

# IN STUDIO: María Schön: Evoking a Primal Refuge

March 24, 2014

by Esperanza Leon

María Schön came to eastern Long Island in the 1980s, when it was growing fast, but far less densely populated than today; when your eyes could follow lengths of potato field toward the dune's slight rise and the broad ocean beyond.

She designed her home with an attached studio space in Sagaponack on a deep lot that she gradually enveloped with plantings of robust pines and low bushes. Hamptons-style super-homes have progressively sprung up all around her neighborhood, gating and fencing out nature and wildlife. Meanwhile, deer and guinea hens still roam freely through her yard.

Surrounded as we are by nature on eastern Long Island, it is no wonder that many artists continue to explore it in their work. While the physical world is a direct source for Schön's artwork, you will not find the local landscape reflected in her paintings and drawings. Instead, Schön escapes to a refuge of past surroundings.

A series she has worked on since 2001, *Landscape and Memories*, is inspired by recollections from a childhood spent visiting family in Venezuela, where the tropical environs made indelible impressions that continually appear in the work.



“Chichiriviche” by Maria Schön, 2006. Oil on canvas, 44 x 44 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



“Iguapó” by Maria Schön, 2005. Oil on canvas, 44 x 44 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Schön's landscapes transport us to a primal place, as much real as imagined. In a reductive style reminiscent of Hard-Edge painting, the artist employs four basic, abstracted elements to represent the landscape—sky, water, land, and vegetation—described in the most essential means.

Above all, Schön is a supreme colorist, imbuing simple lines and forms with inner life in rich hues and tones. These atmospheric works have a diffuse glow that enhances their gently rolling, curvilinear shapes and undulating lines; the entire picture shimmers and vibrates.



"Higuerote" by Maria Schön, 2005. Oil on canvas, 44 x 44 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

In the studio, Schön lines up canvases in a sequence, much like a moving image. Three years of study at NYU Graduate Film School after leaving the Maryland Institute College of Art with a BFA in the late '70s influenced how she conceives her works, the imagery from one flowing to the next, much like a storyboard.



Maria Schön in her studio. Courtesy of the artist.

She devises preliminary line drawings, then transfers these to canvas, subsequently building on the surface and filling in forms with acrylic paint, usually in a complementary color to the eventual oil pigment. The final canvas is elaborated with layer upon layer, veil upon veil of oil paints, transmitting great depth, dimension, texture, and luminosity.



Preliminary drawings in Maria Schön's studio.





Maria Schön's studio.

Schön similarly builds up the picture surface in two series on paper of 12 works each, elaborated in Prismacolor pencil. *Tropical Elements* (2001) has the same reductive vocabulary of the canvases, yet goes farther by removing color. These are gray-scale landscapes suffused with light and contrast. Her knowledge and handling of color manifests here with the stunning tonalities she achieves using mainly black, white, and gray (employing charcoal in addition to Prismacolor).



Maria Schön's studio.

*Color Forms* (2004), on the other hand, represents the landscape through variations in bright hues (blue/violet/yellow/green) of the signature bulbous yet sensuous form. One can interpret sky, water, and land, but these are by far Schön's most simplified, abstracted works.

The artist equates the minimalist/reductionist handling of her subject with representing the most basic sense of self. I note that these soothing, hushed landscapes are the opposite of the chaos and cacophony that is Venezuela, Latin America, or many parts of the world today: concrete jungles of unchecked and unplanned urbanization, teeming with traffic and noise.

In fact, the tropical forests Schön's work might evoke are not entirely serene realms; they are a commotion of insect buzzing and bird and animal calling amid the densest vegetation filtering a tenuous sunlight. But Schön paints a primordial place free of such disturbances. It is this most basic representation that allows us to forget our own inner and outer hubbub and enter a space (past or future) that exists in memory, in imagination.



“Choroni” by Maria Schön, 2009. Oil on canvas, 44 x 44 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

The artist attributes her attraction to landscape painting to canvases created by or inspired by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Circulo de Bellas Artes artists in Caracas, a style of paintings seemingly displayed in every middle- to upper-class Venezuelan home. These depict the distant, lush green cordillera with a central valley, majestic palms, a rosy apamate tree, or golden araguaney dotting the middle ground.

Such paintings and their imagery form part of a collective memory that gives rise to a sense of displacement, longing, and belonging. In her own paintings, though, Schön escapes the bourgeois cliché that they might have come to represent. And while one still gets a sense of “tropicalia” in Schön’s landscapes, they are not so specifically representational as to be trite, much less kitsch.





“Borburata” by Maria Schon. Oil on canvas, 44 x 44 inches.

Schön is currently entering a germination phase with her work after more than a decade of painting and drawing a continuous series of works with related, often contiguous imagery. She will explore taking her already nearly volumetric forms into actual three dimensions. Straying from the quietude of the two-dimensional work but connecting again with her film background, these “environments” may involve sound, in and of itself a sculptural and evocative element. Sounds certainly conjure memories of place.



“Naiguatá” by Maria Schön, 2006. Oil on canvas, 44 x 44 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

We have all been fascinated at one time or another by stories of places that existed, or might have existed; places of primeval beauty (and danger) that transported us: Arthur Conan Doyle’s “Lost World”; Jules Verne’s “Journey to the Center of the Earth”; Edgar Rice Burroughs’s “Tarzan” series and “The Land that Time Forgot”; or William Henry Hudson’s “Green Mansions.”

Schön’s paintings are titled with names originating in Carib Indian language—*Iguapó*, *Naiguatá*, *Ucaima*—and like their subject matter, these titles transport us to imaginary, exotic lands like those depicted in these novels. They may not directly signify anything to most viewers, for whom they are melodic babble. Schön remembers hearing these names during visits with her cartographer uncle Hilario in Venezuela. To her they are a highly associative babble, charged with a sense of time and place.

Innocence, along with beauty and peaceful co-existence with nature, are common themes in the literary “lost worlds.” Violence, aggression, and destruction make their way into the stories, and the subsequent loss of innocence begins to seem inevitable. It is to regain some semblance of that innocence that MaríaSchön creates these pristine landscapes, her own green mansions or sacred spaces that we might share in through our imaginations and recollections.

She creates, she says, to find her “true self, without the many layers of experience, like a molecule embedded in the folds of an imaginary landscape, and from there to reconnect, bring forward, and hold on to something profoundly intimate and familiar.

“This reaching back is what helps me to keep my bearings and move forward in this increasingly impersonal, alienating, and isolating world—a world where it is now easy to lose perspective and

sight of our original dreams, the ones that are at the core of ourselves.”



Maria Schon in her studio.

**BASIC FACTS:** Work by María Schön can be viewed at [www.mariaschon.com](http://www.mariaschon.com).

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