

# I FELT THAT

CURATED BY JOSEPHINE BAILEY

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## An interview with Shir Cohen



**Q: Please can you introduce yourself and your practice as an artist, for the sake of those who are unfamiliar!**

A: My name is Shir Cohen, I'm originally from Jerusalem but moved to London in 2018. I finished to RCA MA Painting course in 2020. I work in many mediums, but have been focusing recently on painting and textiles. I have been researching bigotry from historical sources and how they manifest today, especially relating to scientific bigotry and how it still influences our lives.

**Q: Why did you want to be a part of this project? What aspect drew you in, in particular?**

A: I remember seeing the open call, and being very into meme culture, and partly how physicality affects it, the name itself drew me in. I decided to apply because of my interest in bigotry in science, and medicine played a very big role in it. Chronic pain is a disability that often requires close contact with the medical establishment, and gender can really complicate it. It was something I was hoping to explore more with others, since I only have my own narrow experience to speak of.

**Q: Your work deals heavily with both mental and physical pain, specifically in relation to “othered people”. How do you feel that this can be applied to the gender pain gap?**

A: Judith Butler notes that gender performance is a copy without origin — the perfect gendered individual does not exist, but many of us are attempting to reach a point in the spectrum between the feminine and masculine ideals. The masculine ideal has been held as the standard throughout most of medical history and still is today in many ways. So anyone whose body physically differs from it is othered, and the more different they are, the bigger the impact is on their dealings with the scientific and medical establishment. This is further compounded by other oppressions, and so this group of people - which is most of the world - received poorer care is much more prone to be left in pain.

**Q: I love the use of transparent material juxtaposed to your soft sculpture. The latter in particular really speaks to me, in the way it crumples and folds in a very human way. Can you speak about the creation of these works? What do they reflect for you, as things that you created alongside the meetings?**

A: I think the idea came from a mention of staining in Hellen Frankenthaler's work. It was early on, and we discussed how critics compared this practice to period blood, and how this was yet another way to read a woman artist through a male lens (since Pollock's work was compared to insemination, and Warhol's to urine). It was also partly practical — I use discount fabric, and ended up with plenty of sheer cuts that would have worked better stacked on top of each other, and could bleed into each other.

The soft sculpture was also due to a random fabric delivery— I received an ombré green, and have made a few frog-people in my work. It started as a reference to Pepe the frog, but animals in general appear in my work to discuss the appeal to nature often given by bigots

("hierarchies also exist in the wild"). Frogs in particular are interesting in culture- there is a Jordan Peterson video, I think his only good one, where he discusses frogs as liminal creatures, as amphibians, and as animals who facilitate the worlds of land and water. Going back to soft sculpture, he gives the example of Kermit the frog as the host of The Muppets, who facilitates between the show and the audience, and between puppets and humans.

My own frog is liminal — it has two sets of genitalia, and it has been shot and skinned, possibly for this crime. The title refers to it as merciful, which is the common narrative among transphobes, as any liminal figure in relation to sex and gender complicates their world too much.

**Q: Has there been a particular bit of research or exhibition that you felt was impactful that you'd like to share?**

A: Olivia Sterling in Guts Gallery has an interesting perspective on this subject. The show was called Manslaughter and dealt with a sense of violence towards white men, and involved eating a human-sized white man cake. I think this role reversal is important and interesting, and I share the revenge fantasy, but it can also let us think about the gendered pain of the other side. Sterling is very powerful in using the realm of comedy to sublimate these issues, and maybe getting out the revenge in painting can help us be more empathetic in real life.

**Q: How have you found working collaboratively? Have you felt listened to? Would there be anything you'd change?**

A: I have my own extremely specific experience in life, and I am very aware that it can sometimes be insular. It was amazing to hear from women who have given birth, which is an experience I didn't have, and hear them specifically discuss it in the context of making art. I think it was incredibly important to have this range of views.

**Q: How do you think your practice (if at all) will change after this project. Do you feel the gender pain gap will feature again?**

A: I think gender plays a huge role in my work as it is, as does the scientific and medical establishment. The gap part — this is probably where I will have to explore more and figure out my own understanding of it, as something of a liminal figure myself.



*Shir Cohen, Mercifully shot and skinned, 2022*

*Acrylic on polyester, 145x90cm*