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Alterations: The Work of the Altered Book Artist Miriam Schaer

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Miriam Schaer's altered books originate from a profound introspection of the inseparability of the heart, mind and body. She is seductive and meditative, funny and serious. Personal, cultural, aesthetic, and historical critical threads are germane pathways to understand Schaer's work. Personal perspectives that appear in Schaer's work include interior dialogues that ebb and flow over time. Her edginess brings attention to temptations that border on the dangerous. The artist's cultural perspectives note the proclivity of Jewish culture to have a surfeit of questions arising out of every argument. She also feels at times an unsolicited hostility from unknown sources culminating in a feeling of being an outsider. As a book artist, her aesthetic perspectives explore unique aspects of scale, media and construction while responding to misogynic attitudes in contemporary society. Historical perspectives are seen in the Jewish context of much of Schaer's work aligned with an acumen that often reveals deceptive political actions over the centuries.

Schaer is a Brooklyn-based interdisciplinary multimedia book artist and a Lecturer in the Interdisciplinary Masters of Fine Arts Program in Book and Paper at Columbia College Chicago, Illinois. She is an assimilated, non-observant Jewish woman, with American born parents. However she feels there is something that comes through in her interests and her art that conveys a connection to Judaism. She is affiliated with the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art based at the Brooklyn Museum and the Center for Books Arts in Manhattan. In 2012 the International Museum of Women online exhibition included her work in an exhibition entitled *Mama: Motherhood around the Globe*. Coming from the world of fibers, printmaking, and artists books, she has lead the transformation of book arts in feminist introspection, cultural and ethnic sensitivities and allegiances and the use of new materials to best reveal personal and public contradictions seen, felt and heard in the world around her.

Schaer's altered books are fertile examples of social inquiry, a component of critical pedagogy in art education according to Tavin (2003). Schaer's experience as a teacher/artist has facilitated an intellectual forum of mutually enlightening discourse with students, colleagues and the public. Her students are part of learning communities, gaining confidence and encouragement from her guidance and from peer assessments in the art-making process.

The following interview was conducted over a three month period (late spring to midsummer 2012) with prepared written questions by the author and written responses by the artist. A subsequent conversation between the author and artist occurred on March 1, 2013. Germane to art educators such as Lai (2009) pursuing critical pedagogy, Miriam Schaer's work senses injustice in a Roman apologist, in the global marketing of an idealized femininity, in sanitized fairy tales, in fossilized familial roles, and in the power relations among women themselves. The insightful and introspective responses reveal aspects of the artist's creative process, motivations for her work, and reflective stances on aesthetic decision-making. The concluding section synthesizes her art educational pedagogy that facilitates exploration, dialogue, and critical thinking in the instruction of imagining and constructing interdisciplinary altered books.

The Interview

LF: Your book series entitled, *Hands of Josephus* (2008-2010), is inspired by the Roman first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus' *Twenty Books of the Jewish Antiquities*, *The Life of Josephus* and *The Jewish Wars*. How does the narrative embedded in this series specifically raise questions about who owns history or does the hand of the victor always control the truth?

MS: A friend gave me the two-volume set, *Flavius Josephus' Twenty Books of the Jewish Antiquities*, *The Life of Josephus* and *The Jewish Wars*, but it was about a year before I knew

what to do with them. Despite 12 years of Hebrew school and Jewish summer camps, I wasn't at all familiar with Josephus or his writings, so I did some research into his life and learned not only about his contributions, but his service as a Roman apologist. I also learned his writings should not necessarily be taken at face value. For example, he claimed to be a survivor of Masada, which contradicts the no-survivor stories I learned while growing up.

I started *Hands of Josephus* during the G. W. Bush administration, the Bush who told the American public to go shopping after the World Trade Center was bombed. As the wars of retribution against the Taliban and Al Qaeda progressed, it seemed obvious only a portion of the truth was being told, especially regarding Iraq, as the hunt for weapons of mass destruction was revealed to be a lie. I like to think of *Hands of Josephus* as a reminder that history is written by the victors (see Figure 1).

■ Figure 1: *Hands of Josephus*, (2008-2010)



Figure 1. Various sizes (from 10.5 x 4 x 15 to 10.5 x 4 x 37) beads, wire hand forms, each page cut into hand shapes, on to flexible beaded spines. The artist used as inspiration a series of books (Josephus, 1999). Copyright 2013 by <http://miriamschaer.com>.

