



Katy Schimert/MATRIX 181

Oedipus

September 26 - November 21, 1999

**University of California
Berkeley Art Museum**

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“I like how Freud uses an empirical method to try to find a beginning that does not quite exist. That beginning is usually based within some kind of mythology.” Katy Schimert¹

Contemporary artist Katy Schimert credits Romantic poet William Wordsworth with teaching her how to travel seamlessly between a character and the self. In her often mythic work, Schimert selects iconic figures—Ophelia, Sir Lancelot, Neil Armstrong, Nixon, and, for her MATRIX exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum, Oedipus—and merges their stories with her own in an abstractly narrative space composed of drawings, sculpture, wall drawings, and film. The insertion of autobiographical elements into a framework of fantasy culture imbues the resulting creation with romantic tension and poetic longing.

The ideas evoked in Schimert’s drawings inform her subsequent sculpture and videos. The drawings are complicated and dramatic. The first to emerge in a series are loose and automatic; later drawings become increasingly controlled and refined. Clay, aluminum foil, and wax are sculpted into geographic or physical forms on the surface of the paper. Handwritten texts on the drawings describe action and location, and convey personal history and sentiment. These words sometimes combine into a recognizable form, such as a written message. The texts often appear backwards because, Schimert explains, “they already exist”: they are highly specific things that have been said to the artist—fragments of expression that confirm the tragedy alluded to through the images. The coded inscription necessitates that the viewers invest themselves in this work before discerning the essence of the artist. Thus, verbal, visual, and experiential elements of reality and fiction are woven together.

The drawings in the *Oedipus* series are divided into two groups: light and dark. Schimert believes that brightness as well as darkness can be blinding. The texts included in the “light” drawings are backward, reversed, scrambled, and cryptic, symbolic of the protagonist’s inability to see or know things clearly. Oedipus’ loss of sight is initially symbolized in the “dark” drawings as a small black orb that continues to radiate out. The fluency of the words and phrases increases in these drawings. One untitled drawing from 1996 includes the line, “Dear Freud, I was on the couch... thinking of you when a man came in and asked if we could be friends. I said no. He took out a knife and stabbed me in the throat.” Schimert confesses to have been trying to write a “Dear Freud” letter for ten years—a task she has succeeded in accomplishing for her current MATRIX exhibition. In comparing the new text dated



August 30, 1999 with the old written three years ago, I was struck by both the similarities as well as the subtle differences. Schimert writes, “Dear Freud, Something detached rolled forward with a knife and cut out my voice box. Letting the blood drip I forced myself to understand that I would take my body apart for you.” The state of voicelessness is addressed in both letters. The latter text is authored by Antigone whereas an unidentified author in the former could be Oedipus or even the artist. Despite its circuitous meta-narrative, Schimert’s “Dear Freud” letter illuminates other elements that comprise her *Oedipus* series. Antigone denies the power of Freud several times in the letter. She writes, “Oedipus is dead. In this dark space the end stops with me. He doesn’t care what you say.” These words may reference Sophocles’ play in which Antigone insists on the power of the individual conscience over that of the state or “authority,” as Freud has certainly come to be. Ironically, the final “he” could also implicate Freud himself.

The fragmentation and recombination of narrative and meaning further personalizes Schimert’s work and, coupled with the presence of iconic elements, opens up the experience to the viewer. The sublime nature of longing is evoked in the video *Oedipus Rex: The Drowned Man*. The narrative is described in a scribbled, reversed, and inverted text of another untitled drawing where the artist writes, “The Drowned man. Fat floats. Muscle sinks. I was writing you a love letter when dark reflections destroyed the affair. Your metal bathing suit pulled you to the bottom as layers of reflection film destroyed the focus of your image.” In *Oedipus Rex: The Drowned Man*, the highly saturated field of hypnotically blue water, connoting the atmosphere, environment, and physical reality, literally colors everything. The drowning Oedipus is seen with colliding, dented hearts dangling from his limbs, sinking to the bottom of the sea. The Oedipus in the video has succumbed to his struggle against his destiny, passively awaiting the final, isolated end he seems to crave. During his descent, the camera briefly ventures above the water’s edge to indicate all that he has left behind. At the end of the video his figure is barely perceptible. He has been reduced to a shimmering reflection. His fate is, as Schimert has inscribed in her Oedipal blind spot wall drawing, “death by desolve [dissolve].” Schimert maps a familiar place: the shared knowledge of desire and loss known by all who have loved.

