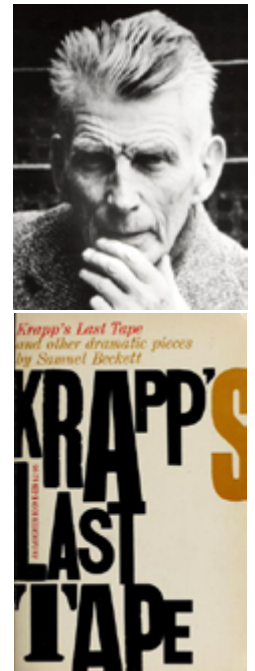


Reading in dust...

by Daniel Reich



With intense necessity, Swiss artist Miriam Cahn has created haunting and thought-provoking sketchbooks for forty years. The pressure she applies to the charcoal of her drawings leaves ghost images and indentations on subsequent pages. Cahn's interrelated drawings have the elementary, pared-down hieroglyphic imagery of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and include written passages of social critique and diaristic descriptions of events. The images are vaguely organic, physical, allegorical and totemic. Playful nature is seen as red polka dots, signifying the repetitious red fruit of a green tree. Soft faces with shadowy eyes cry charcoal tears. We are in a world of symbolic forms (vaginas, houses and mountains, for instance), yet there is always an experiential quality of graphic sadness and possibility, as seen in a Rorschach tree-form lushly painted in black. Cahn's work has the quality of a Beckett character whose irascibility propels the imagination. `



1. Samuel Beckett
2. *Krapps Last Tape*



das haus nicht vergessen and
rechts + links - nur vogel
7.09 x 9.84 inches (18 x 25 cm)

Julie Kristeva's essay "Woman's Time," discusses second wave feminism in terms of the place of the female body, both physically in terms of reproduction (as reflected in pragmatic issues like childcare, family planning and contraception) and psychologically in the symbolic order. For Kristeva, the place of the woman in reproduction postulates a relationship to time and space defined by cycles. As opposed to linear time, such cycles are, to Kristeva, an "aesthetic practice," suggestively akin to Rosa Luxemburg's suggestion of a spontaneous series of creative acts (a sort of anarchic production) whose furnace is a necessary crucible for social change. Cahn's creative acts are synchronized with the temporal bodily aspects of womanhood, including the monthly reproductive cycle that may culminate in pregnancy. Showing the closeness of this relationship, two images depict a fetus growing in the womb, recalling the three trimesters of pregnancy and a changing body beset by the experience of morning sickness and the innate foreignness of a second body inside one's own. In one, a corporeal, multi-breasted mass reclines on a page, challenging our discomfort with profuse, anatomical womanliness and pushing us to see something beyond the sanitized surfaces we are taught to prefer.

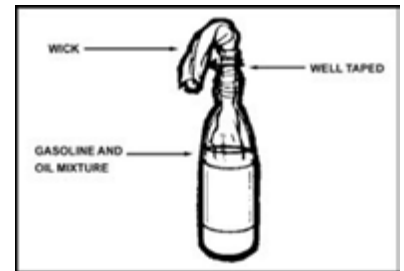


1. Julia Kristeva
 2. Rosa Luxemburg
 3. Bra-burning Freedom Trash-can



Ohne titel, 1979-2010
 Charcoal on paper
 14.96 x 10.63 inches (38 x 27 cm)

Indeed, Cahn's world is anarchic and ritualistic. In a written passage, she refers to throwing white plasticine at a surface covered in black chalk as if it were a Molotov cocktail. In a video, this action is performed with a giant plasticine brick that is dropped on a charcoal covered floor again and again. It is an image of labor and ritualistic repetition. Her drawings can have the graphic, emblematic nature of graffiti—crosses, dots and houses. A suction tube uncomfortably suggests a torture device, with its tunnel rent by the excess of matter that chokes bloodily through. A painted black grid suggests confinement behind the small, grated window of a cell door. A dress and long tresses are shorthand for the female. Pleasure is entailed in the disruptive peek-a-boo humor of lifting a skirt. It is hard to describe the boldness of contrast with which these images are rendered on the white page, but a life-size vagina covered in hair receding into the fold of the page matches the nuclear explosions that so interest Cahn. It is so simple, and so distant in nature from the centerfold, that its undeniable echo is ingenious. As a sketchbook can also be turned upside down, every image can be rotated, so mountains can also become mons veneris. Powerful, spinning, abundant motion-lines of air currents pull apart Cahn's representations into thousands of drawn strings.



