

RISE OF THE FOURTH WEVERS

Young and restless. They've got the vision and they know how to use it.

WORDS Edwina Hagon

Leah Schrager

Pro-sex, pro-humanity, pro-love, pro-freedom – Leah Schrager's work represents all these things and more. Over the past five or so years, Schrager's artistic contribution has cemented the New York-based artist as an integral voice in the new feminist art wave. Through a hybridisation of performance photography, painting and conceptual and digital art, her work addresses the place of women in the art world – "I'm exploring these dynamics of what women are and aren't allowed to do within established industries" – and examines the agency of image ownership – "I used to be a dancer and a model but was frustrated that I didn't own my image as the performer." And when it comes to selfies: "It can be an exploration of the self. Also, [the selfie-taker] legally owns her self, her image, which is not the case when someone else is taking a photo of her ... So what's not to like?"

Where did you grow up and where are you now based?

I grew up in Washington state and now live in NYC.

Why is art important to you?

Art is where I can be myself and create freely. There are also endless explorations to be made.

What projects are you working on at the moment?

Right now I'm working hard on my visual art. I have a show in Miami during Art Basel Miami Beach. Also I'm working on a celebrity project called ONA that asks what it would mean to make a celebrity as an intentional art practice. For that I'm making music, images and lots of online material.

What was the catalyst behind these projects?

I noticed in the art world there was a lot of appropriation by artists of models' images, but there wasn't much by the models themselves that was getting attention ... I started moving into the role of being the model, photographer and artist in my visual works ... Then I was told that since some judge my images to be "sexy" they couldn't be art. And I'm like, what? That's messed up. So I veered into this exploration of online, female, commercial, and art.

How do your media – photography, conceptual, and online art – help to communicate your message?

I'm really interested in the not-NYC-art-going audience, so working online allows me to reach people from all over the world and all different demographics, and I love that. One could call the photography the relic of a performance piece, and then the painting my attempt to wrestle visually with my concepts.

What impact has modelling had on you, both in the personal and creative sense?

I just love modelling, but actually more than the act of taking the photos, I love having the photos to work with visually at a later point. Creatively, it gives me freedom to respond and work with the image of myself in any way I want. I tried photographing friends and using their images as the base of my artwork, but I just found that I couldn't have the same irreverence and freedom with their images – I felt tied to not wanting to hurt their feelings.

What reaction do you hope to incite from those viewing your work?

That's a great question. I try not to have a didactic message as there can be many interpretations to my work, and I like that openness. At the base, though, is a pro-sex, pro-humanity, pro-love, pro-freedom message.

Is there a mantra that you live by or feel best summarises your practice?

A mantra I've come to adopt is "go where you're wanted", which is hard because sometimes you don't know whether you should push to get somewhere you're not wanted or just move to where you're wanted. But inevitably it's something that has stuck with me. Specifically, I didn't have the body of a model, my hips were too big, and I was sad not to be welcomed into the modelling industry when I was young. But then Instagram came along where bigger hips are welcome. So, in a way it's the same thing as "be who you are" and, really, be into who you are even if it seems you're the only one. Also, if you have goals, you just have to go hard and work at them every day.



Snow White and the Seven Unsafe Landings, 2015.



It's So VR Outside, 2015.

Molly Soda

“I don’t want to tell anyone how to feel about anything but I definitely want to explore these ideas of what we’re supposed to look like, what it means to care about your image, what it means to care about men ... and does that make you a bad feminist.”

Since the early days of Tumblr, visual artist Molly Soda has been making connections through the digital sphere. She took up photography at college and over the years, the New York-based artist’s internet and art practice became one, a progression of photography, video and performance art guided by a commentary on body image, gender politics, sexuality and making sense of our on-screen lives.

Could you tell me about your creative evolution – from your earliest works to your current projects?

I grew up with the internet and when I was a pre-teen, I started socialising online and that was something that became embedded into my routine – talking to people on instant messenger from school and chat rooms. Beyond that I got into blogging online and using websites and seeking out these communities online that I wasn’t finding in my IRL circles. So I was sort of leading this second life online. I would post photos of my friends and post art but I never really fancied myself an artist. But it was always really natural for me to share a lot online. I got into college and decided to study photography. As time passed on I continued to blog but I found a way to merge my art practice and my internet practice and became more interested in what that meant – especially when I started learning more about video and performance art and websites as art pieces and even digital art as a concept, as I wasn’t really aware of artists who were using the internet as a medium or platform. So I got really interested in that and began experimenting more with what that meant and started posting videos of myself to Facebook and then it just spiralled and evolved into what it is now.

When you picture your audience, who comes to mind?

I think that my audience is primarily women or femmes just because of the nature of my work and that it is about how we perform online but with more of a woman’s gaze and mind.

You explore various themes including contemporary feminism – I’m interested to hear what being a feminist today means to you?