Installation view of *Oedipus Rex: The Drowned Man* at The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, March 9–April 20, 1997.



Employing a post-minimalist technique, the process by which the video was made relates directly to what it is: a blinded journey. Shot underwater, the action was recorded without Director of Photography Saam Gabbay, actor Oliver Reinsch, or artist Katy Schimert being able to communicate verbally or visually with each other—each was voiceless and sightless. The production depended on less tangible, more mystical forms of knowing, such as those experienced by Oedipus: intuition, logic, and even luck.

Art historian Susanne Ghez asserts that Schimert’s appropriation of the Oedipal myth is a feminist claim for spectatorship—that is, the empowered position of viewing in contrast to the notion of the passive receptacle usually assigned to the female viewer. Schimert invokes Oedipus as an archetypal romantic hero to reclaim the modern female subject, equating herself with Oedipus, the female (mother) figure, and Antigone. Ghez notes that Oedipus owes his household-word status to Freud and to eighteenth and nineteenth-century German Neoclassical and Romantic intellectual thought.² The mythic personas Schimert chooses often appear and reappear in different series. *Oedipus* evokes Dracula, the man on the moon [Neil Armstrong], and Freud, an obvious and strong presence in any modern Oedipal narrative. But Freud also exists in Schimert’s other work. She explains that when she reads Freud, she feels that he is incredibly accurate in describing her self. A subtext of the (male) doctor who knows all, physically and psychologically, is often included. The evocative, sensual forms of her two sculptures in the installation, *Five Objects of Desire* (pelvis and uterine forms) and *Five Senses*, convey the immediacy and intimacy that results from an internal as well as a visual knowledge. These delicate objects delineate zones through which bodies find their way into one another. Placed side by side but not touching, each sculpture reiterates separateness and the tragic failure to find a true connection. The apparent availability of the presented female body is alluring and misleading. All of the orifices of *Five Objects of Desire* except the navel are sealed. Thus Schimert presents objects that thwart desire and allow only a superficial interaction.

I was introduced to Katy Schimert and her work by artist Keith Edmier in 1993. Edmier was involved with a working group of artists that had studied sculpture at Yale University in the mid-1980s including Katy, Matthew Barney, Michael Joaquin Grey, and Michael Rees. The immediacy and accuracy of the emotion in Schimert’s work, the

Five Objects of Desire, 1997 (detail), terra cotta with a terra sigulata glaze, dimensions variable. Collection of Monica and David Zwirner, New York.



lyrical combination of drawings, letters, and video, and the achingly sublime poeticism were unlike any other work that I had seen. I became the first non-artist supporter of her work in New York. Schimert, educated in critical, didactic theory, pieces together concepts of modernist formalism, the presence of the artist's hand, the aura of the art object, and the 1970s women's body and autobiography movement in her work. She also notes the influence of Sean Landers, with whom she was at the Philadelphia College of Art, in particular, his early show at Postmasters Gallery in New York in which he publicly and graphically scrawled his sexual desires all over the gallery walls. According to critic Ronald Jones, Schimert is an important member of a growing group of artists who favor romantic expression over critical theory. He associates her with the nineteenth-century French Symbolists who also turned inward for subject matter. Jones states that if the world is, as it seems, becoming a virtual place devoid of tangible experience, then Schimert "wants no part of it."³ In another untitled drawing Schimert writes, "If I were to mourn for you right now, then all the flowers in my heart would disappear and all the colors in the rainbow would turn into one and black would be the color of my soul." Schimert's wall sculpture *Flowers* is an ecstatic meadow of illumination and reflection. Flowers made of masking tape and mountains of aluminum foil, mundane materials that can be found in any home, offer a hopeful, euphoric space that fills the viewer's scope of vision.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, after learning of his irreparable actions, Oedipus pokes out his eyes in a desire to seal off all of his orifices and become a living tomb. Schimert identifies with Oedipus, acknowledging first-hand experience with the kind of tragedy that would cause one to venture unconsciously into oblivion. The places where the organized and the chaotic intersect—the scientific and the mythic, the known and the unknown, and the real and the imagined—inspire Schimert. To me, she creates work that exists where, through fantasy, truth and beauty meet.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

