

# DISAPPEARING CONVERSATIONS: AN ARTIST'S DIALECTIC

BY ANN BROCKETTE



VASNA WILSON, SAN FRANCISCO

Joan Schulze and I have been friends for many years and have shared wonderful conversations that often continue after time apart. Schulze has a distinctive speech pattern and tonal quality that suggest the soft crescendo of a Chopin polonaise. Her words are slightly elongated in a soft sibilance as if moving slowly into context, and her sentences end on a high tone that lingers in the air and embraces the conversation that is to come. This tonal quality, I believe, is carried over into Schulze's textile constructions.

ABOVE: *Opus*; 2017; packing tape, collage, paper, canvas; glued, stitched; 94 x 134 in.  
LEFT: Joan Schulze, 2017  
RIGHT: *The Writer's Room*; 2014; silk, paper; glue transfer, quilt; 40 x 50 in.; collection of Kay L. Melchor

All photos by Joan Schulze except portrait.

## A NEW HIEROGLYPHICS

Language is the focal point of Schulze's artwork. She incorporates graphic dialectics that act as a visual grammar. The words may be explicit, as in *The Writer's Room* (2014), announcing a theme or motif. The viewer is first drawn to the gallery of images that evoke a locale for creation and the misgivings of the writing process itself. The split image of introspection and frustration depicted in lines one and two relate to the text on the right. This language identifies the theme of the work and the values that drive the writer in her craft.

The dialectic may also undulate in phonograms across the work, a language of compelling hieroglyphics suggesting syllabic and grammatical content. In *Eleven* (2015), Schulze introduces the graphic parsing of language in a cursive style that evokes a visual conversation with the viewer. The content of the conversation is secondary to its movement and its promise of ongoing dialogue. The textual detailing is more dramatic in *Page. Line. Verse* (2016). Here, the viewer is compelled to translate the language of the verse, to define its elusive content, and to relate the text to the images that enhance—and obscure—its message. Image and text are complete in themselves, but their correlation is a matter of discovery and the beginning of a new conversation.

## PASSING THE GIFT FORWARD

In 2016, Schulze was invited to exhibit and lecture at the Shenzhen University Art Museum in China. Wu Fan, director of the museum, gifted her with a bowl from the Tang dynasty, a gift that "sent her to a new idea or feeling." When the gift arrived, Schulze photographed the unwrapping process, removing layers of newspaper and unveiling the bowl itself. This process resulted in the *Bowl Series* (2016–2017), five four-by-five-foot, black-and-white drawings on silk.

*A Long Time Ago* creates a grid that combines images of the protective packaging with negative and positive images of the bowl rotated and turned to reveal its fluid imagery and texture. The conversation, erupting from far and near, has begun. *Not So Long Ago* presents the same bowl on a larger scale in a series of pairs and triplets that suggest the receiver's loving examination of the gift and its beauty. This message is enhanced with graphic details in the background and a band of linked images in the bottom foreground. The viewer is invited to "engage in ideas that are not static but continually stretch, move, and grow into the future." In *The Unknowable Future*, the bowls morph into a sequenced set arranged on a horizontal grid, as on a shelf,



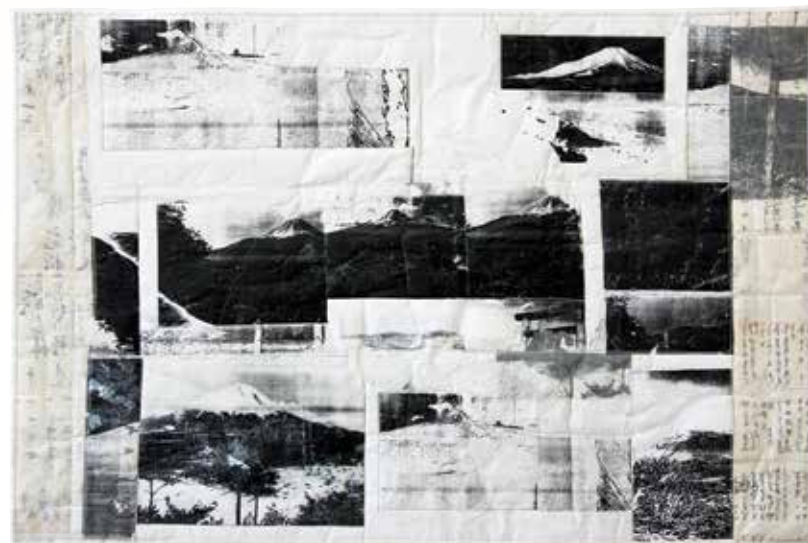
## THE IMAGINARY LIFE OF A BOWL

by Joan Schulze

once upon a time, a long time ago  
a smoky haze  
surrounded the bowl  
nested in the kiln to be  
hardened by time and heat  
transforming the clay  
into a sturdy object  
made to last through time

once upon a time, not so long ago  
this bowl, this precious object  
cared for, used, and admired  
passed from one to another  
then given as a gift  
to one who received it  
with delight and surprise

once upon the unknowable future  
imagine stories  
anecdotes  
casually acquired  
chapters to be  
held in this bowl  
composed in the round  
while the gift still delights  
and transforms me



that evokes a language of its own and encourages the viewer to “participate in the gift society.” The cursive across the top and bottom of the work binds the recurring image of the gift with the textual invitation to become part of the conversation. The work *13 Bowls* continues the dialogue in a flow of bowls cascading from the shelf and in diminishing verbal content. The written text follows the movement of the imagery and moves off the workspace. It leads to *Disappearing Bowl*, a single bowl that is enlarged, transparent, and surrounded by white, as though “disappearing, like the moon. The gift moves into the galaxy, onto something else, and invites us to follow.”