LF: Why did you choose girdles, female figure enhancing undergarments, as a skeleton for a series of altered books such as *Foundations of Twentieth Century Thought?* (1992) (see Figure 2).

MS: I came of age when Twiggy was the female ideal. I, however, was much larger and rounder, which made it more difficult than it should have been to come to terms with my changing body, an experience unfortunately not uncommon among young women. While our bodies may bear the marks and scars of our lives, they don't in most magazines, especially the glossy titles targeting women. In their alternate Stepford-style universe, women are, for the most part, as youthful, glowing, glamorous and flawless as photography and Photoshop can make them. Photography's increasing sophistication in the 1960s with large magazine pages presenting idealized images of their customers could not help but affect me growing up. To some older women, able to understand the deep contempt its veneer concealed, it formed part of the cultural misogyny whose backlash was the rise of feminism.

The idea of working with girdles occurred to me during my first encounters with bookbinding. In my studies of bookbinding and book structures, I learned about a medieval

Figure 2. *Foundations of Twentieth Century Thought*, (1992)



Figure 2. 24 x 34 x 12 opened, 24 x 17 x 12 closed. Girdle, acrylic, Xerox. Large book formed from a girdle, with a child's nursery rhyme inside. Images are collaged from classic vintage female underwear advertisements from the 60s and 70s. Copyright 2013 by <http://miriamschaer.com>.

format, the Girdle Book, worn by monks. The Girdle Book was a traditional codex with a swath of fabric on the top edge (or fore-edge) of the book, allowing it to be tucked into the girdle or waistband of a monk, so his prayers would always be at hand. I immediately thought about using these structures to create narrative sculpture to address female issues. Then I realized I could use the structure to also address ideas not specifically female, but through a feminist perspective. Later, I began to use other garments as well, children's clothing and gloves in particular. The scale made sense for book structures, and I could broaden my framework to include other issues, such as family and infertility.

LF: In your girdle books, *One Heart*, (2004) and *Not with a Club the Heart is Broken*, (2004) you suggest quiet tragedies in people's lives. These works scratch the surface of the melancholy in many of your pieces...Is there a particularly Jewish feminist melancholy? If so, why? (see Figures 3 and 4).

MS: I created *One Heart* and *Not with a Club the Heart is Broken* for my installation *Six Wives of the Brothers Grimm* at the Brooklyn Public Library. But I hadn't thought of them as possessing a Jewish perspective. I wanted to freshly adapt some fairy tales for an urban setting. Grimm's original tales, popularized by Hans Christian Anderson and Charles Perrault, have by now been so sanctified, sanitized and Disneyfied, they have the moral nutritional value of Happy Meals. The original tales had darker themes and intentions, cautioning readers against the dangers and traumas life can bring. The original Little Mermaid, for example, sacrifices her voice to marry the prince, and never gets it back. The tableaux I created for *Six Wives of the Brothers Grimm* use the fables to explore questions that may not have answers, certainly not easy ones. This may well reflect a vital part of Jewish culture, the tendency to examine issues from all sides of every question.

My idea for the *Six Wives of the Brothers Grimm* installation was to use some of Dickinson's poetry to help shape a new urban folk/fairy tale. Based in Brooklyn, in a crowded urban environment, it's impossible for me to isolate a New York sensibility from the broader perception of the possibility of danger, even in our relatively sanitized, affluence-oriented times.

Figure 3. *One Heart*, 2004



Figure 3. 14 x 17 x 9, girdle, acrylic, silk, Indian hand-made paper. Inset hand-shaped book, combination codex/accordion, 6 x 4 x 24 long when opened. Text by Emily Dickinson, Poem number 6, from Part One: Life Sculptural object, created from a girdle with a gold and blue, hand shaped accordion book containing hand-cut letters of the Dickinson poem (Johnson, 1976). Copyright 2013 by <http://miriamschaer.com>.

Dickinson's words, written more than 100 years ago, speak to me with the voice of fairy tales.

Emily Dickinson's poems explore personal and romantic tragedies, the ways people experienced their contemporary anxieties. I hand cut all the lettering in *One Heart* and *Not with a Club the Heart is Broken* to better reflect the fragility of the poems' expressions.