1. Diagram of a Molotov cocktail
2. Nuclear bomb explosion at sea - Bikini Atolls Test



Miriam Cahn,
Das Wilde Leben, 1984
9 minutes 40 seconds

As Cahn writes: “with a knife I shave the black chalk into dust, I chop the rest into little pieces like housewives or cooks do...” At its crux, Cahn’s preparatory practice in prelude to drawing has a heretical ethos. As “work” is anxious, guilty capitalist production, reproduction is and is not work by way of its organism, from ovulation to final labor. Its inverse is “free time,” which Cahn disdains because of an inability to adhere to this punch-card mentality. So instead she adheres to cycles, which are spontaneous and cannot be written into a schedule. In addition to biological cycles, there are also creative cycles of inspiration that occur as if by magic.

The manifestations of post-colonialism in places like the Persian Gulf or Lebanon, as well as the refugees of the Yugoslavian conflict, belie the impassive thin-lipped meanness (meaning cheapness) of the Occident’s quest for bullion and treasure. Orderliness (from 9:00 to 5:00) is drab without the fantastic, meditation or dreams (“drawing with eyes closed,” or “writing in dust,” as Cahn puts it). Following the precision with which a bird dips a wing and spreads feathers to land, one must peel oneself like an onion to have the lucidity to see the presences that occupy Cahn’s pages before they are articulated, shaman-like. These meditative moments outside of the anxious death of capitalist “work” are a mythic projection.



1. King Leopold
2. The Anti-Nuclear Logo



Eine kotzende frau, 1978
Charcoal on paper
8.27 x 11.81 inches (21 x 30 cm)

Cahn's imagery includes mask-like faces, train tracks or roads in one-point perspective, animals, televisions, radios and houses. The house image fixes maddeningly in the brain, as it is expressed using elemental basic geometry that recalls the reductive world of childhood: an oblong with a triangle sitting on top of it. Additional oblongs represent windows, doors and chimneys. In one house drawing, a wandering pathway leads us to the door. It recalls Hansel and Gretel, as this linear pathway is continued in a line of chimney smoke evocative of Gretel's rescue of Hansel by pushing the witch into the fireplace. His motif of passing through something spatially is repeated again and again. The figure of the wicked witch is also the bad, abusive mother, the mother longing for absolution—or the mother who, as in *Sophie's Choice*, must choose one child over another.



Bauhaus Textile by Ruth Holls-Consemmler



EINE CONFUSION heimat, 1977
Pencil on paper
11.42 x 7.87 inches (29 x 20 cm)

At times Cahn draws configurations of flat boxes on the page that are reminiscent of Bauhaus design, only their lines morph from the purely decorative to suggest movement and energy-flows. These configurations relate to her houses and one-point perspective spaces, but are in stark contrast to her mountain landscapes, although they may recall our system of dividing nature into lots that can be bought and sold—fields of grass suggestive of agriculture, lined by trees. These works also bring to mind blueprints and the aerial photographs and military satellite views that so interest Cahn, showing the organization

of refugee camps or potential bombsites. Human forms may be contained within these rectangles: in one image a fleshly body is crushed within a box, hugging what might be children, as though seeking shelter from destructive catastrophe beneath a table. In others, like Ophelia, we float down a river in a glass coffin, only we have a twin at our side. Who is this other woman? She is small on the page, a mere stick figure far away in the distance. Or is she a woman at all, or is she we?



o.t., 1975
Sketchbook
6.89 x 8.66 inches (17.5 x 22 cm)

