

Inside Miriam Schaer's Girdle Books

Miriam Schaer uses clothing to house books and to tell stories. Lynn Cothorn takes a look.

When New York book artist Miriam Schaer heard about “girdle books” in the mid-1980s, she was both intrigued and disappointed. She was fascinated by the idea of books made from Maidenform girdles. But she was disappointed that she hadn’t thought of the idea first. When she saw the book—a medieval book structure recreated by Harvard book conservator Pamela Spitzmueller—she was elated. “Girdle” in this sense referred not to an undergarment but to the cord around the waist of a habit. In light of the difference, Schaer felt she had permission to follow her own vision. “For me, the idea of working with girdles was an opportunity to explore the ideal of female form in the 20th century,” she said.

Even so, Schaer’s modern “girdle books” contain echoes of their historical precedents. The original girdle books were used in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Attached to the books’ covers were long strips of leather that were used to tie the book to the girdle of the habit. The book could be pulled up for reading whenever needed. Most bindings were made of leather, but others were velvet or brocade and protected illuminated prayer books.

Over the last decade, Schaer has reinvented the form. From the brassieres, bustiers, and girdles that women have used to bind, shape, and clothe their bodies, Schaer creates structures in which to house books. She stiffens the fabric with thin layers of acrylic medium, molds it into a female shape, and paints, collages, and inscribes the surface. She creates alcoves or cartouches inside to hold small books that explore social issues, women’s roles, personal situations, and rituals both sacred and secular.

In *Housekeeping* (1998), for instance, a bustier—painted and scribbled with line drawings of toilets, laundry, scrub brushes, and brooms—opens to reveal an arch-shaped cartouche that frames a book made from the pages of the *Consumer Report Guide on How to Clean Anything*, a promotional book she received in

the mail. Small plastic toys spill from other circular recesses. Closed, the book evokes the presence and absence of the female body. Open, the work resembles an altar piece or reliquary. The book was shown in 1999 in “Beyond the Fold: Artist’s Books Traditional to

Ancient Armor, exterior, 1996; girdle, acrylic, Xerox; 18 by 17 by 12 inches closed. Collection of Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York.





"Cutting Edge," a cross-cutting exhibition of contemporary book arts curated by Judith Brodsky and Edward Hutchins.

Schaer's interest in art began at an early age. Born in Buffalo, New York, she attended classes as a child at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, where she saw the work of Eva Hesse, Louise Nevelson, Marisol, and Frida Kahlo. "Marisol's quirky humor and playful sense of scale showed me that one's vision and perceptions didn't have to mimic the real world," Schaer said. Nevelson and Hesse taught her that nearly anything could be the stuff of art. The work in Hesse's 1968 retrospective impressed the 12-year-old Schaer for its large scale and transformed everyday materials. "Hesse's work subconsciously registered as a sign of possibility," she said. "It never occurred to me that the art world was closed to women." Schaer graduated with a B.F.A. from the Philadelphia College of Art in 1978.

During college, Schaer worked in weaving, fiber, and collage and took one course in book arts. After graduating, she moved to New York City, where she lived in a closet-sized apartment in Chelsea for 16 years. The cramped quarters called for an art form that didn't require much space, and she began to make books. She contin-

*Top: Columbine, exterior and interior, 2000; gir-
dle, acrylic, broken glass, printed matter, plastic
toys, inset book printed digitally on Lana Wove
paper; 11 by 8 by 8 inches closed.*

*Left: Baby Love, exterior and interior, 1995; tod-
dler dress, acrylic, ink, Xerox, plastic doll; 12 by
15 by 12 inches closed.*

ued her studies at the Center for Book Arts and the School of Visual Arts. In 1985, she began working as a freelance designer and illustrator. She now lives in Brooklyn, where she has a studio that she doesn't have "to look at from the bed," teaches in local schools, and gives workshops at places such as the Pyramid Atlantic Book Arts Fair in Washington, D.C., and the Center for Book Arts and Lower East Side Printshop in New York City.

Book structures give visual artists a way to use words and stories as more than design elements. Storytelling has always been an important part of Schaefer's life. "I come from a line of powerful women who are all storytellers," she said. "We still sit at the kitchen table, my mother and I and sometimes my sister and brothers, drinking endless cups of tea, trading stories from our lives and our family legacy—salesmen, cantors, scoundrels, china painters, gardeners, and thieves."

Schaefer's texts include the poems of Sara Teasdale and Emily Dickinson, her own writing, appropriated nursery rhymes, and altered song lyrics. The lyrics of "Many Rivers to Cross," by Reggae songwriter Jimmy Cliff, become *No More Dishes to Wash* (1992-93). The altered text is in a book hidden behind the door of a child's toy sink. In *Rest Stops*, modified driving instructions become a metaphor for life. In *And the Cupboard Was Bare* (1994), toy dishes and food packages spill out of a child-sized cupboard, along with a book containing pictures of indigent persons and beggars and the original version of the nursery rhyme "Old Mother Hubbard."

Schaefer also uses the Internet to search for words that evoke an idea she wants to explore. After the shootings at Columbine High School, a search for the word "blame" turned up Shakespeare's Sonnet 129—"The expense of spirit in a waste of shame/Is lust in action, and till action, lust/Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame." She used the sonnet as the text for *Columbine* (1999-2000), a girdle book covered with shattered glass.

Clothing, on the other hand, gives Schaefer a visual language with which to explore personal, social, and spiritual questions. For Schaefer, "Girdles are binders, like notebooks, places to hold and keep stories." The act of binding a book becomes part of a broader metaphor for the girdle as a means of social control, of containing the female body and shaping it into an ideal form. "I grew up big and round in the age of Twiggy," she said. "I was poked, prodded, and snapped. Working with girdles has been a process of healing, of learning to love the femaleness of my body and being comfortable in my own skin."

