

The Women with No Name

Each artist must explore in his or her own way the ageless debate of whether art reflects life or life reflects art. The answers they have found have led to the creation of artistic genres: Abstract expressionism, impressionism, materialism, and photorealism to name a few along the spectrum. However, Bill Schenck's unique style blurs the lines of traditional classification. Being both cinematic and paradoxical, it makes a strong argument for a new genre of a post-Pop movement called Convergent Art. By examining the use of women as subjects across four decades of Schenck's work, this new artistic philosophy emerges.

At this point, I have observed the women of Schenck for more than three decades. As his niece, I spent my childhood in and around the studio. During my adolescence, I remedied summer boredom with volunteer labor as a studio assistant and general accomplice. However, it was not until my mid-thirties that I began to understand the influence that growing up around Schenck's art has had on my own identity. My grandmother's strength and personality no doubt influenced her sons, my adventurous father (Jeb Schenck) and 'Uncle Bill.' The conceptions they communicated to me about what it means to be female have been beautifully unique and silently liberating.

Schenck has always painted women with a different eye. While many male artists paint women who fall into one of the two classic Freudian categories: Virgin or Harlot, or overtly sexualized and demeaningly objectified, the women in Schenck's paintings are not so easily reduced. Perhaps that is why their images impacted me so significantly on a non-conscious level during my adolescence. Growing up around the paintings and spending the summers on the ranch, they become my mirror and implicit narrative of womanhood. I specifically remember being impacted by *Lady of the Lake* and the purity of her fierceness and vulnerability. These works and the stories of femininity they tell, have shaped my self-conscious and personal beliefs in a positive and profound way.

Though claiming to be an iconoclast, Schenck's intentional iconography depicts a different paradigm of femininity. While the following is not necessarily true of every painting, it is true of the collection of works on the whole. Schenck paints women who are complex and substantive. His women are vulnerable without being weak, strong without being masculine and powerful without being overbearing. They are fierce, passionate, yet accessible. Whether or not one finds them approachable depends on one's personal self-confidence. This is the main reason why the images have been so powerful an influence upon me. They are women and their sexuality is neither compromised nor apologized for. It is fact. The sexuality of Schenck's women neither manipulative nor is it offered as an ideal, as in Greek art. Rather, Schenck paints women as women see themselves. Such liberation could only be dreamed up by the feminist revolution. It speaks to Schenck's deep respect for women without the pressure of idealization.

Reductionist paradigms of women are the norm in art. The 'muse' is idealized as an inspiring lover who has little story of his or her own apart from a connection to the artist. Schenck's use of many models and still images over the years has allowed him to resist this confining theme. The professional nature

of those relationships has also allowed the subject/model to be treated independently in the paintings. This means the focal point of his work is not the relationship between artist and model, but rather between viewer and subject. Thus how one responds to the women painted by Schenck - whether with fear, interest or enchantment - says less about the actual image and more about the viewer.

In this vein, Schenck's art goes beyond paradoxical to dialogical. For example, in *Siren of Anxiety* the parasol-toting Bedouin nude, with stigmata marking is stranded on a rock in the middle of the ocean. Smoke rises from mid-20th century battle ships. This image plays at notions of being stranded, battle worn, compelled yet unsafe and Samuel Coleridge's desert of the ocean. It leaves a viewer ponder what shape their anxiety takes and what causes them to be compelled to follow into perilous circumstances. The image is not merely meant to create an experience for viewers, where they see the world the artist wants them to see, as traditional Pop art does. Rather, the images presented by Schenck are meant to create a dialog within the viewer, between the viewer and their preconceptions. This intention creates a different emotional landscape than most Pop art, one that includes self-reflection and interpersonal exploration.

Some male modern and post-modern artists have explored emotional spaces, but do so with self-portraits, male subjects or masculine shapes such text, lines, cubes, and squares. Instead, Schenck has taken the themes he intends to communicate and plays them across both male and female subject matter. He is egalitarian in their treatment. It is my own interpretation that Schenck uses nude or partially nude females as icons of vulnerability and I have seen their number and use correspond to seasons in his life. It is fascinating to watch a male comfortably explore his own emotions through a female avatar.

Originally vowing never to paint women, it seems Schenck has found a greater artistic vocabulary through them, from gun slinging nudes to parasol-wielding Indian grandmothers. I have watched as Schenck's treatment of women has change over the decades. Eighties glam singular portraiture migrated towards glam cowgirl and "renaissance" cowgirls. These divas brandish guns as easily as wine, with the same cool confidence behind mirrored sunglasses. About the mid-Nineties, Schenck transitioned, taking on more nuanced and complex subject matter. Glam girls were replaced by a greater use of desert landscapes and complex expressions. Shrouded Indian maidens grew more common and the back of the head seemed to hold as much artistic interest as the face. By the 2000's, Schenck was exploring the darker side of the desert and the soul through penitent images and dusk scenes. In the second decade of the 21st century, Schenck has rediscovered light and color. His current work seems to depict a new contentment in life and an artist who is comfortable in his own skin. In that he has seemed to grow beyond Pop art's need to reduce, define, and therefore dominate.