LF: How does your work *Solitary Confinements: A Family Portrait*, (2001) and/or *Altars of the Invisible*, (2005) reveal personal/public explorations of the role of Jewish women in secular and religious society? (see Figures 5 and 6).

MS: Both works contrast the idea of a smooth, calm exterior with tumultuous interiors revealed when their garments are opened. My idea for *Solitary Confinements: A Family Portrait* was to explore how the traditional roles in which family members are cast clash against family members' interior dialogs, so often in opposition to their assigned roles within the family hierarchy. As a viewer enters the space of *Solitary Confinements*, (Schaer's first installation) he/she is greeted by four figures standing at a table set as if for a meal. Each figure is a large artist book that dramatizes the place of each individual in family life. Constructed from actual items of clothing, each book represents one member of a family consisting of a mother, a father and two kids. A brightly colored table, chairs, dishes and flatware suggest elements of a dollhouse blown up to life-size scale. Each family member tells a different story and the torso of each opens to reveal a removable book containing a brief narrative. Some of the narratives are in accord with how the world perceives us; others are not. The books within the books of *Solitary Confinements* are available for visitors to read or examine. Visitors can also sit in the red chairs around the yellow kitchen table, guests and participants, as it were, in the larger family portrait. *Solitary Confinements: A Family Portrait* was based on my own experience with the family dynamic. I am the oldest of four children, raised in a traditional, stable middle class family. My parents were married for 45 years until my father passed away. My mother lived in the house I grew up in for 54 years, until this very summer (2012). Our roles were narrowly arranged with

little latitude for variation. I remember feeling terror at the options open to me at the time, and very unclear about what path to take.

In *Altars of the Invisible*, the interior signifies areas and issues women focus on to maintain the illusion of perfection. This could be interpreted through a Jewish lens in the sense that Jews are expected to maintain a perfect persona, like other so-called model minorities. Be polite, not too loud, not too pushy because any out-of-step behavior will bring negative attention to the Jewish community. This piece is a new millennium altarpiece for today's women, who are still being told they can have it all if only they will try hard enough. In form, it is a sculptural work in which I have torn apart, restructured, and compartmentalized an actual wedding dress. The front of the garment, transformed into working doors, can open and close to reveal or hide the interior of the dress and its objects. The piece was inspired by *Virgem do Paraíso*, a 13th century Portuguese altarpiece from Evora, Sandy Orgel's *Linen Closet* installation (1972) and *Maria*, the robot provocateur turned goddess in Fritz Lang's silent *Metropolis* (1927). In *Altars*, the female body is stylized to form a series of compartments bearing items necessary for a woman to thrive in today's world. These objects – symbols of love, sex, careers, marriages, households, families and children – serve as every woman's interior trousseau, and reflect the multiple roles thrust upon women by culture, the media and women themselves. The piece *Altars* expresses to me the interior conflicts and cacophony having it all entails.

■ Figure 5. *Solitary Confinements: A Family Portrait*, (2001)



Figure 5. Mixed media installation at Ceres Project Room at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts. The original installation filled the 15 x 24 foot room. The walls are covered by a series of Xerox and graphite 4 x 6 feet modular paper panels. The bright yellow painted table with accompanying chair is 5 feet long by 36 inches wide and 30 inches high. The dimensions of the figures are as follows (h x w x d in inches, all figures closed). Father : 62 x 23 x 12 (inches); Mother: 45 x 20 x 12 (inches); Sister: 35 x 16 x 8 (inches); Brother: 24 x 10 x 8; Brother in high chair: 56 high (inches). Copyright 2013 by <http://miriamschaer.com>.

■ Figure 6. *Altars of the Invisible*, (2005)



Figure 6. 67 x 28 x 22 (inches) Large stiffened and transformed acrylic blue wedding dress opening to reveal numerous tableaux of found objects representing the perfection women try to attain in the quest to have it all. Inset Book: 29 x 7.5, Trapezoidal shaped digital book printed on hand-painted Whatman paper, contains text *Adjusting for the Moon* by Stan Pinkwas , produced in an edition of 18 with one Artist's Proof (AP) about the complexities of relationships using ancient techniques of navigation. Copyright 2013 by <http://miriamschaer.com>.

