



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Fritz Scholder,
2000 December 7

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Fritz Scholder on December 7, 2000. The interview took place in San Francisco, CA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

Tape 1, side A [session 1, tape 1, 30-minute tape sides]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with the artist -- I was going to say painter, but it's more than that since our subject is multifaceted, multi-media, Fritz Scholder. The date is December 7, 2000. The interview is being conducted by Paul Karlstrom in his living room, as a matter of fact, [at] 73 Carmelita Street in San Francisco. Fritz is in town for a few days and [we are] taking advantage of this opportunity to do an addendum to the earlier interview, which now is up on the Archives' website. How many pages?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Seventy-two.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Seventy-two revealing pages. This particular interview is a focused one, an addendum to the earlier one, but focused very much on the theme of artists and models. Fritz is a figurative artist basically, as far as I could tell. I know you've done some abstractions in an earlier stage, I believe. But you're certainly identified as a figurative artist, perhaps as a humanist artist I would suggest. And perhaps as a symbolist. We'll talk about that later. And the Archives is now doing, through the West Coast Center, a series of interviews, kind of ongoing, with figurative artists, especially those who use the human figure, the body, the nude figure, incorporated into their works. And you certainly do [this] in some pretty interesting and provocative ways I think. So this will be our focus. Artists and models, part of the focus or theme has to do with the artist's studio and with two people, sometimes more, but the artist coming together with other human beings to make art out of them. And in most cases, what we're talking about, they take off their clothes. And then there's this process that leads to the production of an image, the work of art. So I want to learn as much as I can in about an hour of how this works for you, how you use the human figure, how you choose what you try to get out of it, what happens. What kind of a dynamic is taking place. What kind of energy is perhaps released in the studio. This sort of thing. So that's enough of an introduction, but it sets the stage for what we're going to be doing. And I guess I'd like to start with, in very sort of procedural terms -- how do you use models? How do you select them? And where do you work? What would be perhaps the typical scenario from the beginning, from idea through the process [of] using figures, using models, to the piece?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Everyone works differently of course. And I like the full range of adventure of whatever experience happens. I live my life, always have, in a very intuitive way. So this means that at times things just happen. And I'm very aware of every moment and feel that I truly, every day one should be a different person, meet new people, bring in new ideas. This is simply part of my mode of operation. And sometimes if things get slow I have been known to make [a] crisis for myself, which is very different from someone else making [a] crisis for you. So in regard to the models, sometimes it's a very natural thing of meeting someone and finding that they would like to pose. And that is always a good way to do it. Sometimes I simply have my assistant go to the local college and put up a sign for models. And so I also get women that I do not know. I'm not interested in women, necessarily, who have been models, because they have preconceived ideas. It's much better to bring someone into your own environment. I'm very eclectic in everything I do. I have -- my surroundings are maybe unusual in that I live with things of power and things that are entities, I call them. So there's a lot going on in every area. In the studio, of course, it's a matter of almost a ritual. Turning on music. And having it very comfortable in a way, and yet the paradox is it is a working space. A space that we all realize, or both of us, if it's two, that there is a definite thing to do. And, of course, if it's somebody that is unknown then I like to talk to them. I usually ask them to bring something, an object that they like, that they might pose with, along with one piece of clothing. And even that tells me a lot when they appear. And it goes from there. Sometimes these things are used, but it's more a psychological thing. Bringing something that is theirs, they've made a choice. And it's even for me important because I gauge a lot -- everybody, of course, is unique, and that's what it's all about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What kind of things, some examples of -- Well, first of all, clothing. I mean, that's quite interesting. "Ooh, what piece of clothing?" What are some of the responses? I mean, what are some examples?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Well, of course, is the whole range and it gives me clues. If they bring a pull-on robe it tells me a certain something about their personality.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like what?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: That they are shy. That they want to be covered in between the time of posing. If they bring a pair of socks or panties simply that makes another statement. So it's very revealing, and yet very simple.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's a kind of communication?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Yes, of course. And one girl, for instance, for the object brought Ken the Barbie doll. And did all kinds of things that were just great as far as possibilities and in the pose. And let's face it, the female nude is probably the most, the greatest visual cliché, simply because almost every male artist has at one time or another approached that subject. So the challenge for the artist today is even greater. How are you going to approach a subject that everyone knows about? Has been done so many different ways? And so throughout the years I've found myself crucifying them visually, hanging them, throwing something over them. And, again, simply trying to transcend the cliché and make the subject my own. This can go into many areas. It can be on many different levels. I might end up having an intimate relationship with the model. It may last for a day, or a night, or maybe for a month, or years. All of this, to me, is exciting. Because if you can keep from having preconceived ideas and open and just experience the fact that here the model has come to your studio, either by invitation or that she maybe needs work simply. Maybe there's many reasons. But the facts are she's there. The facts are you are there. And simply this is going to be documented. It will be documented, in fact it will last longer than either of you. There's so many levels that can be very powerful, very exciting, very emotional. And I like to explore all of that. At times it's simply coming in, drawing the model, she leaves and that's it. But even that you learn all kinds of things. I use every bit of the experience, because, simply again, it seems like that that is my job.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you find that in general you have, you engage models with an idea of say a series of works, like vampires for instance, let's just say? And that that is what you are into and that's what you are working on, so the model then is going to be basically used to that end, to that purpose? So that's then imposing a theme on this, they're turned in to what you want them to be. Do you find that to be the case most of the time or are there also occasions where it's simply confronting the model, this other human being and then somehow from the interaction, from this communication, this subject -- shall we say narrative subject or identifying image -- arises? Does it happen both ways or . . .?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: It actually happens in all kind of ways. In the beginning, in the 70s, early 70s, I brought in lots of different models simply to draw and to familiarize myself with all kinds of different figures and attitudes and poses, and it was more academic. And yet even then I always felt that a drawing is its own entity and should be complete even though it might be a few lines. And I did a great amount of drawing in the 70s, which later I think prepared me for the different series that I was able to work and use the model. Like the Lilith series where she has many guises, as a snake and a bat, and mythology. Or the vampire. It again, it was of course, an excuse in a way to work with a nude female woman. To explore and to push that envelope even more in regard to what can be done with this visual cliché. Now, of course, the paradox is that often you become emotionally involved. And this also has many different levels. They may just become a friend for the rest of your life. It might be more. And all of this, again, is part of your personal history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There are those artists, and I guess models as well, who have resisted this idea of relationships, especially sexual ones or an erotic relationship being established, from creeping into the studio. Because they think of it as unprofessional, and I guess maybe they worry then people will say, "Aha, this is a bad activity." I gather you don't feel that way. I gather from what you were saying that you are open to that kind of encounter or relationship as much as any other kind. That it's just part of the, well, an acting out on a particular stage what is indicated and possible.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Again, it's hard, I think, to generalize. I'm a professional and when I solicit a model right from the beginning it is, I think, obvious that she is there to pose for whatever I'm doing at that time, drawing, photographs or whatever. On the other hand, there's times when you meet someone, meet a woman who you realize you want to have in your movie. And one of the first steps is I find of posing for you. Which is in many ways, you both know what you're going to get into. But it becomes kind of, I think, a nice mutual giving, and of course, it has to be mutual to make it something that is going to be of the highest kind of expression all the way around. Because the model can bring a lot in to the whole thing. I have known beautiful models that absolutely are zero as far as even when they're standing still there's hardly anything there. And so you have to constantly - and I think this is true in all of the areas of living -- have no preconceived ideas. You have no idea until you are there in the studio and the model is there with no clothes and the music is going. And music I find is a very good thing, because often this person can move or they can't move, or they can pose or not pose. I like for them to be in on this whole thing. It's, again, a mutual thing, a fifty/fifty at least in which they get into it. Because they know themselves, they have a preconceived idea of who they are. And on the other hand, I will come in at times to move an arm a different way, or to tell them, or, "Let's try this or that." It's, of course, a work in progress in the beginning sessions with any model. And, of course, the more you're with that model then you are familiar, both