Pop art is often (and correctly, I think) criticized for its treatment of women as both subject matter and artist. Early on, it is easy to see that something is different about how Schenck treats females. Looking at one or two paintings, a novice critic might conclude that Schenck was following in the footsteps of other Pop artists, but when considering his work as a whole it becomes readily apparent that there exists an underlying respect and intrigue with the feminine experience.

Schenck often plays with the juxtaposition of traditional feminine ideals. This juxtaposition is created by placing traditional cowgirls in more modern settings or reversing that with modern women in historic spaces. It is also done by mixing masculine and feminine icons such as spurs and high heels. This is overtly portrayed in his caption paintings (*Love on the Range*), and feminist revolutionary ideals, such as *La Femme Nakita* and *He Done the Wrong Woman Wrong*. In the space in between he plays at notions of loss (*UFO Attack* and *You Lost the Ranch*), sacrifice (*Perils of Pauline* and *Stumbling Toward Bethlehem*), and collision of worlds (*On the Road to Reno*, and *Apparitions from the Underworld*). The works contain inherent questions and challenges loyalty to ideals, both old and new.

The paintings are captivating because Schenck's subjects seem free to be in the present, free from judgment. He expresses the complexity of conflicting ideals in tones ranging from dark to hopeful to playful to elusive and mysterious. Ironically, these are the same tensions I have faced as a woman in today's society, struggling "to have it all" and wrestling with my own lived experience as a "liberated" woman. In Schenck's art I have found the expression of this dialogical narrative. His comfort with the female avatar has allowed him to express his own journey and quite by accident, he seems to have and illustrated narrative of the postmodern feminist movement.

Since the late 1970's Schenck has broken from Pop art's nihilism and has added context to his subjects' situations with backgrounds, props, and titles. He kept Pop art's style of impersonality regarding subject matter but reintegrated narrative. Like Renaissance painters who worked to incorporate an entire biblical story into one image, narrative and story has always been important to Schenck. He values good story-telling and epic spaces. A vocal fan of Westerns and gangster movies, Schenck approaches his work more like a movie director than epic novelist. Schenck thinks in terms of setting, character, and story. It does not require a leap of imagination to conceive of a tale behind each image.

Good movies are not "on the nose" where the characters speak their feelings and context is overt. Rather, the context and emotionality is intentionally never included in the dialog. Dialog never sets the scene; it only moves the story forward. Renowned Spaghetti Western director, Sergio Leone films contained little dialog in fact, as did the early work of French Director Luc Besson. Like the movies and directors he admires, Schenck allows the look, the movement, and the absence of dialog to tell the story. This way, he avoids the trap of "on the nose" commentary that is common in Pop art. Rather Schenck challenges assumption and lets the settled silence draw its own conclusions.

In Schenck's early work it is easy to see the influence of his mentor, Andy Warhol. But as Schenck has explored his own voice and allowed his art to grow with him through the seasons of his life, it has clearly become something more. Indeed, Schenck has never been content or able to be a follower. Rather, it seems that he found a niche in Pop art, but quickly made it his own by merging it with his love for cinema and epic stories. By the 1990's Schenck's work became arguable Post-Pop and in the 2000's it moved beyond the nihilism inherent in post-modernity to being a voice of the Convergent Era of the American society.

Many artists and philosophers would contend that art reflects and leads culture, elucidating what society has yet to be able to articulate about itself. Schenck has played a part in this, not only by his

unparalleled treatment of gender, but also by using post-modern methodologies to arrive at something distinctly post-post-modern (Convergent). Schenck uses meaning and subject matter to explore the edges of paradigms and challenge notions of the status-quo. The iconoclast uses his skill to open up the layers of viewer's prejudices and perspectives and in it creates the possibility for discovering irreducible truths. In exploring this throughout his life, he has given himself the same large space as his painting's characters.

Many art careers, even those of historically admired and renowned artists, follow a bell curve shape. They blossom as an artist finds a voice in either a subject matter or revolutionary style. In full bloom the artist paints iconic works for historians to study and students to absorb. Yet for how long does that last? Usually, historically, the artist's career usually either drops down the back side of the bell curve or the artist settles into a repetitive exploration of the same subject matter for perpetuity. Unfortunately, what once was revolutionary becomes routine and 'safe.' Rarely, yet extraordinarily, an artist will grow throughout his career, continuing to challenge himself and courageously reflecting that journey in his artistic expression. In this, growth is not a bell shaped curve, but rather it is s-shaped with peaks, struggles, breakthroughs, and new understandings of subject and medium. In this growth curve, each season builds upon the previous and explores its lessons with increased complexity. Not all paths lead to the creation of iconic images, but the journey and exploration of those paths yields depths of their own. I contend, as a fan and critic, that such a journey is less likely with one dimensional subject matter. Schenck's choice to paint the many facets of women (yes, intermixed with his landscapes and cowboys) has provided him with the only appropriate vehicle of such a journey. I do not believe Schenck's depth or breadth would be as it is today without the many women of Schenck. And in that, each is a woman with no name.

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