

Press Release

Cathy Josefowitz. Release

Hauser & Wirth Zurich, Limmatstrasse
1 February – 17 May 2024



Developing a deeply personal visual language in her quest to represent the body as an expressive vehicle of individual experience, New York-born, Swiss-raised artist Cathy Josefowitz (1956 – 2014) created a wide-ranging oeuvre spanning drawing and painting, performance and dance. The breadth of her creative output will be on view in a solo exhibition—Josefowitz’s first in Zurich—focusing on her compelling progression of the figure across four decades, from the 1970s to her later shift towards abstraction, with many works shown for the first time.

Born in New York in 1956, Cathy Josefowitz spent her childhood and adolescence in Geneva, Switzerland. The artist’s lifelong fascination with the bodily experience was sparked in part by her study of stage design at the Théâtre National de Strasbourg from 1972 – 1973. After attending the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1973 – 1978, Josefowitz studied performing arts and new dance at the renowned Dartington College of Arts in Devon, England from 1979 to 1983 and later choreography at the SNND School for New Dance Development, Amsterdam from 1987 – 1988. During her time in England, Josefowitz became involved in political activism, taking part in demonstrations, marches and conferences supporting both the feminist movement and the gay and lesbian liberation movement. Mirroring the increase in her engagement in political activism and feminism, Josefowitz’s art intensified its representation of female sensation and feeling.

The presentation takes its title from Josefowitz’s choreographic piece ‘Release’ (1988), a performance replete with fluid movements that is projected on the wall of the gallery. Drawing on the Anatomical Release technique pioneered by dance teacher and choreographer Mary Fulkerson, Josefowitz falls, twists and rolls in order to let go of tension and cultivate creativity, liberating her body and mind. This feeling of liberation is translated into her later works through the gradual shift from figuration to abstraction. Her relentless and personal quest for expression unites the various works on view in Zurich, with some exhibiting elements of self-portraiture.

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Josefowitz's exploration of the corporeal manifests in works from the 1970s that are filled with figures, predominately female, reclining or in varying states of repose. Her oils on cardboard, such as 'Untitled' (ca. 1974), are characterised by colourful backgrounds portraying domestic interiors, influenced by the artist's exploration of stage design. The unnaturalistic colour and vivid brushstrokes of this period, particularly apparent in Josefowitz's gouches on paper, recall the work of fauvists Henri Matisse and André Derain, who rejected three-dimensionality in their painting practice. Similarly, Josefowitz flattens the body by using a black contour line upon the solid colour plane to portray the profile of the nude figure; yet, Josefowitz challenges the traditional depiction of the reclining nude through her female gaze and contemporary position. The simplification of the subjects' form makes the work appear abstract and demonstrates the ever-evolving nature of her practice.

