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In "Stand by Earth Man," 31-year-old New York painter Dana Schutz's fifth solo show in five years -- her third at Zach Feuer Gallery -- the precocious Columbia grad confirms her position as junior partner in the only firm of American painting that seems to have anything at stake at the moment: Currin, Yuskavage & Schutz.

This trio has gained its grip on the art-public imagination by embracing unequivocally what has made most of us uneasy -- our sense that this is an age of "baroque pluralism," or "laissez faire esthetics," as *New Republic* critic Jed Perl crankily opined last February, a response to John Currin's last show at Gagosian Gallery. Perl is ruffled by the way that Currin's conflates "Cranach the Elder with a raunchy comic in the *Mad* magazine tradition," and how Yuskavage weds "Disney cartoons and Giovanni Bellini's altarpieces." These painters declare that there is no controversy in their leveling of influences, and in so doing make themselves controversial.
Anything goes in image-making, and it is her own confidence in the power of pastiche that gives Schutz her freedom at the canvas. Now freedom is a mixed blessing, and while it's evident that a blank surface has never been an obstacle to this prolific artist, not every work in the current effort exemplifies the success of her endeavor. The outsized centerpiece, *How We Cured the Plague* (2007), puts both the possibilities and the perils of her strategy on display.
The work takes the "Schutz style" -- macabre figures of primitivist, humorous proportions, with pathetic, endearing features and mostly sweet expressions, all done in a cartoonish palette -- and pushes it wholeheartedly into Thomas Eakins territory, an artist for whom Schutz has expressed admiration more than once. *We Cured the Plague* depicts a large, old-fashioned and unsanitary medical ward, suffused with natural tones from the sun-filled, atrium-style window at the rear, and filled in the background with sickly-green bodies, lying on the floor or in beds, somewhere between life and death. The scene distills Eakins' sense of the grandeur and the horror of the medical sciences as represented in his 1875 *The Gross Clinic*, a prize effect Schutz has snatched away from the classic artist's vaunted realism and made her own.
In the foreground, a man stands on a pedestal in cruciform while medical professionals in masks plug tubes into his arteries. These blood red channels connect to a large flaccid shark, gasping on the ground, its placement and form lifted directly out of Copley's 1778 masterpiece *Watson and the Shark*. Here, the historical loan Schutz has taken seems showier and less pertinent. The painter's desire to pad the work with sly eccentricity is a little stomach-turning in its cuteness; the painting's magic is endangered by self-consciousness; the purity of the Eakins chord Schutz strikes is disturbed, and the image begins to flatten out and recede from us. We become critically distant while Schutz herself, as composer, becomes too present; too much of her thinking now obscures the painting, the vastness of which has ceased to envelop, ceased to impress.
The other, smaller, less ambitious paintings in the show, which start at $30,000, generally maintain the artist's charm, which is real, and in some cases they give vent to purely formal experiments, on the whole with more even success. *How We Would Dance* (2007) revisits a motif Schutz has privileged before, the cavorting band of bodies. Here she evokes a sock-footed, hootin' good time in a small, low-lit, shag-carpeted apartment with the same clarity of physical and psychological atmosphere that she conjured up for *Plague* through Eakins. The work is made curious by the brilliantly up-front and simple technical maneuver of masking out random strips of the image with tape, which, now removed, throw beams of reddish-white ground across the picture like kooky light rays.
Schutz is now a prepotent mega-painter, and the shadow she casts over Chelsea is long, but concurrent exhibitions of other talents remind us that painting now is having something of a 21st-century heyday. Across the street from Schutz' show, New York painter Josh Smith has mounted an ambitious solo effort at Luhring Augustine, following in the footsteps of his friend and former employer Christopher Wool, who is also with the gallery, and whose pioneering painterly idiom opened the door to Smith's work.
Unfortunately, Smith's show is overhung, and it looks like the artist is coming out undercooked; the crisp kick in the ass of his messy, desublimated work seems watered down, soupy and a little rarified. Nevertheless, the exhibition itself is significant. Although Smith works in a mode quite literally all his own -- his paintings are based on the writing of his name -- his inclusion in this prestigious gallery's roster can be seen as a sign of the arrival in full of the youngest generation of conceptually rigorous painters, a cadre which includes names like Cheney Thompson, Blake Rayne and Mathew Cerletty.
European artists, naturally, have their own set of concerns, and different paradigms to contend with, so while it's tempting to see a bit of "Schutziness" in the work of a couple of seasoned figurative painters from the continent on view close by, these superficial coincidences need to be extracted and recognized as such. At Marianne Boesky Gallery, in 44-year-old Dutch painter Hannah Van Bart's second U.S. solo show, we are greeted at the door by a large painting of a waving man, titled *Best Wishes* (2005). The idiom is again cartoon, but here the anachronistic, sepia-toned hobo esthetic puts one into a nostalgic, newsprint frame of mind completely absent from the American painters we've been talking about. More present are some of the masters of European Neo-Expressionism, like Georg Baselitz and Jörg Immendorff.
In its subject's friendly gaze, and in his misanthropic, mal-gendered figure, *Best Wishes* is the perfect introduction for the 15 or so paintings, priced from $18,000 to $20,000, that comprise Van Bart's exhibition, wherein touchstone gestures, themes and icons are reiterated without becoming redundant. Many of the works are straightforward portraits, in which