of you are, and it's smoother and smoother.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about, again, I'm curious about what's going on in your mind. I realize how complex these situations are because other people are involved and motivation on each side shifts and changes. So this is very true and very interesting but kind of hard to pin down unless you get to the specifics. But another kind of general question, perhaps asking it again, maybe in a different way, [when] you engage a model. Do you, are there times when you're working on a project where you tell the model beforehand what you really are after, what you hope will come from it. You know, the fact that, "Well, I'm working on a vampire series," let's say, and "you're going to be in it. This is what we're trying to catch." Do you do that? Do you try to create an atmosphere or perhaps almost a psychological state or lay out a role then to play as you work? Or do you feel that that's unnecessary and you simply are working with the poses and so forth, and then afterwards bring it into the series?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Again, each woman I find fascinating and they all are so different. And I kind of play it by ear. I am very sensitive to the fact that women are always being hit upon. And that is the last thing I'm going to do. I mean, I won't do it. I take my cue from them. And they have to make some move to give me an idea of the direction of not only posing but anything else. Because the one thing I will not do, and am not interested in doing, is pressuring anyone in any way, even in posing. However, in the paradox, I have found out how to not only talk straight to the model in regard to what I'm thinking in regard to where I'm at, in regard to that particular period or subject or series. And also when they come into the studio if they are of a certain frame of mind they, I think, immediately realize that this is a very special place. That this is not a regular place. And it has great opportunity and possibility for anything. And that's the way I approach it. And then they can go with it or not go with it because I have, if they feel, I try to do my job and on many different levels here again, from truly intellectual and formal where I am interested in using that model to maybe pose in very awkward, let's say, poses. Things that are just visually going to help me produce something unique. To poses that are very intimate and yet classical. I mean, here again, you gauge it with the person and the personality that you find standing in front of you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about -- I will save this question for later. This is one of the bigger ones that comes at the end. I can't get away from the fact with your work there are these very strong occult mystical symbolist themes that appear in these series. Lilith you mentioned. Certainly the Vampire series. Passion. It's invoking very often, well, Medieval, certainly 19th century sense of woman, sense of the nude, sense, I think, of sensuality. And I feel that these actresses, actors -- but mainly actresses -- in these scenarios are being choreographed to a certain extent. And I guess, again, I'm curious about the strategies that you use. And I may be off track. It may not be that complicated. But I think of your very environment. You mentioned it in the beginning. It creates a certain kind of atmosphere. You created a world and you invite these models into this world even if it's in the studio, I mean, in the house, that's for sure. It's very unusual. Sort of spooky for some people. You can see what I mean. You are like the puppeteer almost. Do you think that that's a fair . . . ?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Oh, yes. And I try to be subtle. And in some ways I think I am in that I try to really make anyone really comfortable with no pressures. But I have a place, and I surround myself, as I mentioned, with objects of great power. The whole place is just a constant visual turn-on, if you will, for people who are . . . of course, and again, it has to be mutual, and the more mutual it is, of course, the more successful it will be on whatever level. And there are so many levels. And I like to just see what happens. I like to surprise myself and surprise anyone around me. Because, again, I find that preconceived ideas are the worst kind of thing for creativity. If you keep open you will usually surprise yourself, because you won't even have thought of the possibilities or what starts to unfold. And I think the other person also immediately feels comfortable with someone who talks straight, is honest, who says, you know, "This looks good. That doesn't." Or, "How about doing this?" And it will get more unorthodox as it goes on if you feel that this person would like to try that. It's, to me, a very concentrated, almost speeding up of regular living when you are in the studio. Which as I said, I feel is a very special place. It's a place where you truly have the opportunity to force self-integrity. In which you can do pretty much what you want. And with a model, of course, it's a collaboration of the two of you. And it is a personal place in one's history and which can never be denied, in which something conceivably might come from it, like a drawing or a painting, that will be there for a long time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds to me, you know, the terminology you use . . . We're going to turn this over in just a minute . . . But it sounds to me as if this realm of the studio for you is actually more than a place simply limited to art practice. In other words, drawing and catching an image. What you describe -- and we can maybe talk about it a little more on the other side -- is actually and conceptually a much broader idea of what can go on there. And that in part it's responding to the moment as things develop. And eventually -- probably, but maybe not necessarily -- it's going to end up with a wonderful drawing or a wonderful painting. But it's a process that is necessary, in your eyes, to lead there [work of art] the way you think it should happen. Is that right?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Oh, yes. I mean, I am in charge. It's my studio. It's my work. And I don't try to deny or in any way cover up that fact because that is part of the monster. You either accept it or not accept it. And yet, again, I

