

An Index of Shadows: Sarah Ortmeyer
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In 79 AD, before being engulfed in volcanic ash, the ancient Roman author Pliny recounted in his *Naturalis Historia* that the role of the shadow in art history was to have “invented” painting. It was first discovered by a Corinthian girl who drew her lover’s shadow on the wall, by the light of a lamp, to preserve his image before he went into battle.

Not all shadows are acts of love. But by nature the shadow is sensual—it traces the outlines of objects and bodies whose forms impart silhouettes onto a given surface when a light source is interrupted. Identity and sex become irrelevant. Within shadows, the light does not go away, but merely exists upon another plane. It touches something else, between the source of the projection and a screen. This distinction is particularly palpable in the work of German artist Sarah Ortmeyer, whose exhibition *INFERNO CHICAGO* (2019)¹ enacts the patterns of shadows latent within forms of image-based language. Ortmeyer has explored the relationship between light and darkness throughout her oeuvre, mainly through representations of chess, the surface area of the board being equally split between these polarities. In a selection of paintings from her recent *GRANDMASTER* series (2012–ongoing), shown at Kunstverein Munich in 2018, images of skies of different hues (bright blue, humid beige, sunset pink) are obscured by a grid of black paint—either massive or miniature boards that skew the works’ relationship to the viewer’s body. The minimalistic turn within these works signals a departure from the artist’s previous use of a tangible archive of chess-related images, which first appeared in her exhibition *KISH KUSH* at Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv, in 2014. That show featured a collection of photographs of female world chess champions posed like vintage pinups amid clusters of oversize marble chess pieces scattered about the gallery. The exhibition carried the disorientation of a strategic game undone—wild and disobedient yet calculated and controlled. This punk sensibility infiltrates the majority of Ortmeyer’s work, which spans photography, sculpture, and painting, through an unraveling of the intellectual toward something more real, more chaotic, more human. The recent evolution in the *GRANDMASTER* series—composed upon large slabs of pristinely welded metal painted recto and verso—is complemented in the context of *INFERNO CHICAGO* by the addition of sculptures with titles such as *ROI* (King) or *PION* (Pawn), fashioned from real ostrich eggs that were wounded or deformed in the laying process, thereby combining the intensely fragile and the hard-core. The experience of Ortmeyer’s recent exhibitions is like witnessing a chess match just before it reaches a stalemate. The shadow is the invisible opponent. Hung alongside the *GRANDMASTER* works, the artist’s recent *EMOJI SHADOW* series (2019) includes monochromatic representations of symbols that capture the essence of particular characters in the Emojicon codex—for instance hearts (*COR*), spiders (*ARANEA*), rainbows (*ARCUS*), devils (*DIABOLUS*), and palm trees (*PALMA*). In these works, the silhouettes of each signifier are painted in a single tone of black pigment on either a paper or a metal surface. The paper, often silver, but sometimes

an eggshell hue or black, appears weightless in comparison to mounted metal works of the same scale—powder-coated aluminum surfaces in matching silver, ivory, and black backgrounds—which hang against the wall in shallow profile like suspended sheets of a manuscript. While the works are serial in nature, each image is distinct. The expressive lines of exotic trees appear to either burst like a firework or droop like broken fronds after a storm; the apparition of an eight-legged creature appears almost weighted and swollen, or otherwise buoyantly dancing in a gust of wind upon a web; the arch of a rainbow appears as a series of unbroken lines, a representation that could have only been achieved by the artist’s hand stretching the length of her body from one limit to the other along a particular axis. Ortmeyer’s reductive yet anthropomorphic style transforms familiar forms of conversation into a vehicle for idiosyncratic language. The titling of the *INFERNO* works alludes to the artist’s current source—Dante’s epic poem—yet Ortmeyer’s use of language also points to something more permanent, more universal. Latin is the root of all Romance languages. Which could also be rephrased: Latin is a shadow upon these languages. Indeed, like words, shadows make no distinctions with respect to the material essence of objects. In this way, they are entirely democratic. That a shadow is cast is the only rule. It can absorb any landscape, object, or being as a backdrop to its stage. An anti-opera. In this sense, the etymology of Ortmeyer’s images becomes increasingly important. The shadow is a love letter. Unlike in Italian, the German word for “hell” (*Hölle*) does not relate to fire. Rather, it evokes a secreted or concealed space, a netherworld. Without light, there is no shadow. Within the context of *INFERNO*, Ortmeyer’s work positions an essential desire that exists at the heart of the origin of painting: for love, for an oasis, for a paradise.

1 At Chicago Manual Style, an art space I run in Chicago.

149 Sarah Ortmeyer, *DIABOLUS*, 2019. © Sarah Ortmeyer. Courtesy: Chicago Manual Style, Chicago and Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv / Brussels. Photo: Robert Chase Heishman
150 Sarah Ortmeyer, *KISH KUSH* installation view at Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2014. © Sarah Ortmeyer. Courtesy: Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv / Brussels. Photo: Elad Sarig
151 Sarah Ortmeyer, *The St. Petersburg Paradox* installation view at Swiss Institute, New York, 2014. © Sarah Ortmeyer. Courtesy: Swiss Institute, New York and Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv / Brussels. Photo: Daniel Perez