I think feminism is more accepted as a movement in today’s environment but I think because of the way that things get put out there in media it becomes this form of clickbait feminism or sensationalised feminism that is still a palpable, packageable, saleable thing for people. So it’s like, look at these thin white women fighting the patriarchy with their selfies. But there’s so much more that we’re not tapping into here. And that’s something I started noticing in the past couple of years, reading headlines and seeing these themes within the word feminism and seeing how it is being packaged. I feel like you end up losing a lot of control or agency over the actual movement or actually what you care about because I feel like in today’s society it’s really important to realise that feminism is intersectional. It’s not just for a certain type of woman, it’s for everyone; it’s for trans women, it’s for women of colour, it’s for sex workers. It shouldn’t be an exclusive club. I think that’s really important to remember because it hasn’t always been an inclusive space.

How does your art incorporate your feminist mandate?

I think being a woman and being an artist and labelling myself a feminist, it’s going to filter into my art in different ways. I definitely



Comfort Zone Card, Molly Soda. Opposite: Performance still, Eastern Bloc, Montreal 2013.

try and make a lot of social commentary with my work in funny or subtle ways. I don’t want to beat you over the head with anything ... Also, I’m just really interested in working with other femmes in general because the nature of the internet is able to bring so many of us together that normally we wouldn’t be able to communicate with.

How would you say the internet and its resources have influenced the feminist movement?

I think the internet has really strengthened the movement in general. I’ve been able to collaborate with so many people and I see so many people collaborating with each other and talking to each other outside of media or whatever. In college I started reading more about feminism and I went online and I was like, OK all these other people are plugged in too and we’re sharing all these resources.

What other ideas do you explore through your art?

Right now, I’m really interested in the archive and how we archive these really, really important memories that we have on our phones or on our devices but they’re stored via apps or websites, and how we approach that. I’m trying to go back and find older pieces of my beginning stages with the internet when I was a teen online and it’s been a really interesting journey because a lot of stuff is lost or deleted or links are broken and it’s not archived. We don’t think about that. We don’t think about these memories. But what happens when these websites are obsolete? The internet moves so rapidly that something that existed 10 years ago is not functional, not readable anymore. Think about how everyone mourned their lost MySpace. So I’m trying to dig out these old pieces of information and history and make sense of that, and also thinking about what we can do now as artists to try to preserve the work that we are doing online because I think a lot of my work is directly reliant on the way that people interact with it online.

Could you tell me about a recent project?

I had a solo show in London called *Comfort Zone* and that touched on the archive a little bit but kind of talking more about these notions of safety and how we feel really safe behind our screens, behind our computers and in our rooms. But it’s not like these screens or these computers are these impenetrable things. Because we have these outlets, people have so much access to us and therefore there’s a lot of emotional weight that is carried with the internet, but I don’t think we necessarily recognise it all the time so we’re sort of quietly walking around dealing with these weird, discreet emotions ... because it’s not a tangible thing that’s happening, we don’t take it as seriously or take it the same way. I was trying to get at this notion of safety and also trying to reveal what’s going on behind our screens, the hidden stuff that we don’t publish.

Sadaf

Sadaf’s creative output defies any easy categorisation. And the Iranian born, New York-based artist wouldn’t want it any other way. “I’m really not sure what I’m doing, and if I were sure then it wouldn’t be interesting for me ... I see more value in the poetically undefined,” she says. From her performance and multimedia art to her music, everything Sadaf produces is made by her hand, and her hand only. Through her work, she explores notions of “fear, death, anxiety, lack of communication, love and a general confusion about the world”. And pertaining to feminist commentary: “I think the most important thing is just showing up and being part of a larger historical conversation.”

Could you tell me a little about your upbringing and how this contributed to your creative development?

Even though I know that there must have been a clear development, I couldn’t say how or what caused it. I do have some artists in my family that do it as work and some as a hobby, but I wasn’t particularly encouraged to go into it. In fact, I think everyone would be feeling more relaxed had I chosen something else as my profession. But like anything, I think it’s not quite explicable why or how we are drawn to certain things, and I don’t think my tastes have changed one bit from when I was a child. I’m still fascinated by the same things. Everything has happened quite organically from the beginning, and the things that I love the most, I discovered almost by accident – or not by accident at all.

What brought you to New York?

The same thing that probably brings anybody to New York. Partly the historical pull of what it was and what it promised in the past, and partly a curiosity of survival or a masochistic death drive that seeks out a challenge. New York is the ultimate test of sanity and balance and I appreciate that.

If someone were to ask what you ‘do’, what would you tell them?

I think it’s my least favourite question and one that usually gives me an immediate anxiety attack. I think I have a built-in refusal of “skill-based” professionalism. Of course there are skill requirements for doing anything, but I think I am really not interested in those merit-based categories.

What ideas do you explore through your artistic practice?

Fear, death, anxiety, lack of communication, love and a general confusion about the world. Those very broad concepts are part of any work that I could enjoy or hope to make. At the moment, I focus on improvisation mostly, and in trying to draw out an inner narrative.

And what techniques do you use to communicate these ideas?