LF: What is the spiritual contemplation of Eve in *Eve's Meditation* (1997) and how does this book's aesthetic structure interpret the biblical narrative? (see Figure 7).

MS: *Eve's Meditation* is a wordless, non-traditional book sewn on hyper-packed, beaded cords that curl along the length of its extended spine. Rather than use text, the interior consists of an endless row of apple silhouettes, hand-cut into the pages, forming a tunnel that bores thru the snake's interior. The book becomes, in effect, the serpent in the Garden of Eden. At 5 inches high by 6 inches wide by 42 inches long, it pushes the boundaries of book structure. For the end papers, I used images of Durer's *Expulsion from Paradise*. I always felt this was a breakthrough work for me.

Figure 7. *Eve's Meditation*, (1997)



Figure 7. 5 x 6 x 42 inches. Silk, acrylic, ink, beads, Xerox. Long purple book, with apple shapes cut from the interior to resemble a snake. Copyright 2013 by <http://miriamschaer.com>.

Eve's Meditation takes the form of a serpent, a book and a fruit, the shape of which fills the serpent with the spirit of hidden knowledge. The path to knowing, therefore, is through the belly of a snake. More than this, it suggests that knowledge is dangerous and apart, allied with

temptation, acquired in disobedience, and punished by shame: all signs of the outsider, the guest denied the feast, characteristics of my own relationship to Judaism. Growing up Jewish in western New York State, among few other Jewish families, my earliest memories are of apartness. That apartness has always made it difficult for me to accept stories at face value. To find the story in the story, to tease out the text between the lines, sensing so often that all is in the not said, I find myself still applying the perspective of an outsider looking in, shaped like *Eve's Meditation*, by an external assimilation that leaves me still Jewish to the core.

LF: Please elaborate on your inspiration for *Baby (Not) on Board: The Last Prejudice?* (2010—2012) (see Figure 8).

MS: Artist's Statement: *Baby (Not) on Board: The Last Prejudice?* (2010-2012) Among the multitude of biblical citations urging the faithful to do one thing or another, "Be fruitful and multiply," Genesis 1:28, is often first in the minds of many in the Jewish community. Some believe it essential to bear *at least* three children, two to replace the propagating couple and a third to replace those lost in the Holocaust, an imperative that also serves to resist perceived threats of assimilation (outside Israel) and ethnic encirclement (within). Women, however, who cannot or choose not to have children for one reason or another seem to anger or offend a great many individuals and institution: so many, that hostile attitudes against the childless amount to a cultural bias, and not only among Jews.

In *Baby (Not) on Board: The Last Prejudice?* I hand-embroidered on several baby rompers cutting comments made to women who chose to not have children. Some were said to me, some to other women who told them to me, and others I encountered in my day-to-day

activities. A few examples: “Childless women lack an essential humanity, you still have time, maybe you’ll adopt, and your decision not to have children is a rebellion against God’s will.”

This attitude is so commonplace and deep-seated as to keep alive the old question: does a woman have any value other than to produce children? Many, and the Orthodox more than most, would answer in the negative. *Baby (Not) on Board* is my effort to shine a little light on a hurtful, harmful attitude that is often expressed but rarely discussed.

I had been thinking about childlessness for a while. At a certain point in my life, it became pretty clear that not having children was going to be my path. In this, I have been fortunate to have had support from my husband, my family, and most of my friends. The stories I have heard from other women are often heartbreaking, with their accomplishments dismissed out of hand because they didn’t have children. My mother once said to me, “I think you would have been a fantastic parent, but you chose the right path for you.” You can’t do much better than that.

Figure 8. *Baby (Not) on Board: The Last Prejudice?* (2010-2012)



Figure 8. Dimensions variable, white baby dresses and rompers, hand embroidered with red thread. Copyright 2013 by <http://miriamschaer.com>.

Discussion and Conclusions

Miriam Schaer's work can be understood by its provocations for additional discussion. In the following section, Schaer's contributions are divided into two sections, further interpretation of her artistic practice and her critical pedagogy focused on social inquiry.