really have had no problem because if you have someone that is not only intellectual and also sensitive they immediately realize what these possibilities are. And in most cases it's very exciting. It is something that they realize is also creative. And in fact, it's hard work often.

Tape 1, side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing this artists and models interview with Fritz Scholder. This is tape one, well, it's our only tape for today, side B. And sorry that we had to sort of cut you off. Do you want to pick up on that point?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Sure. Well, now the studio, often, is the first step. Depending on the rapport that starts to develop with the model, depending on if I'm working on a series, or if I just get an idea off the top of my head, we might go into my house. Which is not like most houses in that it's more of a museum of many objects -- like a sarcophagus, an Egyptian sarcophagus, which I've done a number of paintings of models hiding behind the sarcophagus. I use things I collect as props. And in doing so you will find works with a nude woman maybe kissing a large head of a buffalo. Or laying on a table or whatever happens. Again, there are so many ways and so many levels to take this. The formal level is to in some way produce an image that conceivably might be different from anything you've seen before. And you must, of course, work completely for yourself. But then there also will be an audience and hopefully they won't be bored by looking at something that looks like something, like thousands of things they've seen before.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: And, again, it's a tremendous challenge with a nude female.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you find, again, I keep asking for generalizations and I understand that we do those at our own risk, but do you find that if a personal or an intimate relationship is indicated and develops that this contributes in your experience or detracts from this work of making an image, of actually making a product? What has been your experience like that?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: I found that it contributes a great deal. One of the best models I've ever had, when we got into an intimate relationship, the painting just became better and better. Mainly, I mean, for a number of reasons I think. There was first of all, more familiarity, of course. But there also was, and it's hard to talk about, but simply a spiritual and passionate passion that started showing that wasn't there before. And where before it might have been somewhat formal or staid, it really blossomed into many, many works, that I felt each one was very successful. And a lot had to do with our relationship, our love, our excitement, if you will, of the sexual activity. I maintain that the sexual activity is a very important part of most artist's energy. And, again, it can come about in many different ways. You can use it in many different ways. But when you have it -- painting is such an emotional thing, at least for me, it is that it just adds a great deal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: As I said earlier, there are those who shy away from this idea. But it seems to me it almost splits down the middle. I don't know how many would go in one camp or the other. It's one of the things that I've been learning from these interviews and in the work I've been doing. Some artists seem very -- especially artists -- very threatened by the idea of [sexuality], like it's a weakness. Like they would be giving in to a weakness to have this emotional response, passionate response to a subject. Like somehow that becomes something, it becomes sex and not art. How do you feel about characterizing it that way? That it can't be both?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: I think that unfortunately in the last decade at least the difference between sex, the sexes, gender, whatever, has become sadly paranoid in that this thing of Men from Mars or Women from Venus, whatever. Is just one of many influences of an age that now finds itself scared of sex. And with good reason, of course. However, it has changed many people's attitudes. And I see it in younger women. That they are truly so, how shall I say it? Well, scared is a good word, but also critical. Which I just find has no use in my life because we're here for such a short time. And I early on realized I wanted to have fun. Now I say that and it sounds light. But it has all kinds of ramifications. But I'm talking about the approach. I'm a natural optimist. I love to meet new people. I especially like women. I've learned most of what I know from women. And I now feel sad when I encounter women that, and you can just, it takes two minutes to know if they are functioning under this . . . A lot of it is, I think, because of the fact that we live in a media society, overemphasized. Of course, you can be afraid of anything. I mean, terrorism is everywhere. The planet is falling apart. The earth is in complete denial. We could go on and on. On the other hand, I personally as an artist, and let's face it, I'm not like most people. I have more freedom than anyone I know. I can pretty much make my world. But that being said, I have always lived in a very positive moment-by-moment way. And am pleased that I have because I think I would have missed out on a lot if I hadn't done it that way. And I look around me and I see people who can't spell, who have no idea about geography, or the rest of the world. You might think, well, what does that have to do with anything? Well, it seems to me it has a lot to do with living. It sounds like a cliché but I truly believe that until you find out who you are and then fully accept it, that's the hard part, but once you do you have personal power that will scare you. And the great people that I have been fortunate in knowing have that same common denominator. That is a

