or a combination of the two. The wide range of qualities given to and expected from the female sex indicates its complexity and range of power, as well as the fear it can engender.

At different times in her life, De Beauvoir has been criticized (by both feminists and their opponents) for intellectual stances and personal behavior. Her inability to follow any path but her own underlined the necessity of expanding the definition of woman to include myriad talents and desires, even socially unacceptable ones. In her own investigation of women, the artist Bastienne Schmidt understands that an examination of an entire gender requires an open approach, and uses the organizing principle of typology to reveal nuance rather than confirm identity. The silhouettes of female forms in her *Typology of Women* series recall familiar styles, occupations and cultural identities in anthropological outline; for instance one figure resembles a cancan dancer holding up her skirt and another calls to mind a fashion model from the 1950s. But small additional details within the painterly orange and yellow silhouettes, such as other figures and marks, complicate the identity suggested by each shape’s perimeter; Schmidt calls these additional figures and forms “the running patterns of women’s lives”.<sup>3</sup> Inspired by her archeologist father, who lay shards of ancient ceramics in long lines upon tables to view them and sometimes reconstruct them, Schmidt divides her subject into types and shapes that create a non-specific history. The artist plays with archetypal forms, but adds elements that transform the expected into the enigmatic; she suggests, but does not determine, the role a woman plays by her silhouette. Schmidt is classifying in order to interpret; her use of typology exists as a tool to articulate how identities are constructed, as well as a way to explore the sources that build these identities.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, tracing a line around a human shadow to make a silhouette became a familiar method to create a portrait, as well as a way to provide a quick alternative to the painted miniature. More recently, artists such as Kara Walker have

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<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, Introduction, *The Second Sex* (Vintage Books, New York 2011)p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Judith Thurman, Introduction, *The Second Sex*, (Vintage Books, New York 2011)p. ix

<sup>3</sup> Email conversation between the author and artist 11/7/2015

used this conventional form to expose racial and gender bias, and other earlier artists, such as Joan Miró, have presented abstract forms in silhouette, allowing the viewer to imagine the flat black shapes as both nature and human form. Schmidt experimented with the traditional black silhouette in her series *Evolution of Women* 2007 and *Faces* 2008 as a way to portray women without completely defining them, and has used this technique in her photography and painted scenes of women as well. In her photographs, a silhouetted form (often the artist) is shown in landscapes or interior scenes, usually viewed from the back, and sometimes seen through transparent material. After looking at these photographs, full of life's domestic details, the viewer feels he or she is observing a figure surrounded by clues. The subject's everyday activities seem specific, but also full of indeterminate symbols; for instance a colorful spiral of laundry laid out on the lawn looks like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, seen through the lens of domestic duty.<sup>4</sup> The spiral, a symbol found in ancient Greek, Celtic, Chinese and pre-Columbian cultures among others, often suggests expansion or infinity, and mirrors the approach of Schmidt's typology which embraces multiple types, some recognizable and others more mysterious.

Schmidt uses both cultural and collective memory to investigate the history of women's roles. By presenting varied outlines of female shapes that recall Cycladic sculpture, Matisse cut-outs and paper dolls, she creates a collection of uncertain identities that span centuries from ancient goddesses to contemporary athletes. As noted earlier, by replacing the flat black of the silhouette with a gestural orange, which often includes other figures and marks inside the outline, the viewer has a look into the inner life of the subject, perhaps at the private thoughts or history of this anonymous figure; the painting in the silhouettes, washes of glowing yellow and orange, flicker like small fires. The use of silhouette also emerges from Schmidt's interest in the repeated motifs of fairy-tales such as Hans Hoffman's *Struwwelpeter* and the drawings of Wilhelm Busch. Connecting forms is a way to shape content, but the timeline of these figures suggests different cultures and moments in history in a non-linear manner. Schmidt's investigation could be in the shape of a globe, with silhouettes of women stretched along the longitudes and latitudes; although these figures reflect different time periods and places, they also seem to exist at the same moment, and in the same world.

Along with the more traditionally composed female figures, the artist creates hybrid forms; for instance one figure joins a pair of female legs with a gun, and another displays legs with swirls of soft ice cream representing the upper body. In these figures the artist seems to comment on the objectification of women as well as their power; the images suggest that a woman is able to destroy and control as well as purvey the sensual. Another composite figure joins a pair of female legs with a camera. These works recall photographs by Laurie Simmons, but Schmidt's use of an abstracted camera and gun, as well as paint and paper, ensure the tools lack their usual machine-made perfection. The camera is an important device for Schmidt;

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<sup>4</sup> Vicki Goldberg also discusses this photograph in terms of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in her essay "A Woman's Place"

whether taking a self-portrait or directing the camera outwards, it allows the artist to “pull the trigger and define how she wants to be seen.”<sup>5</sup> A way to identify and record, the camera is the subject as well as the medium in much of her work. It is also a way to change reality, and can have the ability to, as Susan Sontag suggests, commit a “soft murder”<sup>6</sup>. This “soft murder” suggests the photographer takes something vital away from his or her subject. But in 2016, the fact that many photographs we take are self-portraits indicates the metaphorical roles of assailant and victim in photography can no longer be neatly separated.

