



PRESS INFO

MIRIAM CAHN: I AS HUMAN

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opening:

November 29, 7 p.m.

Wybrzeże Kościuszkowskie 22
Warszawa

About the exhibition

“MIRIAM CAHN: I AS HUMAN” is the first Polish retrospective of the Swiss artist Miriam Cahn, one of the most important and acknowledged painters of the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. For over four decades the artist has been bearing witness to social conflicts, crises and emergencies, contemplating the contemporary human condition and the agency of painting vis-à-vis such subjects as war and violence, sexuality, nature, family relationships, and death. Cahn’s rich oeuvre, which includes not only painting, but also drawing, performance, text, and film is based on uncompromising resistance to all forms of violence and therefore is very relevant today.

Cahn was born in 1949 in Basel in a family of Jewish immigrants who fled Nazi persecution in Germany and France between the two world wars and settled in Switzerland. Already in the 1970s the artist joined the feminist and peace movements. She demonstrated her opposition to violence and inequality not only in the field of art. As she participated in protests, wrote petitions, and painted murals in the urban environment, Cahn’s life and work have always been a response to the political reality around her.

Simultaneously, she was developing her uncompromising language of artistic expression that has been always grounded in the body: the body as the artistic tool and as the object of visual representation. After graduating from the Department of Graphic Design at the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule in Basel, Cahn focused primarily on black-and-white works on paper, produced by using her entire body. She rejected the hierarchy which posits drawing as a sketch and a medium inferior to painting, moving drawing in the direction of performance. This gesture became the starting point for her later large-format drawings in coal, which the artist created on the floor, open to process and experiment. Registering the

media coverage of social and political events such as the Persian War, the conflict in former Yugoslavia, or the attack on the World Trade Center, Cahn responded with, among others, the iconic representations of war ships, sites of deportation, weapons of mass destruction, and other symbols of power, control, and violence.

Cahn's participation in three international art events may be considered central to her development as an artist: documenta 7 in 1982 (from which Cahn withdrew her work in the act of protest); her solo exhibition, curated by Jean-Christophe Ammann in 1983 in Kunsthalle Basel, where for the first time, looking at her own family relationships, Cahn reflected on the division of the world into the male and the female; and the 41st Venice Biennale, where she represented Switzerland in 1984. But the real breakthrough in her art happened in mid-1980s when Cahn introduced color into her works on paper, and a few years later, when at 45 she turned to evocative and intuitive painting. Her participation in documenta 14 in 2017 brought her international fame and confirmed her position as an artist who represents one of the most distinct ways of being actively engaged in contemporary world and its problems.

Cahn's works on canvas are above all an attempt to translate emotions into the language of painting: emotions that cannot be conveyed in verbal language in the face of trauma, acts of violence, armed conflicts, racism, and toxic human relationships. Figures in her paintings are often represented without facial features and clothing, as if the artist wanted to lend them the most universal, primal significance, reducing the body to vulnerable bare life. She is also testing the possibilities of representation in painting and striving to face the key questions related to the agency and ethics of art. How does one represent suffering and injustice without telling a moralizing tale? How does one avoid the trap of pathos and sensationalist spectacle? How does one assume the right to speak in the name of those who were deprived of a voice? And finally, how does one represent relationships that extend beyond the human, to the world of nature and non-human species?

Curatorial text

The show MIRIAM CAHN: I AS HUMAN encompasses the key stages of the creative life of the Swiss artist, Miriam Cahn, presenting not only the expressive works on paper, the unsettling oil paintings, and the monumental sculptures, but also the never-before exhibited sketchbooks. The show's title, suggested by the artist herself, testifies to her uncompromising stand and commitment to the quest for answers to the questions: who am I? What does it mean to be a woman? Who am I as an artist? What is art if my models are male artists? How can one combine beauty, destruction, and violence in one image? What happens when a naked woman—the *object* of the gaze—looks back at the viewer? To what extent can painting and drawing represent current political problems? And the fundamental question: what does it mean to be a human being today?

