

ArtSeen

### Emily Ludwig Shaffer & Françoise Grossen

By Madeleine Seidel



The first thing you notice at New York gallery L'INCONNUE's presentation of works by Emily Ludwig Shaffer and Françoise Grossen is the way the pieces speak to each other. Across a selection of paintings and textile sculptures, these two artists working in almost entirely disparate practices connect visually and thematically in ways that explore the corporeal and the feminine with a surreal, unnerving edge.

In L'INCONNUE's small Chinatown space, Shaffer and Grossen's works hang alongside one another though the two artists are separated by both time and medium. Shaffer is an up-and-coming painter while Grossen's career in textile art began in the 1960s. Through their shared interest in exploring human physicality and the gendered notions of craft, these two artists are in a fascinating intergenerational conversation that brings out the details in their subject matter and potential of different materials.

Shaffer's large works dominate the gallery with scenes of futuristic, minimal landscapes and women's bodies. These paintings—exclusively composed in muted, cool tones that highlight the clinical nature of the composition—feature architectural flourishes alongside creeping vines and human-like gray figures. Shaffer's figures that adorn the scenes are minimalistic; their sparse features are only outlined by thick, stylized shadows. They have no distinguishing markings or facial features except for their long hair, breasts, and pregnant bellies. These features are illuminated in *New Fence Finials* (2021), which depicts a wrought-iron fence in which the legs of the figures are woven into the structure. Other paintings

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eschew the figures and simply focus on architectural spaces and houseplants, such as *Care and Maintenance* (2021) in which pruning shears are placed on a table in front of an immaculately square-shaped topiary.

Grossen's two sculptures are not representational like Shaffer's paintings, but with their woven forms, they evoke a lived-in, sensual physicality. *Metamorphosis IV (6)* (1987–90) hangs from the ceiling, and its folds and tassels resulting from craft handiwork are an eerie approximation of the body in the same way that Shaffer's gray female figures are. Grossen's other piece on view, *Maquette for Private Home* (1980), is a more traditionally composed fiber work with braided tendrils of linen and cotton suspended from a dowel, but her incorporation of unraveling or unfinished plaits in the tapestry creates a similar sense of time and action as *Metamorphosis IV (6)*.

Grossen and Shaffer's pieces are different in scope and intention, but they are united through their shared focus on texture and craft as a means to explore the female body and how it operates in space. For Shaffer, paint and painting methods are used to highlight the sleek, anonymous curves of her subjects—a refusal of easy sensuality in favor of solitude and a decidedly feminine gaze. The careful gradients of black and white create stonelike breasts and heavy, stoic brows in the women, and while they have a sleek appearance at first, closer inspection reveals an intricate gradient of acrylic that creates a beautiful sense of light and depth in the controlled garden environments in which Shaffer places her subjects. One of the smaller paintings in *L'INCONNUE, Shaded Parts III* (2021), is an excellent example of the artist's talent at mimicking texture through light and color, as the gradient and shading give the figure an air of aloof inaccessibility despite her compromised pose. As in Shaffer's work, Grossen's sculptures use texture to explore the way human physicality operates. In *Metamorphosis VI (6)*, Grossen applies layers of thick paint and plaster to her fibers—a departure from the typical method of dyeing the fiber before weaving. Through this application of paint, she gives the weaving a sense of wear and shape that evokes a living organism instead of a textile piece.



In *L'INCONNUE*'s exhibition, Emily Ludwig Shaffer and Françoise Grossen demonstrate an understanding of the body and its discontents through space, medium, and surface texture. Their intertwined and intergenerational discourse on women, craft, and the act of creation comes to life through their immaculate use of materials, giving the term “body of work” an exciting and vital new meaning.