self-integrity and a understanding of themselves where they, of course, have confidence. Georgia O'Keeffe was quite elderly when I met her. She was a short woman dressed in black. And yet the minute you met her she emanated with [sic] an unbelievable strength simply by her quietness. And every word was chosen so well that you went away realizing here was a human being. And of course, she had many years to do it, but she had in many ways developed it herself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you then think of this studio world with all of its ramifications and all of the different directions, I guess, things could go, as really an arena for self-discovery? Do you see -- aside from the fact you're an artist and you are making images and objects, aside from that -- do you then see, maybe the most important in a human way, things going on, this process involving art and self-discovery -- for you but also for the model?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Oh, yes. The model, in fact, often it changes her life. Because most people don't have the opportunity to go into a rarefied world. It doesn't have to be through the arts. It can be through science. It's through any area where someone has the passion for whatever it is that they're doing and communicates it to another human being. And so here they find themselves in a place that is unlike anywhere they've been before. Even if they've modeled for other artists. Each studio is different. Each artist works differently. And they can learn so much. And, again, if the artist knows what he's doing he takes from them. I mean, it has to be mutual. I take all I can from any relationship. But I also give all that I can. I love to give in whatever way that makes another person happy. And one should give presents every day except Christmas probably. I mean, that kind of thing . . . because to me it's, again, a mutual homage if you will, to another human being. That you have met them and they are sharing, whether it's just for an hour or a day or a year, a part of your life.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you identify with your subjects, with your models? Or do you try to keep a kind of emotional or critical distance? Is that sometimes a problem? The reason I mention it is some artists I have spoken with say they tend to almost become their models within a kind of intellectual or conceptual construct. You know, there's something that's happening there and they become part of it as they work. Do you know what I mean? Is that something . . .?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Early on I realized -- and it's just part of, I guess, my whole approach on life -- wherever I find myself or who I might find myself with, I quickly examine or think about all the different possibilities. Right from the beginning. Now oftentimes first impressions are, as we find, off the track. Well, I use that in that I am very definite about everything. And yet I'm able to make a complete about-face if I find I should change my ideas. And so immediately I think, let's say a model comes to the gate who I really am not . . . maybe I saw a photograph of. I guess I usually ask for photographs when they submit to, if I post something. I immediately have an idea of what I think she's going to be in many levels. And it's almost for my own entertainment. And yet I think we all do it. And then see how wrong or right I am. And it all will be revealed in that first session.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm curious, do you feel a part of this investigation of humanity [if that] is what it is, of other people -- is aided and abetted by putting the models, putting these individuals, if they're agreeable, in extreme situations? There's a certain extremity to your work and to your themes. It's pushing, however one might want to describe it. It moves certainly outside of convention. The themes are bizarre, threatening, disturbing in some cases. And I'm gathering as we talk that these are the results not just of imagination after the fact, as opposed to these forms that you've recorded and drawn. But that it's an organic kind of process which reflects what you're talking about. This sort of voyage of discovery. And I sense that an important part for you to test this, to get people really to move to a new level [of] extremity, is [to say], "Look at this. Hey, what do you think? Can you be part of this?" And they say, "Oooh, I don't know." Is that . . .?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Oh, yes. I mean, in most cases the model and many weeks or months or years after will tell me that the first time they came to the studio they would have turned around and run away if they had known what they would be doing, or end up doing by the end of that first session let's say. Or by the end of the first year. Or whatever. Because they had no idea what would happen. And, again, in a way I accept this as a compliment. Early on I seemed to have been aware of a lot of different things, just having to do with living. And I like to communicate. And today people need this so much. The reason people go to shrinks is because they need a person who is out of their realm that they can talk to without all the baggage of being family or whatever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: I immediately make them realize that I am very different. But they don't need to be afraid, because I believe in being civilized. And it is up to them what will happen. And anything can happen, because of the fact that I have thought out -- and concept today is so important. Just being strange for the sake of being strange means nothing. I, in my own way, am a researcher. And I am fascinated by what people in the past have believed, what they've done. And they've done it all. And so there's nothing to be shocked at. It all depends on one's background, which I completely honor because we all are, we intellectually grow differently, physically grow differently. And I find it exciting when two human beings can come together and have any kind of honest communication. And to me that's one of the few valid things in this existence when you really get down to it.