Miriam Cahn's oeuvre is extremely rich, diverse, and radical. Working since the early 1970s, the artist immersed herself in the political and social realities, reacting to current events. The end of the 1970s and the 1980s brought more visibility to the feminist, peace, and ecological movements; it is then that the artist defined her work as a site of individual resistance. In the 1990s she closely observed the war in the Persian Gulf, the Balkan Wars and their media coverage. More recently, her work is an anxious reaction to the refugee crisis and the #Me Too movement.

From the very beginning, the reflection on her own medium and language, its tradition and history, has been an important element in the work of Miriam Cahn. The artist has also always employed her political awareness in reflecting on her own work. The decision she made already as a student to work in black and white and to abandon the canvas has been a feminist decision: oil painting was at the time dominated by male artists and male subject matter. Miriam Cahn wanted to write art history from scratch: on her own terms and from her own, female perspective. Not only has she rejected color, but also eliminated the hierarchy of the sketch and the masterpiece, a decision that generated the large-scale drawings in coal that Cahn created in public spaces and subsequently on oversize tracing paper. These works represented, on the one hand, pipes, rockets, ships, towers, and on the other, floating beds, houses, or small carriages: motifs whose gender-inflected charge recurs in her work and continues to constitute one of the key elements of her artistic dictionary.

Miriam Cahn's rejection of classical beauty conventions lies at the core of her performative practice and of her interest in ephemeral materials and formal simplification, placing her on the cusp of (consciously chosen) naïve art. And yet even here Cahn rejects the demands made of feminist art, according to which she *should* address "female topics" and develop "female aesthetics." As she creates with her eyes closed and according to her own biological rhythm (she describes her works as "ovulation works," or "menstruation works," this physical reference affirming the uncomfortable and repressed spheres of woman's experience), the artist relinquishes full control over her work. As she undermines the hierarchy between process and effect, she suspends judgment (on success/failure) and with it, the fetishizing concept of "the masterpiece." She works on the floor, often using her entire

body and drawing on sensory memory, consciously refusing the general overview of her work and suspending safe distance and interpretation.

In the mid-nineties Miriam Cahn came back to painting, to the easel and to color. Bright, sparkling, layered hues have since become characteristic of her style. Irrespective of format and technique, however, she creates all of her work with the same degree of immersion and intensity. On none of her works does Cahn spend more than a couple of hours, which is the time of maximum concentration. With extreme focus, the artist reaches the deepest layers of consciousness, and her works are an internally uncensored recording of “an aesthetic discharge.”

Cahn's work is accompanied with literary commentary. Without reducing her work to anecdote, the artist uses words and images to tell her family history, her desires and dreams, the experience of her body and of growing old, her fears and anxieties, her anger and determination to be independent both in her work and in private life. At the same time, she places herself in the broader context of social and political events. Her emotions are those of an individual confronted with omnipresent violence. In her art, Miriam Cahn becomes an advocate in cases in which others fall silent and turn away.

Emotions, particularly anger, are in fact the force that drives Miriam Cahn's art. Her works are expressive, sometimes wild, created with passion, often outrageous and aggressive. Yet the artist consciously and carefully chooses her means of expression: she uses colors, textures, surfaces, and materials with great precision. Those works fascinate, provoke, terrify, sometimes seduce, and therefore even more powerfully confront the audience with uncomfortable reality. Interestingly, without sacrificing her search for aesthetic beauty and power of expression, the artist paints simultaneously violence and bliss, desire and loneliness, mutilation and gentleness, tenderness and physical blows: her art is both full of contradictions and provokes contradictory emotions. By placing her paintings “at eye level,” so that the gaze of the painted figures meets the gaze of the viewers, she forces us to look at them as if into our own mirror reflections and in this way dislodges us from positions of comfort and makes unequivocal judgment impossible. The titles of her works clearly suggest their subject (*hände hoch!* [*hands up!*], *beirut-beirut*, *träumen* [*dream*]). At times, however, Cahn is deliberately misleading: enchanted by the loveliness of her colorful watercolors, only slowly do we begin to realize that the colors are shaped like a nuclear mushroom and we are standing enthralled in front of the representation of the greatest catastrophe in human history. In this way, ambivalence but also the unconditional equality become the subject of Miriam Cahn's work. They interest her in the context of gender struggles, the debates about refugees and about the relation of humans to the world of plants and animals.

