

Marianna Schmidt  
UNTITLED (THREE FIGURES)

Marianna Schmidt: *Untitled (Three Figures)*

BY ROBIN LAURENCE



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By Robin Laurence, 2008

The expressive figures in Marianna Schmidt's art manifest the sense – or nonsense – she made out of her difficult existence. Evident throughout her many media, which include etching, lithography, photography, drawing, painting, sculpture, and collage, is a consuming interest in the human face and figure and an intuitive and often emotive approach to image-making. Also revealed through the work of this Hungarian-Canadian artist, who lived in Vancouver from 1956 until her death in 2005, are enduring themes of dislocation, alienation and loneliness. The mood is often bleak, and yet a wry or surreal sense of humour may inflect her art. Schmidt had a strong

Marianna Schmidt  
*Untitled (three figures)*, 1985

charcoal drawing on paper  
(52.7 x 75.1 cm)  
SAG 2007.06.09  
gift, from a private donor

Photograph by Brian Foreman

feeling for the uncertainties of existence, and an eye for the looks and gestures that separate people from each other.

Marianna Schmidt was born in 1918 into a middle-class Hungarian family well-established in southeastern Europe, an area she described as “the far outcroppings of the Hapsburg Empire.”<sup>1</sup> It was a time of great social, political and economic upheaval. Following the end of the First World War and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the empire was dismantled and Schmidt’s birthplace, Nagybecskerek, became part of a newly constituted Yugoslavia. Her family was uprooted and eventually

resettled in a rural area in southern Hungary. Whatever tranquility Schmidt may have known there, as a child and young woman, was shattered again by the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1944, she fled Hungary in a wave of refugees, and spent the next eight years in displaced persons camps in Europe and Great Britain. When she immigrated to Canada in 1952, she had lost everything: home, family and peace of mind.

In order to support herself and her art practice, Schmidt worked nights as a hospital laboratory technician. Throughout her long journey towards creative expression, she continued to struggle with



Marianna Schmidt, *Untitled (three figures)*, 1985, charcoal drawing on paper (52.7x75.1 cm) SAG2007.06.09 Gift, from a Private Donor. Photograph by Brian Foreman.

persistent feelings of displacement, disillusionment and insecurity. She never felt at home in Vancouver, despite her nearly five decades in that city, and looked to European art and culture as a way of reiterating her sense of self. She also travelled extensively in Latin America and later Turkey, and found a paradoxical consolation in encountering indigenous and folk cultures and traditions entirely different from her own.

During and after her studies at the Vancouver School of Art (later Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design, and now Emily Carr University), which she attended from 1960 to 1964, Schmidt established herself as an award-winning printmaker, exhibiting her work in competitions and biennials around the world. Her early etchings were much influenced by the French modernist artist Jean Dubuffet. They depict densely populated urban scenes of cartoon-like figures, seemingly derived from children's drawings. The mood ranges from the comical to the agitated, and from the lively to the tumultuous. Schmidt fully embraced Dubuffet's idea of *Art Brut* ("raw art"), which lauded the creative power and originality of art produced by non-professionals, including children, naive artists and psychiatric patients. (*Art Brut* has now been subsumed under the umbrella term "Outsider Art.") For Schmidt, well-educated and with a sophisticated understanding of historic and contemporary art, it translated into spontaneous and, at times, intentionally primitive imagery. Despite her formal art training and close observation of the contemporary art world, Schmidt identified herself as an outsider. Again, a sense of social and cultural estrangement prevails in her work.

Schmidt abandoned printmaking in the mid-1970s and began to explore mixed media on paper. Her materials included watercolour, gouache, ink, pastel,

graphite and acrylic paint, and incorporated greater or lesser elements of collage. For a period in the 1970s, she experimented with geometric abstraction and non-figurative subjects. In the early 1980s, however, as part of the Neo-Expressionist movement sweeping Europe and North America, she returned to the human subject. The influence of Georg Baselitz and other German artists of the time is clear in Schmidt's work. However, she imprinted whatever she did with her own sensibility. It was as if Neo-Expressionism gave her both the means and the license to articulate her own anguished feelings. While younger proponents of this movement, including a group of Vancouver artists dubbed "The Young Romantics," received attention and acclaim during the 1980s, Schmidt worked outside the limelight, creating lasting images of social, physical and psychological crisis. Her art was rooted in a lived experience of war, destruction and violent displacement.

