



Allison Schulnik, *Pink Shells*, 2012, oil on canvas and board, 16 x 20".

Allison Schulnik

MARK MOORE GALLERY

For such gendered mythological creatures, mermaids have a peculiarly sexless anatomy, at least below their scaled hips. So when Allison Schulnik paints a work like *Mermaid with Legs* (all works cited, 2012)—a large canvas depicting a seated nude spreading her legs to the viewer—she grants these half-women not only their sexuality but their personhood too. Similarly positioned, *Mermaid with Legs #2* features a figure surrounded by brushy, flowerlike patterns that radiate across the surface of the canvas. Included in her recent exhibition “Salty Air,” these pictures are typical of Schulnik’s candy-colored impastos of marginal, otherworldly characters. However, this body of work expanded the artist’s language to include a brash, quasi-feminist/polygendered visual vocabulary.

In this group of thirty-one works—a family of oil paintings, sculptures, and works in gouache on paper—Schulnik seemed to celebrate the mermaid’s shape-shifting femininity, giving her pride of place among a coterie of seafaring subjects: haggard captains, lone sailors, anthropomorphic crustaceans, fish heads. Throughout, Schulnik incorporated countless literal and symbolic representations of vaginas and a few phalluses, with some forms appearing to contain both at once. *Shell #2*, for example—one of four porcelain ceramic sculptures resting on pedestals in the center of the main gallery (two more had been installed in the back room)—resembles a larger-than-life cerith seashell, rising up like a vertical spire. However, its diamond-shaped aperture, which is encased by a muted, natural-hued exterior, reveals a womblike crimson glaze. This deep-red opening was echoed in seven masterful still lifes of seashell arrangements (some of the most compelling pieces in this show), replete with thickly painted conchs—works loaded with enough female energy to rival even the most suggestive entry by Judy Chicago or Georgia O’Keeffe.



But for all its corporeal allusion bordering on kitsch, “Salty Air” had another very pointed referent: Disney’s 1989 film *The Little Mermaid*, whose protagonists it name-checked (mermaid Ariel, Sebastian the lobster, and Flounder the fish) in the titles of various works. If Disney took liberties with the original Hans Christian Andersen tale, Schulnik went even further: Five paintings of Sebastian, for example, involved a version of the cartoon arthropod with oversize muscles and multiple abstract penises; in *Sebastian (Gouache) #4*, the creature has morphed into a yonic form. With apparently long-circulated rumors of Disney animators slipping erect phalluses into split-second frames of *The Little Mermaid*, this libidinal subtext became all the more clever. And perhaps it’s no coincidence that Schulnik studied experimental animation at California Institute of the Arts, the school famously underwritten by Walt Disney. Like Paul McCarthy and Wolfgang Stoerchle before her, Schulnik compellingly employed the characters of this fantasy media empire in the service of psychosexual artistic gestures.

In a different vein, Schulnik also included three large, dark canvases depicting hobolike mariners among her ring of mermaids by the sea. While typical of the artist’s more familiar recurring subjects, this character type and the way it was rendered here steers dangerously close to mere recapitulations of Sean Landers’s well-known portraits of lone sailor clowns. Indeed, the heroics of the sailor’s outsider status seem to fascinate both artists. But unlike Landers’s precise, flat grounds, Schulnik’s are differentiated by their loose, thickly applied paint. The sense of urgency that this facture relays and the dark, muddy world these works represent add great dimension to the younger artist’s ideation of her maritime wonderland—one that ranges, via a strange sort of violence, from the uncontained pleasure of her liberated mermaids to the heaviness and sorrow of her outcast men.

—Catherine Taft