The armless statue, reminiscent of the Venus di Milo and antiquity, has appeared in cartoons and modern art as a way to reveal our uncertain and romantic connection to the ancient world. Schmidt uses armless figures that evoke ancient goddesses and mid-century models, and some emerge from her memory of the Caryatids that she saw as a young girl at the Erechtheion in Athens. The ability of these female statues to provide architectural support with their heads suggests impressive physical and psychological strength, perhaps the antique corollary to the multi-tasking modern woman.<sup>7</sup> In an earlier series, *Hokusai Maps*, Schmidt painted floating scenes full of figures who are mostly women but sometimes include children and men. These paintings, whose composition recalls the repeated figures from everyday life in Hokusai’s manga or sketches, laid the groundwork for the *Typology of Women*. However in her typology, Schmidt removes the women from their surroundings to present individuals whose sizes range from that of a small child to an adult human being. Their height difference recalls Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* whose transformation from diminutive to towering forces her to adapt accordingly. However these dramatic changes almost cause her demise; being very small nearly leads to drowning and being extremely large causes her to cry many tears that flood the world around her. Alice’s fantastic struggles seem related to the multi-pronged social issues surrounding gender that have the power to join women from disparate groups as well as separate them from their goals and desires. The collective identity that we may feel as a group is a result of our individual knowledge; this paradox can result in allegiances that are only sometimes in sync.

Schmidt’s preoccupation with boundaries and measuring allows her to direct the viewer’s eye, as well as create volume out of air. In her work concerning the capture of space with line, she refers to geographical and abstract memory, requiring the viewer to observe carefully in order to note the surprises available in texture and shadow. For instance in *Strings Attached*, 2015, she draws in the air; attaching orange and blue string to branches or blue stakes stuck upright in the snow, Schmidt recalls Eva Hesse’s work such as *Hang Up*, 1966, in which Hesse uses a long steel tube to extend a shape from a traditional rectangular wall mounted frame. Both artists are concerned with extending spatial dimension by using humble materials

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<sup>5</sup> Email conversation between author and artist 11/7/2015

<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag, In Plato’s Cave, *On Photography* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York 1977) p. 13

<sup>7</sup> Email conversation between author and artist 11/7/2015

like string; their shared emphasis on process reveals their interest in the random as well as a fascination with the more specific act of mapping. Schmidt's early photographs, such as her 1992 picture of flowers hanging upside down from a net stretched in air (taken in Patzcuaro Mexico), or the photograph *Lights in Cairo*, 2010, are examples of her desire to use existing lines to illuminate the geometric beauty of the everyday. The outlines of the women in her *Typology* series serve a less abstract purpose but are nonetheless a way to define form; her addition of mythological reference and indeterminate cultural types encourage us to think about geography and place; in that way her investigation of women links to her more abstract and sculptural experiments.

The cultural and patriarchal tradition that eliminated many important women thinkers from history's pages is slowly breaking down. Schmidt's documentation of women is connected to this history and to its inhabitants, such as Tullia d'Aragona (1510-1556), who was a daughter of a Cardinal and a courtesan, as well as a courtesan herself. D'Aragona was also a well known writer and philosopher who wrote a Neo-Platonist discussion of women's sexual and emotional autonomy in the sphere of love. Another example is Hildegard Von Bingen (1098-1179), an abbess who was also a mystic, musician, writer and some believe the founder of scientific natural history. These women, along with many others, are rejoining the historical timeline as their importance is being re-discovered. The multiple roles that they were often forced to play relate to Schmidt's silhouettes, as does their experience skirting the political and personal landmines surrounding their attempts to join domesticity or religious faith with intellectual life. While creating this typology Schmidt gave the outline and its corresponding inside equal emphasis; neither reveals an exact identity but the figures' interior contains people and a heated atmosphere that gives off a generalized desire. Her wish to imagine and draw out the interior struggles of women connects her to other artists such as Nancy Spero. The two artists share a graphic sensibility in their depictions of the female sex, as well as an interest in using myth and symbol; they both create their own language in a bid to document the way women exist. Schmidt's women also relate to the collaged figures in Wangechi Mutu's work; both artists interpret the female portrait, and, using somewhat different means, they examine the traditional methods of portraying women that were used in order to screen out a more nuanced and uncomfortable reality. The following statement by Nancy Spero could describe the approach of Mutu and Schmidt as well, "I want to try to re-invent a language. I try to create a new kind of hieroglyph to subvert old meanings and open up the possibility for new ones. My most important concern is that in the work "woman" is not the other, she's the activator."<sup>8</sup>

Typologies can be used to classify almost anything, from Ray Blanchard's study of transsexualism to Bernd and Hilla Becher's documentation of industrial buildings. We seem to take comfort in finding familiar traits in chosen groups, and classify in

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<sup>8</sup> Tamar Garb, "Nancy Spero Interviewed", *Artscribe International* 64 (Summer 1987): 58-62

order to understand. But as we try to clarify and comprehend women's roles in our society, it becomes clear that many women still lack the option to empower themselves. Just as fairy tales were sometimes embroidered to conceal political subtext, in the past women who were engaged in philosophy and writing used acceptable social settings, such as salons and even churches, as meeting places to engage in veiled intellectual exchange. Today the female sex speaks more freely, but only in some locations; contrasting cultures highlight the state of women who still live under extreme oppression. Schmidt has created a line-up of female figures whose outlines suggest we might know them, but whose interiors show us we don't. In her exploration of the female sex she reveals that society's attitudes towards women both change and stay the same, as if our lives exist in parallel worlds; these worlds sometimes reach out to touch one another and some day, perhaps, will exist in full embrace.

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