I don’t believe in technique. Or I should say, I only believe in the kind of technique that is already naturally there. What’s interesting to me is developing a singular style which functions like a signature. That

being said, I do believe that even when improvising or shunning previously developed techniques, we are always quoting or citing someone else. I think I’m starting to really believe that the work of art writes or makes the artist, not the other way around. In the same way that [philosopher and literary critic] Lacoue-Labarthe [believed] that every time there is an “I”, it has nothing to do with you, especially in an autobiography.

What influences your work?

I think the thing that influences both my life and my work is based heavily on how I relate to fiction. I am obsessed by a certain kind of film that is able to present an entire world view through an individual perspective. I think it’s become a weird form of self-psychoanalytical tactic for me. I think I rely so much on projection, on projecting myself onto fictional characters and trying to place myself in relation to them. To me these stories are often more “real” or true to life than what I experience with people.

What does feminism today mean to you?

It means not quite falling into place. I also do believe that we have to give importance to the personal. I think women have actually been duped out of the joy of their personal stories and their daily life has been stripped of its importance. It makes me crazy when people confuse “vanity” or “narcissism” with having a strong personal narrative, or elevating the everyday into the public sphere. For me that’s a generosity and a confidence. Also, looking in the mirror has so much more to do with being a scientist, an observer, embracing a fear of decaying, ageing, archiving than it has to do with a self-centredness. This is one way in which many male curators look down on certain women artists who use their bodies in their practice. Don’t get me wrong, there are so many bad imitations of this feminist inner gaze, but I’m mostly thinking of the never-ending [artist] Hannah Wilke conversations in the 70s and how we have come far but not that far. Also Francesca Woodman and Ana



Mendieta, who didn't get the recognition they deserved when they were alive.

How does your art support your feminist intentions?

I think given my background and the kind of work I do, the fact that I do it at all becomes in itself political. Even if I had no intentions of directly speaking about women in music, women in the arts, what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, I would still be challenging the status quo by my mere fact of being there. I think the most important thing is just showing up, and being part of a larger historical conversation. Another thing is that I rely entirely on myself in my work. Everything has my hand and my hand only in it. I produce and write all of my own music, I direct my music videos. I think having control over my output is the most important and empowering part of what I do.

What projects are you working on at the moment?

A string of performances, a never-ending full-length album, a series of drawings, some video projects. I'm trying to take it as it comes.

Is there a mantra that you live by or feel best summarises your practice?

There's a really good Fassbinder quote: "And I don't believe that melodramatic feelings are laughable – they should be taken absolutely seriously." I don't know if it's a mantra but I absolutely agree.



Arvida Byström

If Arvida Byström's practice could be encapsulated in a word, it would be pink. You need only look at her Instagram, awash with shades of magenta, fuchsia, coral and watermelon, to get a taste of the Stockholm-born, LA-based cyber artist's proclivity for the hue. There, you will also find an ongoing series of self-portraits, still lifes and video art addressing the intersections between feminised aesthetics, naturality, machines and the internet. Above all, her work is a continued exploration of self that has found a devoted audience online. "I like it when people feel inspired to do their own things from my work," she says. "Or if they feel happy, maybe are presented with new thoughts."

Where are you based at the moment?

Los Angeles, CA.

When people ask you what you 'do', what do you tell them?

I usually say everything and nothing, looking down on my shoes kicking around a stone or something. I'm very socially anxious.

How would you describe your creative practice?

In change.

Tell us about your creative path and what drew you to the particular media you work with?

I do a lot of photography still, but more and more still lifes. I can't get over the inherent hierarchy of the photographer versus the model. It makes me uncomfortable to hold such power over how to portrait an individual. I recently started working with CG, in other words computer animation; I hope to show more of that sort of thing.

When did you come to realise the power of art to incite positive change?

I don't really think I realised that or that this is a true statement. All art will affect some people positively and some people negatively.

There is no art that will be universally read as positive. I do think it can be an interesting way of bringing people together in terms of platforms like Instagram.

How have online resources like Instagram supported your work?

Immensely. I wouldn't be able to make money out of what I do if I didn't have the internet. I would probably barely have shown my work to people if it wasn't for online. Now days, though, with a big following, yes it is helpful for jobs. But I preferred when I didn't have as many followers in the way that the internet was more personal, it felt more intimate to move around online. Now it has become a bit too much of a work tool for me, which I find sad. But also extremely happy that there are so many people that like my stuff. You guys are amazing and give me a lot of inspiration. I just wish I had more time to answer every single comment.

What reaction would you like your work to inspire?

I like when people feel inspired to do their own things from my work. Or if they feel happy, maybe are presented with new thoughts. Some work of mine is also more humour-based, so maybe a laugh or a smile.

Is there a mantra that you live by or feel best summarises your practice?

Pink. But also I feel like the online movement I come from has been very co-opted by brands, so whatever thoughts or hopes I had have become very bleak and just put into saleable slogans. I've made some decisions I'm not proud of. So IDK, mantras sound too short to summarise what I believe in.

What is a main focus for you at the moment creatively and personally speaking?

Searching myself and what I believe in. Learning more about 3D animations. 🍷

Images courtesy of Arvida Byström.



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