And when that happens, and it can happen in a way even maybe a little easier in the studio if both parties come together knowing that even though it might not be the, how should I say, the most natural thing to do, that it is, it can open up all kinds of ideas and possibilities.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the time we have left I would like then to direct you to a few of these images. And we don't have a lot of time to do this. But I guess what -- I want to see if I can somehow connect what you have been saying about a kind of a philosophy of the studio and a relationship and an attitude towards models, and how they fit in your life and in your art. That's what you've been talking about to me. How do you see your feelings about them? Or better yet, about the psychology of this experience you've been describing of self-discovery, of extremes? How do you see that then coming forward in these particular works? The Lilith series, these are disturbing images. They're these strange, strange creatures who have, most of them are related to mythological stories or some kind of a legend and myth. But underlying all of that is a kind of instability. I'm saying too much, but I'm trying to lead it right to that to see behind or into these works of art to the studio, to the model situation, and is there a connection, I guess that's the question.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Well, first of all, it might sound, what I've been saying, clinical but in reality I feel I'm very open and free to the experience. I have thought a lot about whatever it is I'm doing. In fact, I contend that an artist must become an expert on whatever subject that they're working with. And with the woman this to me is, I'm delighted to consummate research, if you will, of the woman in every way possible. And I believe that the paintings is a maturing process where every painting you learn from. And then you find that there's, oh, much in regard to the woman in history. When I started the Lilith series people would ask, "Well, who is Lilith?" They had no idea. And yet here is a tremendous amount of information from not only the Kabala, but from the, even today there are amulets put around babies to keep Lilith away in areas of the world. This was Adam's first wife and it is just another, in fact, with the feminist movement they also discovered Lilith. And there's even a magazine I believe called Lilith. And this is great because it . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it's an empowering thing, isn't it?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Well, yes. But it's also walking that line between reality, I consider myself a romantic realist. Sometimes the women are just sitting there pulling on their T-shirt. Maybe they're just standing by the fountain. There's nothing wrong. I studied with Wayne Thiebaud who, I think, has made some of the most static figurative works of the 20th century, which are fabulous in their static power. I was very influenced by Diebenkorn when I was here in California in college. And it all, it seems to me, can work because it's whatever you put onto it. And so if I want the woman to be Lilith or it's also biographical. I had a bad affair at one point and started the Monster Love series. And then I had a great affair, in which the Dreams started. And where everything was so great, with such great ecstasy that you would wake up wondering if it really happened or you had dreamt it. All of these series can be read on many different levels. And so whether it's together where it's very evident that the man and woman often mesh together in the iconography, or if it's passion where you can feel conceivably a type of narrative that's happening between two people, all of this, of course, is difficult for the artist to analyze because when you walk into that studio I find that I must push all of my information to the back of my head and try to come in with no ideas, and turn on the music and get into a ritual of almost automatic ready because I need to have as much freedom to see where it's going to go.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What attracts you about . . . let's just take a quick look. We've mentioned, now, actually this is good, some of this series, but here, this is a really powerful famous Lilith. It's Lilith Number 20 from 1992. And for you what does that, what does it mean? Or what are some of the things it means?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: There are formal considerations that one could look at in this painting. For instance, the upper right hand corner is a light coming. Just formally that is hard to make work. This is a large painting. [inaudible] is that they're looking, finding the light because here it is a demonic type of humanoid with bat wings and with a . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Serpent around her waist.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: . . . serpent around her waist, which is one of the guises that Lilith used because after the big fight with Adam she said, "I am going to wreak havoc onto mankind forever." And so conceivably this is what she's doing. And yet there may be some positive aspect to that. And then, of course, simply it's a matter of making an image of a woman that's maybe a little different from something you might have seen before.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about the idea for you, we're talking about the extreme situations, you know, going beyond, going into the unknown, the darker side if you will. Does that have, does it work like this, that kind of significance for you? It's like an image or a testament to the value of that kind of pushing ahead, looking beyond?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Well, first of all, I believe that the painter can only come half way. And we [the audience, viewers] must come the other half. And for that reason I'm not interested in what many artists are today in