Also in the realm of landscapes, one drawing book captures the passage of seasons in the quiet foothills of the Swiss Alps, where Cahn lives, with great soggy expanses of overlapping color. This is a place of exiles, refugees, bankers and revolutionaries, the repository of the world's treasure because it does not take any moral or ethical position on conflict. Up here close to the sky, the individual feels small, and Cahn's drawings reflect this. The sun rotates low, as if round the surface of a sundial, in late winter or early spring, and we alone look to the left as the foothills accompany us towards a bit of yellow warmth on the upper right corner. Or else, we face a spiny rock ridge in white snow, or the fleshy intersection of two hills on which sparse grass grows as though the hairs a Giant in Jack and the Beanstalk. The sense that one is finite in the largeness of nature is like seeing the immensity of a horizon at sea.



o.t., 1975
Sketchbook
6.89 x 8.66 inches (17.5 x 22 cm)

Cahn uses naïve flat drawing techniques to great effect, as they allow for play, symbolic excess and the happenstance of error. For example, there is a grouping of many beings side by side that suggests a familial subset. To the left, a delicately shaded person with a round head cries charcoal tears. This figure evokes the vivid childhood memory of playing in the dirt, and suddenly scraping one's knee on a rock. As tears stream down one's cheeks, they mix with sediment before drying as dirty vertical streaks. A large ant hurries underneath the rock as if it had things to do and places to see. But this delicately shaded being, whose round cranium is ever so lightly visible, is defined not only by its tears but by a flowing, diaphanous gown of light billowy fabric, like a ghost defying a heavenly pull. To the right of this figure, a companion stands more firmly. A harder charcoal line suggests a more ornate costume, and perhaps the beginning of an Elizabethan collar—altogether foppish and harlequin-like. The exotic nature of these two characters could not be more different from the woman and child on the right, who as “mother and child” populate interminable artworks. This particularly ragged pair has the sparseness of the Sheteale of the Pale. The woman wears a puritanical dark dress tied at the waist, her hair falling naturally behind her head as she looks upwards. The stocky little creature that belongs to her creeps (quite realistically for Cahn) along at her side, the most grounded and volumetrically stable figure in a composition of ghosts.



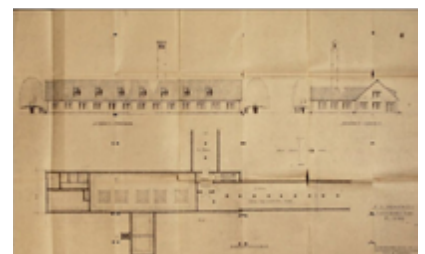
Yet another of Cahn's preoccupations is with ancestors, an anthropologically loaded term she uses in her writings. The sequence in the book with the familial subset discussed above plays with the idea of ancestry and derivation. This sequence, which carries us through a series of pages, begins with the oval shape of a face with a smudged-charcoal beard and two gently described oval eyes. The beard undergoes a metamorphosis on successive pages. For instance, one shadowy face has dark eyebrows over deep-set eyes and a very smudgy beard that looks like a fake—it is not fully affixed to the face, and appears in danger of falling off. On the next page, beard and now bushier brows are humorously animated, as though the face beneath this very male disguise might be laughing, perhaps involved in some innocuous mischief. Sometimes, the character becomes pensive, and here the beard is not so much a beard as it is plumage that forms a mask around the eyes of an owl or another raptor. The beard has the detachable quality of those used in the theater. A beard is associatively male, virile and even patriarchal, but in this case appears to be only a disguise.



Following the theme of ancestors, one book includes a matrilineal timeline. It has the feeling of a fragment, as it reduces lives to lists. The story of a grandmother, a mother and a daughter offer a collision of personal and political history. The word Auschwitz appears. While unique, Auschwitz is the ultimate outcome of the supremely functioning state—a state in which people “work” a bit too hard. Another example: before buying the Congo, King Leopold of Belgium meticulously studied the history of Portuguese conquest in ledgers and concluded that slavery was economical, as it cut out the cost of the worker. Subsequently, eleven million slaves died in the Congo.