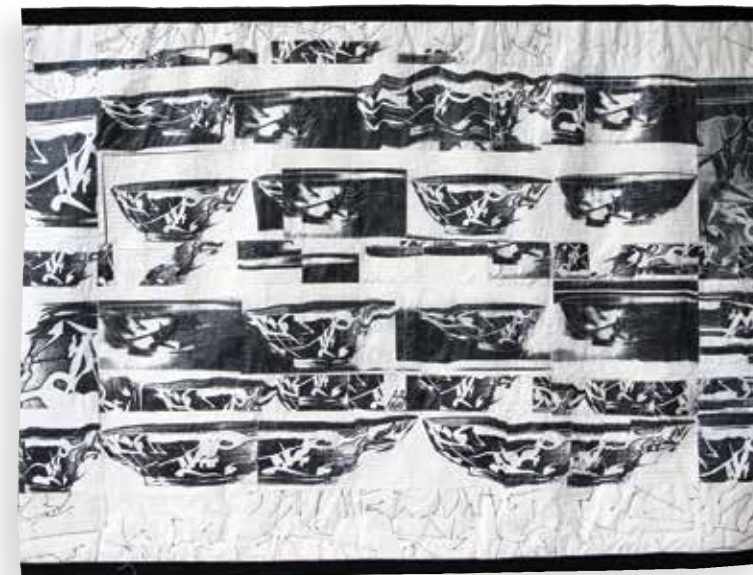
As an artist, Schulze must participate in the gift society: doing the work that she wants to do, authentic work that is her gift to the world. “For me,” she says, “the important thing about making art is that I want my gift to be the best that I know and the best that I do—that no one else can do.”

### COLLAGE THINKING: LITTLE PICTURES IN LINEAR PATTERNS

Schulze’s work is the result of her mother’s gift of Sears Roebuck catalogs that she began reading and using when she was four. She created a “ragbag” of clipped images, candy and bubble gum wrappers, and cartoons. By the eighth grade, she was making her own outfits for school. She replenished the ragbag and drew from it for each new project. Thus began a lifelong process of “cutting out, tearing out, folding, and making things.”

In the 1960s when she moved to Dallas, Schulze continued to clip images from catalogs, newspapers, and magazines. The intricate piecing of collage emphasized the linear quality of patchwork. And, in the ’70s when Constance Howard encouraged her to “Do more, Joan. Do more!” she adapted new sewing techniques to create “little pictures.” She embraced new quilting forms and techniques—photography, photocopy processes, Xerox transfers, and the newest digital technologies—but the work lacked a subtle tonal quality she was trying to achieve. She photocopied images drawn from multiple sources and applied gluing techniques to transfer the images to transparent fabrics.

The non-conventional images Schulze creates juxtapose, overlap, dissect, and repeat the visual content of the work and demand the attention and collaboration of the viewer to discern and engage in its message. In *Wind at My Back: Mt. Fuji Series* (2015), images are drawn from magazines, travel brochures, and personal photos that she has photocopied and glue-transferred to silk organza. The randomness of the piecing, the



inconsistent quality of the images, and the repeated brushwork of the background act as a counterpoint to the Chinese lettering that forms a border.

### DISTINGUISHED WOMAN ARTIST OF 2017

Each year, The Council of 100 at the Fresno Art Museum presents the Distinguished Woman Artist Award to an artist who has spent 30 or more years in the studio and has created a unique and prestigious body of work ([www.fresnoartmuseum.org](http://www.fresnoartmuseum.org)). Past awardees include Helen Lundeberg, Inez Johnston, Angie Bray, Junko Chodos, and Hung Liu. This year The Council chose Schulze as the recipient, an honor which includes an exhibition and catalog of her work and a series of lectures that she will present throughout the year.

As a key work for the exhibit, Schulze has chosen *Opus* (2017), a monumental collage (94 by 134 inches) that expands her signature techniques and themes. She creates long strips using packing tape and found images from contemporary magazines. These are torn, cut, ripped, and pulled into strips that are sgraffitoed into entirely new images. The strips are sewn onto silk organza, layered on canvas, and sewn together as a montage of images that engages the viewers in a “people’s meeting.”

“Every day,” Schulze says, “we look at 35,000 images. I wanted to create the biggest notebook in the world... which combines new techniques and is opened for all people—the privileged who view art all the time and the non-privileged who view art occasionally.”

*Opus* is immediately engaging. The viewer must stop, look, examine, reflect, and respond. It is a fully participatory work that bridges the divide between the viewer and the viewed, the expert and the initiate, silence and speech. It is the opus of a new dialogue that leads into the future and entices us all to follow.



OPPOSITE PAGE  
TOP RIGHT: *Wind at My Back* (Mt. Fuji series); 2015; paper, silk; quilt; printed, stitched; 22 x 32 in.  
BOTTOM LEFT: *13 Bowls*; 2017; direct print on silk; quilt; 47 x 33 in.

THIS PAGE  
LEFT: *The Unknowable Future* (series of quilts 3 of 3); 2017; direct prints on cotton; quilt; 48 x 65 in.  
BELOW: *Page. Line. Verse*; 2016; silk, paper; glue transfer, quilt; 43 x 82 in.

*Ann Brockett*, President of The Ward Center for Professional Development and Professor of Humanities at Northwood University (Cedar Hill, Texas) writes for *Studio Art Quilt Associates (SAQA)* and *Surface Design Journal*. She can be reached at [abrockette@sbcglobal.net](mailto:abrockette@sbcglobal.net).