Ancient Armor is a golden artifact housing an obscure nursery rhyme, and the faces of women peer out of the pages as if seeking to leave, but afraid to depart, their gilded sanctuary. Some pieces, such as *Bronze Age*, are a tribute to strong women. Inside this girdle are images of women warriors such as Artemis, Joan of Arc, WWII Wacs, and female soldiers from Vietnam and the Gulf War. In each of these, the sense of presence of a woman now absent from the garment evokes a history and a story that is intimate, questioning, or sardonic. Some pieces, such as the blue *Sanctuary* (2000), offer refuge, "an empty space for meditation." This work was one of 18 pieces shown in "Binding Ties: Girdle Books and Other Meditations" as part of the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series held in the Douglas Library at Rutgers University in 2000.

Schaefer has also used toddler dresses and baby rompers to examine motherhood and infertility. The books are housed like embryos inside the stiffened clothing. "These books reflect my conflicted feelings about having children—or not having them," Schaefer said. *Precious* is a baby romper that contains vials of Pergonal, a fertility drug, and a small book made out of her own medical records. In *Baby Love* (1995), a toddler's dress acts as the covers of a book. The faces of children and hand-lettered words cover the pages. An oval shape has been cut in the same place on each page. When the pages are closed, the oval forms a space in which a plastic doll in the shape of a woman lies. The adult woman becomes the embryo—the woman within the child, the child sheltering the woman.

Schaefer's "girdle books," with their basis in medieval times and their altarlike shapes, bring to mind prayer books and religious practices, but it was not until her father's death in 1998 that Judaic themes appeared in her work. Schaefer came from a middle-class Jewish family, one that was "not particularly observant," so she was surprised to find herself cutting her father's letters into hand forms for *Memories of Missing Words*. And, in *Mo(u)rning Prayer* (1998), a gold-painted bustier opens to reveal a Star of David-shaped book whose pages are covered with the Kaddish. Tiny photos of unidentified people look back at the viewer.

Schaefer's prayer books evoke both the hands that hold books and hands held in prayer. The *Book of Common Prayer* (1996) has red pages shaped like hands and is printed with the texts of prayer books from different religious traditions. Into the palm of each hand, Schaefer cut symbols of different religions as a means of creating "a place for forced dialogue." She also uses gloves and glove dryers found in antique shops and flea markets to evoke gesture and embrace. In *Journey*

Miriam Schaefer with Tallis of Lost Prayers, 1996-2000; Lana Wove paper, acrylic, ink, glove dryers, leather cord, beads; 10 inches by 4 inches by 10.5 feet. Photo: Stan Pinkwas.





#6, The host encounters the guest at the border, "Rules of Engagement" series, 1997; hostess apron with acrylic, color Xerox transfer, hand embroidery; 22 by 37 inches. Photo: D. James Dee.

Without Map (1998), leather gloves suggest hands cupped together in a gesture of devotion or offering. From their palms spills a heart-shaped book.

Tallis of Lost Prayers, a 10.5-foot-long book, is made of hundreds of hand-shaped pages that Schaer has hand cut, painted in nonfigurative patterns, and bound with leather cord and beads. The book, which resembles a snake or the gills of a fish, contains no words. The covers are beaded and embroidered. Schaer thinks of the piece as a prayer shawl, but it can hang on the wall or take shape as the space surrounding it demands. Schaer says of the hundreds of hand-cut pages, "I'm an eat-all-the-cookies-until-they're-gone kind of person. It's real hard for me to do things in moderation once something takes over." *Eve's Meditation*, a four-foot snake book with a beaded binding and a hand-cut apple in each page, is traveling with "Women of the Book: Jewish Women, Jewish Themes," curated by book artist, critic, and editor of *Umbrella* Judith Hoffberg (showing March 25 to May 19 at the Minnesota Center for Book Arts in Minneapolis).

Schaer's new series, "Rules of Engagement," exhibited in 2000 at Western Wyoming Community College in Rock Springs, illustrates her need to exhaust an idea. Each piece is created from a hostess apron, which, like the girdle, binds the waist and both draws attention to and covers the female body. For middle-class women in the 1950s, individually sewn and decorated aprons were part uniform, part creative expression, and a sign of domestic skill.

Schaer collected the aprons and collaged them with pictures of idealized women. They are embroidered with sayings from Sun Tsu's *The Art of War*, such as "Good warriors take their stand on ground they cannot lose." Schaer began the series of 20 wall pieces in 1996 after seeing a book touting the use of Chinese military strategies in business. "I thought it would be funny in a subversive way to recast these strategies in a female context." In this series, the domestic realm becomes a battlefield, the apron a shield, and women are called upon to stand their ground. Sun Tsu's saying "The host encounters the guest at the border" takes on new meaning in these works.

Schaer is currently working on five large-scale pieces that will be included in "Solitary Confinements: A Family Portrait," to be installed in the Ceres Project Room at the Elizabeth Foundation, New York, April 30 through May 25. "I think of them as a family, each one with an inner and outer persona. Within all families, stories are told—and sometimes hidden. The garments represent the person's outer presence, the hidden book the inner, secret narrative." She would also like to return to the snake book form and envisions her third as having legs, or perhaps feet. "I've also been thinking about 'Aliah,' the word for the immigration of Jews to Israel from around the world, and about journeys and returns, especially returns to places one has never been."

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