being so liberal, that they even write words onto their paintings, which to me is a cop-out. If you can't paint it, you know, writing is a whole different deal. I wouldn't think of writing on the painting. I bring the visuals up to . . .

Tape 2, side A

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Arts, Smithsonian Institution, continuing this interview session with Fritz Scholder on 7 December of the year 2000. This is tape two, side A upon which we will conclude this. We will wrap it up. But we do have a few more things that we have to discuss. Fritz, we were beginning to talk about some specific examples within these series, and I guess trying to in some way pin down a little bit where they come from and what they're about, but what they mean to you. And I would think especially in terms of attitudes toward people and the human experience but also trying to keep in mind the presence of these models. And you talked about Lilith a bit, that series. I mean, there's much to say about all of this, I realize. And I don't want to try to pin it down too closely. But I'm trying to sort of tease out of this whatever connections there might be with these actual people who posed. Not to say that they become that thing. You've chosen a few that you think that would be useful, a few images that would be useful.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: I'm talking about actual people. I chose one called Missing Woman on the Bed. And usually, or I shouldn't say usually, when things go well with a model, whether I know her or not know her, we usually end up in the bedroom. And not for maybe the reasons you might first think of. But here is a even more intimate space. And by then she is comfortable and I've done a number of paintings of nude women walking on top of the bed. Which I think is subtle and yet tells a lot. And this particular one has one stocking on and is walking on the bed. It's cut off mid-body where you don't see the shoulders or head. But you don't need to because the statement is there. It's a mundane thing and yet it isn't because by the fact of walking on the bed we know that, again, a dialogue or a narrative has been set up. On the other hand, it often becomes symbolic. Dream Number One where the two are meshed was when I started a great romance and it's very romantic for me, and yet it's simply two people so enmeshed that it becomes a romantic icon. In which you're forced to just zero in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, yeah. That's quite abstract, at least from. . .

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Yeah. And it's a large painting. So romantic icons become, of course, symbols or stronger than, in many ways, reality. But then there are also so many levels. I often am amused that animals, the pets like I've always had dogs and cats, seem to love to be voyeurs. And they like to watch. And so this is a new work called Woman, Man and Animal and it pretty much tells it all because the animal is the voyeur.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: And so there can be humor, there can be all kinds of things. But the Passion series, which is the newest series on the subject for me, has kind of brought together a lot of this in that it's often very obvious that the man is a painter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. Talk about iconic.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Right. And that there is a very strong narrative beginning with the woman, the nude woman that is with him. And the colors also it seems to me are passionate if you will. Color is so personal, but as we all know, certain colors are somewhat universal as far as getting across a feeling. And so when you put oranges and reds together with purples and greens things are going to happen. And this painting of Passion Number One those are the colors and the artist is hovering over the woman in a very vampire way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: But he still has hold of the pallet and brushes. And so it has everything. It has all of the things that one would want.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let's talk about this a minute. Clearly, anybody looking at this that knows anything about you and your work would see this as a self-portrait. Not literally but in almost every sense of the word in terms of this relationship, actually, that you've been describing, which to a large extent is a kind of seduction on a number of levels, it would seem to me.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Hm-hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Seduction is basically getting people to do things. You might want to say helping them to do things. And yet if you agree with that, right? This is to a certain degree a self-portrait, auto-biographical.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: I maintain every painting of mine is auto-biographical and probably a self-portrait. I think that seduction, which often has a negative connotation, could conceivably be exposing another person to new or different ideas, which they may not have thought of or weren't really maybe even against, and bringing them