Further Interpretations

In Schaer's, *Foundation of Twentieth Century Thought?* (1992) using the girdle form for its structure suggests Jewish women are now participants in longing for shapely figures openly enticing men. *Foundation of Twentieth Century Thought?* is a page turning enticement to arouse male desire by looking at women seductively posed in lingerie. The girdle, a figure-enhancing garment, provides a prototype of an appealing feminine shape. Intrinsic to best understanding this piece is an oblique reference to the Talmud's requirement that a married couple, not only have sex, but have sex in the right frame of mind, so as to have babies but also to strengthen the marital bond, essential for a healthy family. One's requisite alluring shape, Schaer warns can therefore become an overriding preoccupation sidelining dialectical inquiry by both professional women artists and student artists.

When contemplating Schaer's *Eve's Meditation*, (1997) an alternate meditation could be considered. Lilith is an apocryphal character created not from Adam's rib but equal in stature to Adam who refuses to be ruled by him. The artist says the character of Lilith never entered into her thoughts as she is often thought of as a female demon and whose legacy is complicated and open to interpretations. According to Melvin Konner (2009), she (Lilith) could not be considered the mother of humankind in the patriarchal society of ancient Israel since in any traditional society there are few worse things than childlessness for a woman. Konner (2009) investigates the fear of childlessness as it relates to infertility. Infertility can represent a fear of unregulated

female sexuality since there will be no repercussions of pregnancy. Lilith was condemned to an alternate world but not destroyed, so she became the temptress to all men. The Other is always hypersexual and that difference can be an aphrodisiac. Lilith can however have great currency for art students; many contemporary women do not have the desire for the inequities often embedded in marriage and subsequently child-raising.

In Jewish tradition, tattoos are seen as mutilation and therefore forbidden. In *Not with a Club the Heart is Broken*, (2004) Schaer has tattooed a garment with the text of an Emily Dickinson poem on the interior back side of the girdle and on the heart-shaped spill of pages coming from the inside back of the girdle structure. The skin of the girdle is festooned with googly eyes pasted on its exterior. One can then imagine the carved and tattoo-like text filled Girdle Books as a taboo charged alteration of the female torso. Many of Schaer's art education students however are readily festooned in tattoo images. They perhaps conceive of themselves as avatars of the evolution from non-western ancestral to modern global aesthetic perspectives.

Schaer's work and interpretation of her work prompts humor and sarcasm, and provokes a confrontation with sexual feminist topics. In Schaer's Artist Statement *Baby (Not) on Board; The Last Prejudice?* (2010-2012) and in response to the author's questions, there is a looming often unstated sentiment that Jewish women need to propagate to make up for the 1.5 million children murdered in the Holocaust. This is part of a larger ethos that it is a misdemeanor in deviating from what should be a Jewish woman's most ardent wish, to be a mother. These two sentiments are also evident according to Wasserman (2011) in the work of Yani Pecanins a Mexican artist born 1957 who created a series of books from dresses her mother had given her that she and her sister had worn as young children. Pecanins' books were inspired by the diary of Anne Frank and are called *Both Sides, Los dos Lados*, (1998). She created this artist book from

one of her childhood dresses with photographs, calligraphy, thread, and words from Anne Frank's diary. The artist feels the dress showed her as small and fragile the way Anne must have felt not knowing what will become of you in the future and in the act of discovering yourself.

Several of Schaer's students have used the human body as an inventive canvas to explore sexuality. Two students with the most profound interest in depicting gender have been gay men. One of them revealed how he was feeling pressure to have a child with his partner. The time-based issue of fertility resonates in a gay man's world as it does in the lesbian, transgender and heterosexual world. The other student felt that Schaer's embroidered baby clothes could be seen as a colonization of consumerism where people are made to think that they must have children to buy these precious clothes. Purchasing is then understood as a proactive activity of capitalism.

The power of procreation and the treasure of childhood innocence are timeless themes of cultural production. The biblical character of Hannah, ultimately the mother of Samuel, epitomizes the anguished woman who prays and admonishes God for not letting her have children. The heart rendering cries and childless despair of Hannah can then be heard through Rosa in Cynthia Ozick's (1989) short story *The Shawl*. Rosa sees her starving infant, Magda, floating on the shoulders of an SS soldier moving further and further away from her. The terrifying image of Magda separated from her mother but seen at a distance thrown in the air towards an electrified fence etches an unabated image of powerlessness shown through suspended weightlessness. In Schaer's embroidered dresses as pages in a book, like Pecanins' book from dresses, there is a potent resonance of endless abeyance alluding to the vacuum of childlessness. The shadow of the Holocaust is never far from the allusions engendered by Schaer's work.

