

Jeanne Aurel-Schneider: Document, Transfiguration, and the Carnality of Everyday Life

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The flesh of painting becomes a living document; the visceral ignites into fierce spiritual love; and daily life is transmuted into textile and social fiber—is this not the very essence of radical complexity? Jeanne Aurel-Schneider (1930–2013) was born in San Francisco and raised within a community of French immigrants. Her grandmother, originally from southwestern France, played a pivotal role in shaping both her artistic development and feminist outlook. Proudly, the artist recalls that in 1899, when many women did not even imagine a professional life, her grandmother, at just 21 years old, declared "seamstress" as her occupation on her marriage certificate. Reflecting on this inheritance, Jeanne observes:

"I still have my grandmother's White treadle sewing machine, which she bought when she arrived as an immigrant here in San Francisco in 1909. She made underwear from flour sacks for the immigrant children she cared for during the workweek. I have two examples of drawings I made using the kitchen towels that hung on my easel during the 1970s. So, from my beginnings, the fabric was a fundamental aspect."¹

This early influence not only instilled in her an intimate knowledge of textiles but also anchored her political stance: sewing, home life, and garments became carriers of identity, heritage, and the social complexities of domestic labor. These formative years resonate throughout her oeuvre, shaping her work with a profound understanding of the intersection between the private and public realms. Through her statements, letters, and notes, it becomes evident that her personal and professional lives were deeply intertwined with her artistic, political, and feminist pursuits. When the youngest of four children reached kindergarten age, she resumed her art studies at age 35 at San José State University. In the early 1970s, she actively participated in the feminist movement and joined student protests. In 1976, Jeanne founded the San José Museum School of Art, creating an accessible educational space grounded in humanism and community.

¹ Aurel-Schneider, J. A. (2006). *Letter to Deborah Corsini, curator at San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles*. Aurel-Schneider family archive.

Aurel-Schneider's political and philosophical positioning rooted in feminism demonstrates how the quotidian is entwined with existential and macro-social dimensions. She reclaimed domestic labor, the female body, and private time as artistic media, challenging the hierarchy between "art" and "craft" and the divide between manual and intellectual work. A defining characteristic of her poetic approach is the use of textiles as a form of political language, intimate yet radical, never falling into the realm of propaganda. Her work proposes art as a document, as a way of life, as a relic. For her, there is no artwork without lived experience. Thus, her work becomes an act of resistance, integrating the everyday to counter fragmentation. In 1985, she explicitly asked: "Where is the separation between art and life?"²

Art as Document, Archive, and Resistance

The artist's feminist proposal frames art not merely as image-making but as an intervention in historical memory. Her work reclaims women's place in visual culture, transforming art into a document not only as an aesthetic record but as a source of historical, political, and social knowledge. Subjectivities, memories, and experiences omitted by official discourses, historical, legal, or academic, emerge in her work as evidence of marginalized cultural and affective practices. This approach challenges traditional notions of a "valid" document, which demand objectivity, textual evidence, and official status. Feminist critique has highlighted how history has been written from a patriarchal perspective and that art, especially art by women, becomes an alternative archive and testimony.

Aurel-Schneider's artistic career spanned nearly six decades, yet, like many women artists who began in the 1970s, her work was marginalized by a dominant canon that favored male figures and movements such as minimalism, abstract expressionism, or seemingly neutral conceptualism. Despite this, her work strongly aligns with the feminist movements of her era, articulating a view of art through the body as a space where trauma, maternity, desire, violence, and resistance inscribe. Parallels can be drawn with artists such as Ana Mendieta, Mary Kelly, Tracey Emin, or Faith Ringgold, all of whom shared a practice that turned lived experience into an emotional, intimate, political archive.

Her production also engages with the affective turn in art, situating personal memory and emotions at the heart of political potency. In connection with similarly marginalized trajectories, Aurel-Schneider's work constitutes a persistent form of affective resistance, sustained even into the final years of her life. Body

² Aurel-Schneider, J. A. (1985). *Artistic statement*. Aurel-Schneider family archive.

and Art in Three Intersections: Garment–Body, Skin–Fabric, Archaeology–Everyday Life over the breadth of her life and career, four interconnected phases emerge, each defined by pivotal personal events. These transformations profoundly influenced her materials and their symbolic resonance.