around to understanding why you feel that they are not only important but exciting. I think that -- I like to give lectures, and in lecturing an audience you can become very seductive.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, sure. You sway them.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: The dynamics actually is much easier than a one-to-one. Because most people are like lemmings who once they get a feel that someone else in the audience is with you they usually get with you. And you can whip them around in a very, you know, definite way. Now if you have integrity this can be very good because you can literally change their minds about all kinds of things, in this case art, in which they go away not only having been through an exciting, hopefully, experience, but one that has new ideas for them to ponder. And every relationship is like that, but the artist/model relationship is, I think, one of the most special for many reasons. And very different from even any other relationship you have with another woman or with a woman.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you equate, conflate the artist with the vampire in this respect? I've been listening carefully to what you've been saying. But as an agent of transformation of release of self-knowledge, of letting go of that which is safe and confining and then discovering self, do you think of vampires in that way?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Well, the vampire concept is one of the oldest and most universal. The Greeks talk about the vampire and it really is universal simply because the vampire does not die. Something that we think might be interesting. The vampire seduces and is very sexual and this is why it's had the longevity that it has had. Again, I use it often, but in a way I am apart. Like there is a so-called vampire thing going on today in cities throughout the world where you act certain ways or might drink blood or might do this. I'm not interested in that kind of thing that the masses find -- it becomes the newest fashion. My interest has been right from the beginning, and has been somewhat scholarly. But more than anything, again, realizing that we all have a dark side. And the dark side is usually the most interesting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Look at the, we're talking about Passion Number One still. Look at that model reclining. It looks like she's not at all responsive at this point, at least in one's reading the image and looking at it. In fact, she seems, well, certainly vulnerable -- and all nudes are in a way vulnerable and by definition. She certainly doesn't look aroused at this point. She seems neutral. Did you intend that? Do you have any thoughts?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Well, I'm not sure if I completely agree because one of her arms is up and her hand is behind her back. Now that to me shows that she is open. And then the other hand, you notice, she is actually laying on. And that is a pose of kind of, it seems to me, waiting for what's to come. And the, of course, the male figure is the aggressive one. And yet even her feet are together, posed nicely instead of being apart if she was maybe afraid. I don't know. At least I felt that this was the prelude to seduction.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Could well be. I just think as an alternative reading and one that actually a few other people have made at looking at this, how especially you cast it within the male/female dynamic and as a power struggle, which is one of the issues, especially when you talk to some of the younger feminists and so forth, that's still an issue. That she does seem, I don't know, I won't say victimized, because there's not enough information here. But that might be a way, certain people, depending on their points of view, would see this. That the aggressive powerful figure is once again taking advantage of a more defenseless . . . After all she's there without her clothes on. She's working for the artist. When you think of it that way you can see how it might be read that way. Which isn't the way you intended it, obviously.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: No, I'm in no way, I mean, it's not, there isn't an aggressiveness, a natural aggressiveness in sex. Again, it should be neutral and as you well know, a woman can be more aggressive than the man. But I am so sensitive to, and really so empathetic with the plight of women generally because of the way they have to deal with so many men. And I also know how a lot of men think about women too. That I bend over backwards to make sure that they realize that there's nothing to be afraid of. And if I sense, for instance, the first session any, if I can't get the model comfortable by the end of the session and really meaning where she really wants to come back, I won't invite her back. Because there's not only no reason but I'm not interested in making anybody uncomfortable. In fact, I want exactly the opposite.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Fair enough. Would you go so far as to say that Passion Number One is perhaps a metaphor for you in the studio? I mean, in the broader sense, if you had to choose one image? And you've talked about somehow facilitating this, opening up, this self-discovery on the part of the model. You've been quite clear and explicit about that. For you, would this be of the works you've done the closest thing to an actual then a sign or a symbol, a metaphor for the situation, the dynamic that you seek or understand within your own studio?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Yes, I think within the context of the different series this pretty much tells it all. That I have finally identified the artist, the painter and in the act of seduction, which comes in many forms. And, as I say, the color is very important in this one, I think, because it, to me, are seductive colors. But it, and, again, I think most people realize that even by being auto-biographical I have the freedom to enhance it or make it even subtle. I have that ability in doing the painting to put whatever emphasis I want. But the main thing is to, I like the fact