¹ Conversation between Katy Schimert and the author in the artist's garden in New York City, June 25, 1999.
² Susanne Ghez, *Katy Schimert* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 1997): 8.
³ Ronald Jones, "Kathleen Schimert AC Project Room, New York," *Frieze* 29 (July/August 1996): 82.

Dark Continent from Above with Upside Down Figure, 1999, watercolor and ink on paper, 13-7/8 x 19-5/8 inches. Courtesy of David Zwirner and the artist.

Katy Schimert was born 1963 on Grand Island, New York. She received her B.A. from Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1985. She earned her M.F.A. from Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, in 1989.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1999
Theoretical Events, Milan, Italy
- 1998
David Zwirner, New York, NY
- 1997
"Oedipus Rex: The Drowned Man," The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- 1996
"Love on Lake Erie," AC Project Room, New York, NY
- 1995
"Dear Mr. Armstrong," Janice Guy, New York, NY

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1999
"Abracadabra," curated by Catherine Grenier, Tate Gallery, London, U.K.
"Cosmologies: 1801–2001," The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, Canada
- 1998
"Poor Man's Pudding, Rich Man's Crumb," AC Project Room, New York, NY
"Encyclopedia, 1999," Turner & Runyon Gallery, Dallas, TX
"Parallel Worlds," Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC
"Surfacing: Contemporary Drawing," Institute of Contemporary Art, London, U.K.
- 1997
"1997 Whitney Biennial Exhibition," The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
"New Work: Drawings Today," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
"Heart, Mind, Body and Soul: American Art in the 1990s," The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
"Places that are elsewhere," organized by Diana Thater, David Zwirner, New York, NY

Selected Installations and Videography

- 1998
Icarus and the World Trade Center, super-8mm film transferred to video, running time: five minutes, color, no sound. DP Saam Gabbay
- 1997
Oedipus Rex: The Drowned Man, super-8mm film transferred to video, running time: five minutes, color, no sound. DP Saam Gabbay

The Sun, 1998, blown glass, 96 x 96 x 18 inches. Collection of Susan and Michael Hort.

sound. DP Saam Gabbay
1996
The Astronaut, 16mm film, running time: twenty minutes, black and white, no sound. DP Saam Gabbay. Performed by Oliver Reinsch and Katy Schimert. Produced by AC Project Room and Janice Guy. Screened at 65 Thompson Street, New York, NY, on March 14, 1996