The Garment as Interior Portrait (1976 onward)

In 1976, garments began to appear as a powerful visual language, serving as interior portraits and psychic vessels. Her work from this period is deeply introspective, expressing the presence of the body through its absence via memory-laden textile objects. That year, Dorothy Burkhart noted that *"the fabrics are frequently manipulated through knotting, twisting, and shredding, rather than merely being draped. Furthermore, Aurel-Schneider's work has progressed from an emphasis on the external forms of the blankets to a focus on their internal spaces, indicating a reflective exploration of her psychological experience"*³.

Her key Series of Blankets, rendered in watercolor and graphite, employs symbolic textiles such as wedding dresses and nightgowns. Using mixed media textile, watercolor, graphite, and molded paper, her drawings from 1976 to 1982 balance ethereality and carnality: the fabrics appear to float and dance yet still exert a sense of corporeal weight.

Through titles like *"The Dialogue"* (1976) and *"The Feather Blanket II,"* where feathers seem to drift in a gentle, enveloping motion, viewers are invited into a sensitive and complex mental reflection. To achieve volume, texture, and a "velvety richness," Aurel-Schneider layered graphite akin to watercolor, working on soft engraving paper she likened to skin for its warmth and tactile response. At this stage, the intersections of body-garment, skin–fabric, and archaeology–everyday life remained framed within the two-dimensional limits of paper, upheld by the smoothness of graphite and the transparency of watercolor.

Technical and Symbolic Consolidation

During this phase, Aurel-Schneider expanded her technical vocabulary and symbolic range, introducing acrylic paint on sculpted canvases, vacuum-formed molded paper, painting on silk, and repurposing

³ Burkhart, D. (1976, February 7). Aurel-Schneider's Self Explorations. *ArtWeek*. Aurel-Schneider family archive.

garments as sculptural elements. It became clear that the divide between art and life was artificial; art functioned not only as testimony but also as a refuge and a method of resistance.

Between 1986 and 1988, Aurel-Schneider created a series in which clothing became both support and protagonist. A particularly emblematic work from this period is *The Painter's Dance I, II, & III* (1987), a triptych that combines acrylic, oil, bronze cream, and garment collages on canvas. In this graceful, joyous piece, the artist's body appears as an allegorical dancer moving across the pictorial plane, offering introspective depth while also reaching out and enveloping the viewer in a sensory, affective exchange.

Trauma, Body, and Resilience

In this mature conceptual phase, Aurel-Schneider explored the intersection of feminism with the social, spiritual, and material, imbuing her practice with tremendous potency. She precisely connected her personal life with her artistic practice, using materials, the body, garments, and painting as documents. Her son Fred's accident in 1998, followed by her cancer diagnosis in 2010, ushered in a period of grief, creative paralysis, and eventual rebirth. The physical and emotional fragility of this time manifested in her choice of materials: unstretched Belgian linen, translucent paper, mulberry fiber, and natural pigments. Within this context, she articulated a key concept: "material resilience as spiritual resilience."

The artist emphasized that clothing accrues the essence of its wearer, harboring an archaeological dimension that renders garments vestigial. She often coated garments with gesso, integrating them into her paintings to form sculptural friezes or potent, three-dimensional pictorial objects evocative of cathedral imagery, intended to move and stir spiritual contemplation.

Notable works in her *Blanket* series include *The Bride: Innocence*, *The Mother-Child: Pregnability*, *The Afterbirth: Forsaken*, and *The Resurrected: Rebirth*. In these, Aurel-Schneider repurposed personal textiles such as her personally handmade prom dress as symbolic and visual foundations. The forms transition from exterior to interior, speaking to a profoundly introspective pursuit that, while psychologically resonant, remains fundamentally spiritual.

The Transfigured Body: Spirituality and Art as Passage

Aurel-Schneider's engagement with religious imagery is not merely metaphorical but direct. In *La Madona* (1986), she presents a resplendent image imbued with materiality. A suggestion of a cloth veil is manipulated, emerging as almost flesh-like. From the neck, what appears to be a face surfaces, though it is, in fact, part of the garment. Aurel-Schneider transformed the fabric into an object perpetually transfiguring caught at a moment of divine revelation and anticipating resurrection.

According to the Gospels, during the Transfiguration, Jesus's face shone like the sun, and his garments gleamed like light. In this key work, Aurel-Schneider effects a genuine transfiguration. It is pivotal in her career, not only due to its formal majesty, but also because it synthesizes many of her lifelong concerns and positions. A consistent theme emerges: the relationship between manual labor and spirituality. In her artistic cosmos, art becomes a vehicle that bridges the physical and the symbolic, life, death, and rebirth.