that you reacted a certain way because even [though] I did it and so my idea of it is no more valid than anyone else's. And whatever elicits, it elicits from people is just as valid. And that is what I like, to get people to, to react. And it will mean different things to different people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Final question, I think: Do you find that, you use, as often as possible, I think, amateur models, or at least they start out that way. Maybe then they go on and make careers. Although I don't sense that's necessarily the case. It seems to be a much more personality-based thing, it's a relationship that you create and initiate in the studio. Do you find in most cases, setting aside those models who pose for art classes and see your postings and show up, I don't know about them. Maybe you can say something in this regard about them. But do you find that there are sexual expectations that somewhere, hovering in the minds of these neophytes, amateurs, is a notion that they are going into an erotic situation? That that is part of the territory? And maybe even makes it more attractive for them?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In most cases?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: First of all, as a man I can't deny that the sexual thing is always there. I truly love women and have always used the sexual drive, my sexual drive as a great part of the creative process, which I think is . . . and you said is the case with most artists. I can't speak for everyone, but that's how I am and how I've always functioned. And I think women are not that different from men, even though a lot of people try to say differently. A true woman, I think, is very sexually aware in a positive way, especially if she finds herself with a man who is not going to pressure her, that's not going to hit upon her or anything else, that is honest and straight and this means it might just happen naturally. Or it could even be as overt as after two minutes in the studio saying, "Let's make love." I mean, why not? If you get the vibrations that that conceivably is what she's thinking too.

[Interruption in tape]

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . [we are now] very much, I think, to the crux of the matter, or at least one, a part of it, and that is to sort out this rather sticky, this question of how the erotic can function in a positive way. Not that eroticism is negative, but you know what I mean. A kind of work situation. This is the unusual thing about it. It is work. This is your work.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Nice work if you can get it. And what you've been saying is that, acknowledging that sex is very much, the erotic is an important, actually, I guess, positive element within this kind of confrontation, the artist and model, and out of it something comes. Often a nice work of art. I was interested that you seem to feel that generally, perhaps not always, but in most cases these women, doing something probably they haven't done before, probably a little bit apprehensive, tend to, under the right circumstances that you've described, which is a non-threatening situation, pretty easily go over, or allow their own sexuality to emerge. And so this, would you say this then, for you, becomes back again a kind of energizing force as they explore themselves, display themselves, whatever form it may take? This ratchets up your own . . . ?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Oh, of course. Of course. I mean . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I mean it in strictly in a creative . . . I mean, in the creative sense, not just the more obvious.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Well, you see, I think we've come to the point which we all realize where, at least for the artist, work and play come together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: And with play, which I've always contended that the best thing you can do in this reality is have fun. Well, I give thanks every day that in my "work" I not only have fun but I can direct, if you will, or initiate or conceive of what my adventures will be for that day. What my, what fantasies I want to live out, or at least start. I have freedom. And freedom is not free. But you can truly use it in so many ways that hopefully will be beneficial to everyone that it touches. And I truly believe, I'm a natural teacher. I love to turn people on to new ideas, to new directions. And it's been my experience that many of my models, their lives have been changed when they walk into that studio.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said that earlier. And I'd like to, by way of sort of wrapping up here, we're getting close, to go back to that. It's very intriguing, your experience, your observation that these lives have been changed. Which in a sense is a pretty big claim, and I think in the way you mean it is. I mean, our lives, of course, can change for a lot of reasons. But this suggests to me that you're talking about either a kind of epiphany, a whole

new understanding. Would you go that far? Is that what you mean?

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Well, maybe I'm being too dramatic because as in the movie [The Gods Must be Crazy] a Coke bottle can change the whole tribe. [laughs] But truly I guess I believe that when you meet up with another human being that either is on your wave length or in many cases may have knowledge that you don't have, and is willing and able to share through communication . . . And, of course, the best is when it's mutual and you, the other person has knowledge that you don't have. This is why I contend you must use everybody and yet give as much. The only way you can, in fact, keep anything is to give it away. And so once you understand basics in life every encounter, I think, can have the potential of being very important to you, very dramatic, conceivably in your life, something you can't deny. It's something that is conceivably going to change your life. And I don't say in any ego way, truly, even though ego has to be when you're doing everything yourself, you have to create the problem as well as solve it. But what I'm saying is that I know I'm energized when I have been with those people like Jonas Salk or Brownowski have developed a finesse in everything they do. And it makes one want hopefully to not only be better and see the potential for oneself. So I do provide not only in the studio, but through lectures, through tours through the house, part of my role it seems as "an artist" is again to anyone that comes into my realm, and I feel no meeting is by accident, that it is so important. Or at least it has the possibility of importance. And, of course, it depends on the other person how far it might go.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I think that wraps it up pretty well. And I think that's good. It actually provides, I would say a particular insight into these images that we've been looking at. Which on the face of it seem pretty unconnected to, well, at least our own experience. And the way you talk about it they seem much more connected to me. So, great. Thanks a lot.

FRITZ SCHOLDER: Yeah, I think that was a good session.

[End of Interview]

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