1940 is the year that Cahn's mother, her hair cut short to resemble a boy's, boarded a children's train leaving Paris for the “free zone” of Italian-occupied southern France. For the Jews, the ste-

Map of Auschwitz



reotypical Latin/Southern/Oriental lassitude that is often the subtext of European debates today proved a godsend. One imagines a coal-burning steam engine straining the piston of the locomotive, setting wheels in motion, relieving itself by spitting ash and soot into the atmosphere in the same way that so many of Cahn's images, like "woman throwing up," spew great quantities of matter across a page dirtied by charcoal dust. Inscribed in wrought iron above Auschwitz's entrance was the phrase, "work will set you free." Auschwitz joined an administrative building with work camps provided by Farben, Siemens and Krupps, punitive cells for wayward residents, a section for medical experimentation, gas chambers and a crematorium from which eventually the ash of the dead emerged. In Hannah Arendt's "Eichmann in Jerusalem," Eichmann explains that he only acted as hardworking citizen who, after a checkered work history, finally found his calling: the holocaust. His interest was not the Jews, Gypsies or political and sexual undesirables whose transit to the slaughterhouse he managed. His interest was "work," as defined by schedules, numbers, logistics, capacity and turf battles. It is the facility with which our society produces such men without qualities, like Eichmann, who is ultimately a boring bureaucrat, or Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, that Cahn's work so vehemently protests. For instance, she dreams, "My father tells me that he only survived because he behaved as inconspicuously as a mouse..." and when describing a super 8 film she writes, "It was a mouse running along in panic along the track in the subway station in Charlottesburg." While we aggrandize the bold heroic gesture, this "man-as-mouse" is ultimately indicative of twentieth-century masculinity (and, in spite of phallogocentric mythologies, the true theme of its representation), when viewed as a historical sequence beginning with World War I veterans who wore half-masks to hide skin melted by poison gas.



Helicopter

Dustin Hoffman as Willy Loman,
Death of a Salesman



Tellingly, Cahn called the room reserved for a charcoal drawing show the “war room.” The messy media of charcoal coats the pages of her sketchbooks with the tragic, ash-like dust suggesting an aftermath. War, and not only World War Two and its particular atrocities, has always been a key influence in Cahn’s life and work. For example, in the course of a body of work about the war in the Balkans, she helped war refugees seeking asylum. Cahn’s work is a reminder that many of us are the occupants of states built on the foundation and prosperity of accumulated wars. Rarely are we the occupants of a state in which this paradigm is inverted, and we crouch as disembodied cogs while war hovers above us, threatening to smelt us from the sky as missiles. The position of the refugee is so frequently a liminal status within a camp—no longer among the victims of a land of violence, but not fully accepted in the land of peace across the border—they are personifications of alienation and isolation. And if one lists the each of United States’ twentieth-century conflicts, and then adds in the French wars, the English wars, the German wars and all the other wars, it is apparent that we have forever awakened to the noise of war, even if it is not within earshot: the hum of Humvees, Mirage jet fighters, helicopter gunships, and AK-47 fire, somewhere in the world. Yet by its very nature, war must ignore the human condition.

What was so singular about the first Gulf War, a conflict that fascinated Cahn, was the control the state exercised over images of war. It unfolded in bloodless low resolution, seen aerially through night-vision goggles, making the flat square of a building green. As a falling lozenge-shaped thing decreases in size, the tidy flat square of the building below it implodes, dematerializing as dust. There is not a human being anywhere in sight.

Not so of Cahn’s sketchbooks, however. She acknowledges our wish to gloss over the individual, corporeal man, woman, and child in favor of a glossier, public-relations-approved vision of life, by vig-



images of the Gulf War,

orously forcing them into our consciousness. In one drawing, a woman is up very late. Her bulging eyes express fatigue and she seems occupied with the cares of the world. Stark Dutch angled boxy television sets and radios cast dark, dense shadows.

As war is historical, it is so often not seen as dimensional, as corporal and as human. Its passage is noted by a new boundary line on a map bisecting a once-coherent country into two parts, as recently occurred in the Sudan, or in the political change in the name of a country, as in the 1949 transition to People's Republic of China. So often these events expose the individual (who we so highly regard in liberal democracy) as a vivid being outsized by the larger structures of the time. Hence, it is relevant to, like Miriam Cahn, crouch and create. One ought to make a little female mark in which to vestige and store one's humanity in an inhuman age.



Weisse frau, 1984
Charcoal on paper
12.2 x 16.93 inches (31 x 43 cm)