Her spirituality is humanistic rather than dogmatic, incorporating biblical references from Ecclesiastes to Corinthians from a symbolic and ethical lens. The search for existential meaning propels her creative process. A profound spiritual axis in her work is drawn from 1 Corinthians 13, particularly the verse "Now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face." Aurel-Schneider adopts this directly, rewriting it as "through a mirror, darkly."⁴ For her, the phrase is not a mere metaphor but an active principle guiding her artistic journey: the visible, the body, the material, the artwork is only an incomplete reflection of something more profound and illuminating.

"Fred's essence is his spirit, his mind, his personality, not his spine,"⁵ she writes. Her son's physical fragility following the accident reshaped her understanding of the body, inspiring works that lack traditional stretchers those "spinal support" sustained solely by their flesh and light.

Living Flesh, Living Art

⁴ Aurel-Schneider, J. A. (2012). *Artist's statement*. Aurel-Schneider family archive.

⁵ Aurel-Schneider, 2012

Central to Aurel-Schneider's work is her use of fabric as personal archaeological memory. She reutilizes textiles intimately tied to daily life: her prom dress, a nightgown, and a kitchen towel. Each fragment becomes an emotional fossil, an archaeological surface of stratified layers, every fold, every mark of time laden with domestic, emotional, and biographical experience. By abandoning stretchers, the artist declared: *"This work does not need a 'frame' to be art. This fabric can hang like a garment or lie like a blanket on the floor of a house."*⁶

In this gesture, the garment serves as a symbolic object, containing memories, an absent body, and invisible labor. Her techniques are performative, not merely representational: through them, she transforms matter and meaning from a clear political and philosophical stance. She paints on silk, embeds clothing in canvases, and molds paper with textiles. These fragile supports, lopsided linen, recycled cloth, and delicate paper convey as much as the imagery. Imperfections fraying, tearing, folding betray the passage of time, experience, and memory.

Her oeuvre is organized into thematic series, blankets, garments, nests, mirrors, wounds, and roots, each revealing emotional and philosophical evolution. This trajectory from the intimate toward the collective embodies a poetics of transformed sorrow. Her son's experience does not remain within his own body; it passes through hers, profoundly affecting her physically, emotionally, and symbolically. That transfer materializes in work that transcends representation — it becomes the body.

A body without skeletal structure or stretcher, offered as living flesh: supple, vulnerable, weighted by its substance. Unstretched linen becomes skin; layers of fabric, paper, plaster, and domestic items form a voluptuous, organic surface. The work is embodied: a shared, torn, reconstructed body where the biographical and material merge.

Portable Art, Material Spirituality, and Transitory Bodies

Aurel-Schneider's place within the Californian Portable Art movement further complexifies her practice. Her choice of soft supports arises from a logic of displacement and everydayness: art that folds, is stored, and carried like a sheet or garment. Unstretched linen deliberately subverts the hierarchies between art

⁶ Aurel-Schneider, 2012

and domestic life, affirming the dignity of everyday materials, such as clothing, cooking, and care, within the art field. Her feminism emerges in a convergence of elements that, from a traditional standpoint, might seem contradictory. Although permeated by religious references, her work does not allude to institutional religion; rather, it embodies a broad, material, and affective spirituality. Visible motifs such as crosses in works like *Windows* or *La Madona* reveal a connection between the profoundly human and the boundless meaning of existence.

For Aurel-Schneider, everyday objects and handmade items, garments, utensils, and decor are not trivial. They are ways of conceptualizing spirituality through the material. These objects become near-sacred elements. Body, sacrifice, carnality, and reality persist permanently in her work. Unstretched Belgian linen with its folds, textures, and wrinkles functions as living skin: a body without a skeleton, yet filled with memory, desire, and transformation.

Jeanne Aurel-Schneider's work weaves a complex fabric of concepts, materialities, and political stances. In her art, notions such as document, transfiguration, and the carnality of everyday life are not merely articulated, they are embodied. Her work reveals bodies: not closed or definitive bodies but ones open to mystery, transition, and the possibility of transformation. Faith as an amorous expectation rather than dogma allows her to imagine the physical body, marked by history, wear, and vulnerability, not as a boundary but as a veil that can become transparent.

Thus, her dense and supple works become thresholds of a longed-for transformation: that body-art, that child-body that woman-body may finally shine forth becoming a face illuminated and embodying, with profound humanity, the spiritual promise of "seeing face to face."

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