Selected Catalogues and Publications

- Oedipus Rex: The Drowned Man*, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, 1998
- The 1997 Whitney Biennial Exhibition*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 1997
- Universalis*, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil, 1996
- 1996 Wanas*, Wanas Foundation, Knislinge, Sweden, 1996
- The Power of Suggestion*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, 1996
- The Lie of the Land*, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, 1994
- Untitled, 1996
Watercolor, ink, and plasticene on paper
15 x 21-1/2 inches
Collection of Yvonne and Paul Schimmel
- Untitled, 1996
Watercolor, ink, and plasticene on paper
15 x 21-1/2 inches
Collection of Rebecca and Martin Eisenberg
- Untitled, 1996
Watercolor, ink, foil, and plasticene on paper
13 x 22 inches
Collection of Rebecca and Martin Eisenberg
- Untitled, 1996
Watercolor, ink, and plasticene on paper
14 x 22-1/2 inches
Collection of Patricia and Morris Orden, New York
- Untitled, 1996
Watercolor, ink, and plasticene on paper
15 x 22-1/2 inches
Private Collection, New York
- Untitled, 1996
Watercolor, ink, foil, and plasticene on paper
13 x 22 inches
Collection of Joel and Nancy Portnoy, New York
- Untitled, 1996
Watercolor, ink, and plasticene on paper
15 x 20-1/2 inches
Collection of the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum
- Untitled, 1996
Watercolor, ink, and plasticene on paper
11-1/2 x 16-1/2 inches
Collection of Susan and Michael Hort
- Flowers*, 1996
Masking tape, plaster, and aluminum leaf
Dimensions variable
Collection of Eileen and Peter Norton, Santa Monica
- Oedipus Rex*, 1997
Watercolor and ink on paper
11 x 16-1/2 inches
Collection of Monica and David Zwirner, New York
- The Dark Continent*, 1997
Watercolor, ink, and plasticene on paper
14 x 20 inches
Collection of the artist
- Untitled, 1997
Watercolor, ink, and plasticene on paper
8-1/2 x 14 inches
Collection of Joel and Nancy Portnoy, New York
- Untitled, 1997
Watercolor, ink, and plasticene on paper
14-1/2 x 20 inches
Collection of The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee

Installation view of *Love on Lake Erie* at the AC Project Room, NY, March 1996.

- Five Senses*, 1997
Ceramic
Dimensions variable
Collection of The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Painting and Sculpture Committee
- Five Objects of Desire*, 1997
Terra cotta with a terra sigulata glaze
Collection of Monica and David Zwirner, New York
- Oedipus Rex: The Drowned Man*, 1997
Super-8mm film transferred to video, running time: five minutes, color, no sound.
Director of Photography: Saam Gabbay; Oedipus played by: Oliver Reinsch
Courtesy of the artist
- Oedipal Blindspot*, 1997
Aluminum tape, graphite, thread, and pins
Dimensions variable
Sammlung Hauser und Wirth, St. Gallen, Switzerland
- Dear Freud*, 1999
Gelatin silver print
52 x 40 inches
Courtesy of David Zwirner and the artist

- Dark Continent*, 1999
Watercolor and ink on paper
13-7/8 x 19-5/8 inches
Courtesy of David Zwirner and the artist
- Dark Continent: Couple with Buried Head*, 1999
Watercolor and ink on paper
15 x 22 inches
Courtesy of David Zwirner and the artist
- Dark Continent: Couple with Buried Head #2*, 1999
Watercolor and ink on paper
15 x 22-1/8 inches
Courtesy of David Zwirner and the artist
- Dark Continent: Buried Body*, 1999
Watercolor and ink on paper
13-7/8 x 19-5/8 inches
Courtesy of David Zwirner and the artist
- Dark Continent from Above*, 1999
Watercolor and ink on paper
13-7/8 x 19-5/8 inches
Courtesy of David Zwirner and the artist
- Dark Continent from Above with Upside Down Figure*, 1999
Watercolor and ink on paper
13-7/8 x 19-5/8 inches
Courtesy of David Zwirner and the artist

PLEASE NOTE:

Katy Schimert will give an artist's talk on Sunday, September 26, 1999, at 3 p.m.

A conference entitled "Oedipal Blind Spot: Psychoanalytical Explorations of Art as Self-Analysis" will occur Saturday, October 30, 1999, from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

A selection of the works in Katy Schimert/MATRIX 181 *Oedipus* were first shown in "Oedipus Rex: The Drowned Man" at The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois in 1997.

MATRIX is supported by Phyllis Wattis.

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cover: Untitled, 1997, watercolor, ink, and plasticene on paper, 17 x 11 inches. Collection of Monica and David Zwirner, New York.
above: *Sir Lancelot*, 1991-1993. Copyright Katy Schimert. Director of Photography: Saam Gabbay; Lancelot played by: Oliver Reinsch.