Strident sentiments embroidered on Schaer's baby dresses and outfits underscore the difficulty for Jewish women not being able to bear children to live up to public expectations of motherhood. Miriam Schaer has drawn from life experiences, corporeal and psychological, to address issues of equity, justice and compassion within Jewish tradition and culture. She has reconfigured the essence of a book, the stalwart pillar of beloved truths, constructing an aesthetic and pedagogical framework for exploration and interpretation of contemporary feminist ethical, social, and religious issues.

Critical Pedagogy

As a professor/teacher in art education and exhibiting artist for decades, Schaer has a highly engaged public as well as a broad age range of students and sister/fellow artists converging in their desire to further understand her interdisciplinary altered books confronting injustice. Narrowing the space/difference between student and teacher, Schaer's students and others organized an informal salon at Columbia College Chicago provoked by curiosity to further explore interdisciplinary altered books. The salons can be understood as collaborative consultations moving from the abstract to the concrete. One of the ironical postures for Schaer, when participating in the salon, is to discuss her completed works of art while intellectually and aesthetically being deeply entrenched in the creative art-making process. She reflectively says that a teacher should assume nothing when teaching, recognize that inspiration comes from a broad range of experiences, and understand that there is no one way to reach all students. Schaer has seen students of all ages rise above their circumstances confronting personal and cultural obstacles to engage in meaningful artistic practice. Disruption often becomes a catalyst for creativity.

As an educator, Schaer feels she is a facilitator for students coming from diverse aesthetic and personal histories. When introducing a new project, she breaks down the project into discrete sections to focus her students. She asks students to conceptualize their work, to confront what will be the most difficult part, to imagine influences that perhaps will engender the work, and to eliminate any hierarchical ideas that could block the realization of the work. Miriam Schaer does not teach by using her own work as exemplars but employs questioning strategies as scaffolding for students to build upon for their own practice. For some of Schaer's students, silence instead of dialogue needs to be transformed so that this often telltale signal of despair can be harnessed as a catalyst for art-making.

Critical aesthetic turns can be seen through a generational lens in Schaer's students who have come from families who built accordions/musical instruments, electrical circuit breaker boxes, and/or were contractors and roofers. Miriam Schaer, in discussion with her students, notes the perhaps conceptualizing a past of artifact making was a precursor to their own work. Schaer acts as a conduit for student musings while encouraging students' inventive infusions. She is selfless in her open conversation with students. Some of her current students' work includes audio and visual technology into the making of books. The artist readily acknowledges that she does not know all there is to know about many topics. However, she is quick to put students in touch with information and appropriate people to gain an expertise.

Visual art students are often challenged in writing artists statements. In one of her art as practice classes, Schaer has students engage in a series of pair, listen, and write activities. By having students talk about their aesthetics, social inquiry and/or art-making ideas, not only do they hear their own voice but also another student hears these thoughts. Having the listening student write down/scribe what the student has said and then having it read back to the speaker

adds gravity to the thought. When this activity is done two or three times over time with different pairs of students, the repeated words of what another student heard helps solidify the speaking artist's conception of what he/she is trying to accomplish. In this activity of pairing, students speak, listen, and write thereby becoming involved in active listening and purposeful talk. At first, students are resistant to be scribes but soon see the import of the interactive pedagogical activity.

Reflecting on her critical pedagogy employed in the classroom, Schaer has described her feeling of Otherness as both feminist and culture carrier. In this context, Miriam Schaer has said, as noted earlier, she finds inspiration for her work in the text between the lines. Critical inquiry according to Garber (2004) involves digging into subtexts and underlying meanings. By tackling issues of power relations within families, professions, and politics, she participates in public life, a basic premise of democracy.

Humor and heartbreak embolden the edginess of Miriam Schaer's altered books. The unique scale, media and construction of the artist's altered books incite a surfeit of questions. Her interactive pedagogy of critical thinking, collaborative consultations, encouragement of technological invention, and deep interest in social inquiry nurtures feminist introspection and addresses cultural and ethnic sensitivities. Schaer's aesthetic and educational approaches reflect the diversity of contemporary artistic practice and teaching of interdisciplinary books arts.

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