

MIRIAM CAHN. war

The *war* room by Swiss artist Miriam Cahn (b. 1949) was created between February and May 1999 against the backdrop of coverage of the wars in Yugoslavia. Designed by the artist as an installation, the presentation comprises 20 oil paintings that, provided with precise dates, reflect the chronology of their creation and thus develop a dramaturgy within the closed sequence.

With this cycle, Cahn takes up a pictorial tradition that has its roots in Francesco de Goya's *Desastres de la Guerra* (1810-1812), Käthe Kollwitz's woodcut series *Krieg* (1918-1922/23) or Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). In intensity, Cahn's paintings are in no way inferior to these anti-heroic depictions of the tangible suffering of war. Yet the artist expresses her condemnation in her own way: Predominantly individually captured figures, flowers and everyday objects, in the totality of their isolated depictions, provide a multi-layered picture of the subject matter. Figures gaze frontally out of the canvases and – hung at eye level – seek an emotional resonance vis-à-vis the viewer. Similar to the medieval images of *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, these depictions do not tell a story; they give expression to the horror and inhumanity of war by reflecting the incomprehensible suffering of civilians in exposed, vulnerable bodies. At the same time, the motifs portrayed leave us guessing. They do not exhibit any differentiable personalities and are situated in an unidentifiable space. Nor do the lurid colors model corporeality in the traditional sense, but rather – as if captured by a thermal camera – shift the focus on those places substantively affected by the events: on sensory organs that perceive violence and suffering; on genitals that are exposed to injury; on hands that protect, conceal and carry. They do this with a force that runs counter to the tranquility of the compositions and, as clamoring certainties, question every individual about their personal responsibility in this social drama. "It is important to grapple with wars. As far as possible, you have to take a stance. You can't stay out of a war," summarizes Miriam Cahn in addressing her audience.¹ In their indeterminacy, the images make it clear that wars can repeat themselves anywhere in the world and at any time, as we are sadly experiencing at present.

Through her work, Cahn has been responding to information and images from the media since the late 1970s, questioning the impact of common power structures and role models upon people. As in her "*Athens*" Room, which brings together drawings from her early work as well as literary texts, she pokes her finger deep into the wounds of social grievances while also addressing her own existence as a woman, a Jew and an artist.

Susann Scholl

1 Quoted from exh. cat. *Miriam Cahn. zeichnen drawing dessiner*, Städtische Galerie Offenburg 2014, p. 108.

war, 1999, series of 20 paintings

- 1 *mit bündel (5/1/99)*, oil on canvas
- 2 *unklar, bl/arb/* (5/2/99)*, oil on canvas
- 3 *o.T. (5/4/99)*, oil on canvas
- 4 *o.T. (5/6/99)*, oil on canvas
- 5 *angebot, bl/arb/* (5/7/99)*, oil on canvas
- 6 *o.T. (5/8/99)*, oil on canvas
- 7 *schauen (5/10/99)*, oil on canvas
- 8 *frühlingsausbruch (5/14/99)*, oil on canvas
- 9 *kind (5/15/99)*, oil on canvas
- 10 *versehrt (5/15/99)*, oil on canvas
- 11 *flüchtling (5/17/99)*, oil on canvas
- 12 *schönheit (5/18/99)*, oil on canvas
- 13 *hören (5/18/99)*, oil on canvas
- 14 *o.T. (5/19/99)*, oil on canvas
- 15 *hat glück gehabt (5/23/99)*, oil on canvas
- 16 *lächeln (5/24/99)*, oil on canvas
- 17 *o.T. (5/25/99)*, oil on canvas
- 18 *blume (5/27/99)*, oil on canvas
- 19 *bündel (5/27/99)*, embroidery and oil on canvas
- 20 *unbenennbar (5/28/99)*, oil on canvas

*bl/arb/ = Menstruation work