In the mid-1990s, Schmidt's figures became more stylized and streamlined, losing their Neo-Expressionist crudeness but still maintaining an element of alienation. Her brightly coloured and partitioned figures with thick black outlines evoked the work of the French Outsider artist, Gaston Chaissac.<sup>2</sup> Again, however, Schmidt spun her own forms and meanings out of those of her predecessor. On occasion, she revisited the idea of home through what seem to be idealized European landscape images. As she aged and struggled with illness and osteoporosis, Schmidt drew less and immersed herself in collage. Her last important body of work, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, was a series of Xerographic prints based on her original collages. While maintaining her themes of cultural and psychological displacement, they evince her enduring interest in international contemporary art and her willingness to explore new means and technologies.

Neo-Expressionism and a sly sense of humour inform Schmidt's 1985 charcoal, ink and wash drawing, *Untitled (Three Figures)*. Three surreal individuals, aligned along a crooked diagonal, suggest various stages of human-to-animal transformation. Their appearance reiterates a theme that strongly engaged Schmidt during this period: that of the atavistic or animalistic qualities inherent in human behaviour. The drawing suggests that civilization is a thin veneer and that at any moment it may be stripped from us, revealing a more violent or, in this case, crude, comical, even stupid, aspect of our nature. As is also often characteristic of her figurative work, the characters are depicted in physical proximity but emotional distance from each other. They do not interact in any meaningful way. In fact, they are mostly oblivious to each other, looking and gesturing in different directions and undergoing different degrees of distortion and regression.



Marianna Schmidt, *Untitled (three figures)*, detail

In the foreground, a shaggy figure with human legs and torso and a cow's head gestures broadly but enigmatically. It is almost as if he is hailing a taxi with

the raised arm that ends in a cloven hoof. Beside him, a woman with a diminutive head that is not much more than a duck's bill stands facing the wall, one hand raised, palm upward. Her gesture could signify a "So what?" shrug or a hopeless question, an unanswerable "Why?" Despite her short little tunic, exposing her upper thighs and long legs, little is actually revealed about her. She is as closed off from our comprehension as she is from her two companions.



Marianna Schmidt, *Untitled (three figures)*, detail

The third figure in this group, who seems to be wearing a Roman toga and sandals, takes on an historic and symbolic character. His face, although expressionistic and exaggerated, is the most recognizably human one here and his hand seems almost to reach out to the others. Almost. His legs are awkwardly posed, he is blinded by the nest of scribbled lines covering his upper face, and he is silenced by the dark bar across his mouth. Symbolically, it appears that the person bearing the historic mantle of Western civilization is ineffectual in communicating with his fellow beings:



he is handicapped and they are absorbed in their private gestures and transformations – their reverse evolution. Although their predicament is quite comical, it is also tragic.



Marianna Schmidt, Untitled (three figures), detail

The sketchily suggested setting for this group of unnamed figures – a rough wall and a cobblestone street – derives from a photograph Schmidt took in Bolivia in the 1970s. In the original, piles of bowler-style Bolivian hats are displayed along a wall, for sale by an unseen street vendor. It was a scene the artist alluded to repeatedly in her prints, drawings, and collages. Something in the texture of the cobblestones and the diagonal orientation of the line where the wall meets the street must have appealed to her - and the conjunction must have been psychologically as well as formally compelling.

It has been observed by curators and friends that Schmidt felt most at home when she was on the road, travelling through cultures unlike her own, observing traditions of long standing and deep meaning. It is

also true that Schmidt was fascinated by indigenous festivals, carnivals, and masked dances in the Andean towns and villages through which she travelled. Costumed dancers in animal-head masks must have struck her as richly symbolic, not only of totemic beliefs and shamanic states of transformation but also of our own conflicted nature.

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Notes:

1. Marianna Schmidt, quoted by Robin Laurence, "Marianna Schmidt: Dislocations," *Marianna Schmidt*, Burnaby and Coquitlam: Burnaby Art Gallery, Evergreen Cultural Centre, Simon Fraser University Gallery, page 12.
2. See Didier Semin and Serge Fauchereau, *Gaston Chaissac*, Paris: Foundation Mona Bismarck, 1989.

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