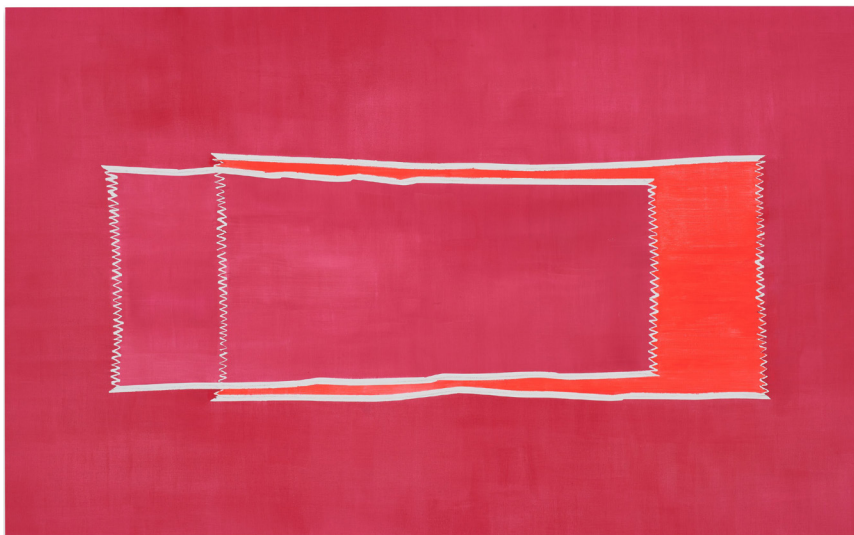


These paintings are complemented by figurative works from the early 1990s in which Josefowitz's visual language enters a new phase, revealing a different way of working with the body through a shift in pattern, style and form. Using various combinations of oil, gouache, charcoal, pastel or chalk, the artist's biomorphic subjects reached a new level of simplification, becoming indistinguishable from the chairs on which they rest. 'Untitled' (1993) exemplifies this movement towards a more non-representational style, achieved by a focus on shape of the figure and bold planes of colour. Releasing her subjects from historic depictions of the female body, Josefowitz reveals a unique awareness of and sensitivity to the physical forms of the self. The backgrounds of the works have also entered a transformation, characterised by geometric patterns and curvilinear forms, resulting in the isolation of the figure in space.

This development is also charted in her series of watercolour paintings on receipts (1988 – 1992) exploring the female nude on a more intimate scale. A travelogue of her trip from Parma to Vienna in the summer of 1988, these works exhibit elements of autobiography. Using watercolour and ink, the contorted limbs and fluid brushstrokes in 'Le Vieux Bistrot - Paris' (1991) evoke Josefowitz's flexible movements in 'Release,' whilst the checkered background of 'Trattoria dall'Amelia – Mestre' (1992) alludes to her stylised domestic interiors from the 1970s and geometric patterns from the 1990s.

The figurative realm soon gave way to increasing abstraction with Josefowitz's Prayers series (1998 – 2001). Depicting prayer shawls and mats, the artist uses a freedom of expression beyond the constraints of the figurative and the abstract. Often named after family members or a place she loved, such as 'Parme' (c 2001) or 'Pâtisserie Égyptienne' (1999), these large-format paintings see Josefowitz using a reduced colour palette.

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These are placed in tandem with the similarly monumental Venus series (2004 – 2006). Josefowitz became increasingly engaged in the physicality of creation, intersecting her performative and pictorial practices by working on the floor of her studio instead of the wall. For these works, the artist placed fabric on the canvas in a dynamic position and traced around it; the resulting abstracted forms, painted in blocks of colour, express the body's presence and represent self-portraits. The freedom and movement of these forms are juxtaposed with depictions of static reclining nudes that revisit tropes of womanhood from classicism, referenced through titles such as 'D'après l'Olympia de Manet' (2004 – 2005) and 'D'Après la Vénus de Titien' (2004 – 2006). Harking back to her work of the 1970s that challenged the traditional male gaze of art history, the Venus series articulates the different configurations a human body can take as a form of both resilience and liberation. In surveying the development and revisitations of the artist's visual language, this exhibition attests to Josefowitz's enduring determination to depict the figure in both its anatomical and metaphysical dimensions.



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Opening hours:

Tue – Fri, 11 am – 6pm
Sat, 11 am – 5 pm

Caption and courtesy information:

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Cathy Josefovitz
D'après l'Olympia de Manet
2004 - 2005
Oil and pastel on canvas
194 x 158.8 x 2.7 cm / 76 3/8 x 62 1/2 x 1 1/8 in
Photo: Jon Etter

Cathy Josefovitz
Untitled
ca. 1974
Oil on cardboard
96.3 x 68 cm / 37 7/8 x 26 3/4 in
Photo: Flavio Karrer

Cathy Josefovitz
Untitled
1992
Oil and charcoal on paper mounted on canvas
133.8 x 150 x 2 cm / 52 5/8 x 59 x 3/4 in
Photo: Jon Etter

Cathy Josefovitz
Le Vieux Bistrot - Paris
1991
Watercolour and ink on paper
17.6 x 9.9 cm / 6 7/8 x 3 7/8 in
Photo: Jason Klimatsas

Cathy Josefovitz
Parme
ca. 2001
Oil on canvas
201.6 x 324.8 x 2.7 cm / 79 3/8 x 127 7/8 x 1 1/8 in
Photo: Jon Etter

Cathy Josefovitz warming up, 1970s