Her dreamy paintings are peopled with figures with blurry contours. Sometimes it is difficult to tell if they are human or animal; male or female. Emerging details guide our gaze, mark the points of tension or identity: genitals (usually erect), terrified eyes, clenched fists. Those colorful paintings are filled with anxiety. And even if their titles refer them to specific places and events, they seem to drift outside of time, between one catastrophe and another. The cycle *mare nostrum*, begun in 2015 and continued

until today, is an irate meditation: the artist paints the fleeing naked and humiliated people in an abstract environment or, recently, drowning in the Mediterranean. Those paintings are, again, grounded in ambivalence: thematically they are dramatic and terrifying, but simultaneously—in terms of composition, expression, color—they are strangely and unquestionably beautiful. Answering the question why the subject of war recurs in her work, Miriam Cahn has been saying for years that it is important to make a statement, to take a stand. She believes there is evil in every human being and one needs to confront directly this dormant potential, this smoldering danger, and the violence that may erupt from it. It is those that Miriam Cahn's art continues to confront.

The show MIRIAM CAHN: I AS HUMAN is conceived as a retrospective, however, it is not organized chronologically. On the contrary, arranged by the artist (for whom hanging her works is a gesture as important as creating them), it is a form of an installation in which works from different periods, created in different social and political contexts, enter into multilayered dialogue. The exhibition at the Museum on the Vistula comprises around 200 works representing an oeuvre that is heterogeneous, disquieting, and full of the most extreme emotions: emotions that accompany us in our everyday lives: us, as humans.

Marta Dziewańska

Miriam Cahn

(born in 1949 in Basel) Swiss painter, graphic artist, and writer. She studied graphic art with Armin Hofmann in the famous Allgemeine Gewerbeschule in Basel. In the 1970s she associated with the Swiss Stampa gallery which gathered a young international community of artists experimenting with the new media, such as video and performance. From the very beginning she combined her life as an artist with political activism. In 1977 she visited Warsaw for the first time, as an OFRA delegate (the Swiss Organization for Women) at the World Congregation of the Builders of Peace. In 1982 she withdrew her works from the prestigious documenta 7 show, curated by Rudi Fuchs. A year later she had her first institutional solo show in Kunsthalle Basel, at the invitation of its then director Jean-Christophe Ammann. In 1984 she represented Switzerland at the 41st Venice Biennale. In 1995 she has shown her works in Poland for the first time at "Where Is Abel, Your Brother" show, curated by Anda Rottenberg in the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw. But she achieved true international fame only with her show at documenta 14, curated by Adam Szymczyk. "MIRIAM CAHN: I AS HUMAN" in the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw was preceded by the artist's shows in 2019 in Kunstmuseum in Bern, in Haus der Kunst in Munich, and in the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid. Cahn's works can be found in numerous art collections around the world, among others at MoMA in New York, at the Tate Modern in London, at the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid, as well as at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Miriam Cahn is the recipient of many awards, such as the Käthe Kollwitz award (1998), the Meret Oppenheim award (2005), and the award of the city of Basel, Basler Kunstpreis (2013).

"MIRIAM CAHN: I AS HUMAN" is a show arranged by the artist specifically for the Museum on the Vistula. It is the effect of cooperation between the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, the Kunstmuseum in Berlin, and Haus der Kunst in Munich. The travelling exhibition is accompanied by three publications: "MIRIAM CAHN: I AS HUMAN" (ed. Marta Dziewańska, publications of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw); an online publication in Polish of selected texts from the above book; and "MIRIAM CAHN: WRITINGS IN RAGE" (ed. Miriam Cahn, publications of Kunstmuseum Bern and Hatje Cantz).

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