Poor has found a way of converting vulnerability into strength and power, seeking out challenges in which she is obliged to rise to the occasion. When she first met the photographer Francis Olschafskie, not knowing she would marry him, she instinctively tested his mettle by sucking him solidly in the stomach. Some of the words the artist summons to explain the power of her work are rendered in a glossary she affixed to an exhibition wall, including “amulet” and “talisman,” suggesting a fetishistic function in the magic of art to ward off evil.

During a gallery visit together, I remarked to Poor that the creature was missing an appendage. A hollow core was shaped to fit a finger, like the thumb of a seamstress. “Yes,” she said, “he has such a sweet little worried face. Until you mentioned it, I didn’t even realize he has only one arm. Poor baby!”

“I’m sorry?” I pointed out the creature’s sharp teeth and leftish left arm.

“Yes,” she said, “he’s here to protect me. And because of all the bombs that have killed innocent people.”

This makes me want to talk about how some people find my pieces funny or cute, because they’re small and diminutive. Often the animals, for me, are called “Innocent Bystanders and Orphans.” The two lefts seemed to reference Giacometti, whose own Woman with Throat Cut was first splayed, provocatively, on the gallery floor in 1932. Looking like a mangled scorpion, the piece was in two parts, much like Poor’s. Power and pathos are linked only after there is pathos, where power comes into being on the occasion of its valuation of loss.

After only she finished Giacometti’s Legs did Poor understand that she had unconsciously been referencing Giacometti, whose own Woman with Her Throat Cut was first splayed, provocatively, on the gallery floor in 1932. Looking like a mangled scorpion, the piece was in two parts, much like Poor’s. Power and pathos are linked only after there is pathos, where power comes into being on the occasion of its valuation of loss.

If Poor modeled her gilded legs on Giacometti’s stubby articulations, obsessively adjusted in every pinch, her aim was to elevate and carry, ceremonially, the pink alabaster naked torso of a woman, missing her head and legs. Poor, however, has placed the strutting figure not standing, but lying down in its glass box, in a position of post-action repose, looking the most curious feeling that what happened was not long ago but yesterday.

Poor told me that she felt her piece, carved by a woman, made for “a less violent version” of how the female form might cause male anxiety. Indeed, this piece is a most moving requiem for universal female suffering, making the viewer ponder if where he or she stands in the viewing alters what is seen. Giacometti said he found it difficult to see the whole of a sculpture at once: “When I see the profile, I forget the front.” Poor might have said as well: “When I see the loss, I forget I’m vulnerable.”

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The LIFE STORY of my mother, Miriam Laufer, has many elements shared by Jews of her generation caught between the violent dissolution of an Old World lifestyle and the adoption of a new diasporic one. Personal changes were mirrored in political changes, and vice versa, and her journey from childhood to adulthood traced a voyage through nations also in transition, crossing borders and territories whose identities were also shifting. Born in Poland in 1918, Miriam Ickowitz (later Laufer) grew up in Berlin. Her grandfather was a Torah scribe. Her father deserted the family in the 1920s and became an actor in Yiddish theater in Uruguay, leaving her mother abandoned and jobless. Miriam and her brother, Leo, were put in the care of the Ahava, a progressive Jewish children’s home in Berlin. At Ahava (the name means “love”), art became an important part of Miriam’s life, and she designed stage sets for theater productions and worked in the art studio. With the rise of Fascism in Germany, the entire orphanage relocated to Palestine in 1934, thus saving the children from Nazi extermination.

In 1938, Miriam entered Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem on a scholarship, beginning her formal art education. She studied graphics with Joseph Budko, the head of the school, and painting with Mordecai Ardon, who had been a student at the Bauhaus. Miriam worked as a painter for the occupying British Army, honing her drafting skills while lettering signs in English, Hebrew, Arabic, French, Polish, Greek, and Urdu.

Miriam Laufer’s paintings are notable for their intensity of feeling, the vibrancy of the brushwork and color, and the fluid handling of the paint. Attraction to strong colors—red, purple, blue, green, yellow, orange—and an avoidance of muddy and subdued tones is characteristic; a color sense reflecting her own abundantly energetic, outgoing nature. Equally predominant are the recurrent female figures—sensual, revealing nudes and self-portraits in oil as well as the many ink and wash drawings that she did from models. Overall, her work involves the integration of an expressive concern for figuration with an underlying commitment to pure form and color.

Her style also integrates other influences: Matisse, the Fauves, geometric abstraction, as well as the American abstract art movements of which she was a part. Like many of the artists who came to New York City in the 1940s and participated in the famous Tenth Street days, she brought with her an adventurous artistic spirit and a strong cultural heritage. Laufer saw many of the works of the German Expressionists first hand during her formative years in Berlin.

Laufer’s work underscores again the German Expressionist roots of Abstract Expressionism. Her subject matter, too, is often in the Expressionist vein. While she could paint light-hearted “joie de vivre” pieces, more frequently the imagery, as well as the brushwork and color, express tension and anxiety.

From a catalogue essay by Diana Morris Manister for Miriam Laufer: A Retrospective (1981)
Medium as Creative Catalyst

CATHERINE MOSLEY’S MIXED-MEDIA PAINTINGS

By Christine de Lignières

The generic outline of a female swimmer, limbs angled in various configurations of the diving motion, appears alone or in a group in each of the three works of this series. As the swimmer is depicted against the backdrop of the ocean, the viewer is taken on a journey of discovery, where the body seems to merge with the natural surroundings. The piece titled “Poolside Series i” (2012) is a body flexed into an isosceles triangle, evoking a sense of tranquility and harmony. The artist’s keen observation of the human form is evident in each work, capturing the essence of movement and grace.

In the Poolside Series, the artist has created a visually captivating body of work that invites the viewer to immerse themselves in the beauty of the human form in relation to the natural environment. The pieces are a testament to the artist’s skill and creativity, as she masterfully balances the elements of form and gesture to create a cohesive and compelling narrative. The use of mixed media adds depth and texture, further enhancing the visual impact of the works. The Poolside Series is a powerful exploration of the interplay between the body, nature, and the artistic process, leaving a lasting impression on the viewer.

The Poolside Series

By Christine de Lignières