

Marina Schulze
Shallow depth
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Translation by Suzanne Eldredge

Marina Schulze has developed into one of the great realists of her generation in her more than twenty-year career as a painter. Often her paintings are subsumed under the term “photorealism.” However, when “looking at them [. . .] we don’t just look at what can actually be seen in the paintings, but at the same time imagine what could potentially be there [. . .] Which is all the more astonishing, since her works are all highly representational in their origin.”¹ And it is not uncommon for our assumptions to be completely wrong!²

The term “photorealism” is not generally applicable to her work, although it is without a doubt extremely realistic painting.³ Because of the way in which Schulze selects and reduces a detail of a photograph, and in turn greatly enlarges this section (“Blow up”), she succeeds in making her works appear almost abstract.⁴

In one way, the exhibition title shallow depth refers, oxymoronically, to these contradicting properties of her paintings. The viewer is undecided as to which parts of the painting appear raised or flat, high or low, above or below. In her series of works *Drehpunkt* (Turning Point)—which she started in 2016—even the artist does not specify anything, as the paintings can also be rotated by 180 degrees.

On the other hand, the paintings by Schulze literally have a “shallow depth,” since painting is a two-dimensional medium⁵ and the artist prefers a transparent application of paint. Plasticity and spatial depth are created in the works exclusively through artistic technique and painterly skill. Schulze is fundamentally fascinated by painting’s ability to create the illusion of three-dimensionality; “She paints surfaces [. . .] and always lets the ‘behind’ [or below] also become visible.”⁶

In addition, the exhibition title creates a link to photography. There, ‘depth of field’ denotes the sharp area of an image. In a figurative sense, Schulze’s pictures have precisely this very shallow depth of field, as only a very small part of an object is in focus.⁷ The exhibition shallow depth is displayed in approx. 400 square meters over two floors in thirteen rooms of the Syker Vorwerk. It includes not only new paintings but also some key works from Schulze’s oeuvre. Thus, as a retrospective, it creates an overview of several creative phases going back to her time as a master’s student in 2004. This reveals that certain motifs such as mushrooms and, above all, human skin, are repeatedly dealt with anew by the artist. The exhibition thus appears as a retrospective, or “retro perspective” in the sense of a “look back ahead.”⁸

For the first time, Schulze turns away from the depiction of a real existing object in an untitled spatial work (NW I), specifically created for the Syker exhibition. This is a development from her previous spatial images, in which the artist created spatial illusions with *trompe l’oeil* painting, straightening corners or letting light disappear.⁹

The painting of the walls in this almost square, symmetrical room with three entrances and a window front, which forms the center of the “Beletage” of the Syker Vorwerk, follows a system that Schulze developed especially for the exhibition.¹⁰ For the color scheme of the room, paint residues were used that had accumulated over the years in her studio and thus appear in many of her paintings. References therefore become clear, for example for the face details or nudes, these series can also be seen in the adjacent rooms of the installation. In terms of content, Untitled (NW I) is also in the context of the series of (painted) paint remains (FR), which has been created since 2018.¹¹

A coarse net was stretched across the walls of the room, over which the artist applied many different layers of paint with a roller, from bright to muted. The artist temporarily shifted the position of the net slightly so that a certain liveliness is retained. Subsequently, the net was removed, leaving a light grid structure. Schulze used such “lost” net structures as early as 2004 in her leg paintings. The work Untitled (Legs IV) from that series is shown in this exhibition. In the form of tights, nets in connection with human skin, are also used by the artist in the series *Gute Waden* (Good Calves) (2006). Here Schulze plays with the opposing combinations of protection and vulnerability, concealment and nudity, inside and outside. The latter feelings of being inside or outside a body are especially emulated within the spatial work. Due to the resulting net structure and the color scheme, some people feel like they are trapped in a fishing net, yet the room still looks open due to the entrances, exits, and windowed front. Again we ask ourselves what we are seeing—what is the foreground, what is the background of the painting.

Due to the large formats often used by Schulze and the partial use of the “allover-technique,”¹² she pulls the viewer into her pictures. In the work Untitled (NW I), people are at the center of the work. The painting is only limited by the features of the room itself. The installation for her exhibition shallow depth can thus be described as the essence of all of her artistic work.

- 1 Michael Stoeber, "Gesicht der Zeit," in Marina Schulze: Erscheinungsbilder, Hannover, 2017, p. 7.
- 2 Since Marina Schulze has only been naming her paintings with abbreviations and the running Roman numeral of the respective series since 2004 (FR for paint residues, GA for facial details, WO for water surface, P for mushroom, etc.), the titles hardly give uninitiated viewers information about what is represented. "The images are intended to stimulate associations that go beyond their true origins and question our ideas of what surrounds us." (Marina Schulze, Portfolio 2020)
- 3 Cf. Daniel Spanke, "Böser Realismus," in Frischezentrum, Graduate Catalogue, University of the Arts Bremen, Bremen, 2004, p. 18 f.
- 4 Cf. Heiner Schepers, "Blow up," in Marina Schulze: Blow Up, Wilhelmshaven and Wuppertal, 2010, p. 6 ff.
- 5 In the art trade or museum studies, paintings, graphics, and photographs are commonly referred to as "flat goods."
- 6 Heiner Schepers, "Blow up," in Marina Schulze: Blow Up, Wilhelmshaven and Wuppertal, 2010, p. 6.
- 7 Karin Seinsoth deals in detail with the relationship between Marina Schulze's painting and photography in her text "Marina Schulze's photographic gaze or the infinite complexity of simple things," in this publication.
- 8 Catherine David, the artistic director of documenta X (1997), used the term "retro perspective" to describe her approach. In connection with the leitmotif "Looking back ahead," this meant to relate the exhibition to past documenta exhibitions and at the same time to place them in their "tradition of innovation." See Karoline Hille, "Blick zurück vorwärts," in FKW: Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur, No.25 (1998), pp. 79–84.
- 9 Cf. Roland Meyer, "Behind the picture: On Marina Schulze's room paintings," in Marina Schulze: Blow up, Wilhelmshaven and Wuppertal, 2010, p. 78.
- 10 The symmetrically constructed "balcony room" historically served as the reception room of the respective bailiff/ district administrator/senior district director.
- 11 See pages 18–23.
- 12 See search term "allover-painting," <https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/182> . Accessed February 1, 2021.