figural dysfunction is poised against the artist's battle with paint (acrylic, in this case). Mistakes and switchback compositional decisions account for as many of the subjects' deformities as do intentional distortions, an effect which is likely to win one over: Van Bart shows us she is not posturing, and so her paintings are more convincing.

The strongest works here also partake in ambivalent allegory. *The Trap* (2006) shows a rabbit-headed, busty female in a short black dress, standing in a half split and pointing indeterminately at what appear to be her own black droppings between her legs. Behind the figure, a brick wall is partly articulated, complimenting her somewhat vulnerable pose to assure the viewer that it is the subject of the work who is trapped here. Not so fast; echoing the lines of the wall is the fetching stroke of eloquent cleavage, and this concerts with the vague command articulated in the gesture of the hand, which might be pointing crotchward, suggesting an entirely different take on the meaning of "trap." The sum of conclusions to be had strikes this male viewer as eminently ripe.

Two blocks over, at Greene Naftali's light-filled eighth-floor space on West 26th Street, the 39-year-old Berlin-based painter Katharina Wulff's small, uncanny quasi-portraits look first and foremost like a kind of revivalist *Neusachlichkeit*. The work also resurrects an untrained, Eastern European folk esthetic. The human subjects of these elegantly deliberate renderings, mostly depicted in arboreal, autumnal settings, are themselves stiff, wooden and unnaturally colored, yet they manage to remain paintings of people, not of statues, and we identify in them a nuanced, organic, Teutonic pathos, sympathetic despite its chill. And in a surrealist touch, the finely rendered detail of a sweater or an elegant hairdo is in many cases belied by missing or defiled facial features. The results put the viewer into a number of dialectics, between comfort and alienation, identification and rejection. The price range is $20,000-$45,000.

Outside the Arcadian world of painting in New York, other paradises can be found in the galleries. Bellwether Gallery is worth a long visit; here one can gladly spend an hour to devote to watching all six episodes of 30-year-old Shana Moulton's video series "Whispering Pines," started in 2004. Moulton, who has just arrived in New York from California, where she grew up, has named the series after the mobile home park where she was raised. We may guess, then, that it is a title by turns hopeful, ironic, sentimental and artificial, which puts it perfectly in tune with the videos themselves.

Moulton's semi-narrative films are hinged upon her deep understanding of, and reverence for, that class of objects known as California kitsch. These plug-in, plastic relics of the '70s -- lighted crystals, tabletop fountains, "magic eye" pictures, medicine-colored electric blankets -- are the vehicles which, through the artist's inventive filmic manipulation, lead her, as the ever-present bewigged protagonist, into a series of misadventures that always seem to culminate in the character's dissolution into the cosmos, a death / nirvana attained passively, simply by dancing along the special-effects pathway that some knickknack or other has presented. It is in this bewildered hero's attaining that we as viewers most enjoy, laughing and marveling at the virtuosic associations the artist draws along the way.

Many will note shades of Portland filmmaker Miranda July in the saccharine, goofy, hippie-girl esthetic Moulton cultivates, but the stronger affinity at the heart of Moulton's work is with the films of Maya Deren, the surrealist and early pioneer of experimental cinema whose most famous piece, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), is known to every art student.

A totally different and much more stringent pleasure is to be had across town on Orchard Street, at Miguel Abreu Gallery's exhibition of photographic works by 40-year-old, New York-based photographer Liz Deschenes. Like her structuralist predecessors did in the 1970s, Deschenes lays claim to a brand of techno-iconoclasm, purporting to turn lens-based media in on itself, dispensing with a depicted subject in the real world and instead bringing the functioning of the technical apparatus to the fore.

At Abreu are about seven largish (54 x 40 in.) iterations of a moiré pattern of overlaid screens, a double-dot matrix made by overlapping two negatives in the darkroom. The works, priced at around $8,500 each, are visually captivating, and stunning examples of what Clement Greenberg, late in his career, called opticality, that is, a purely visual, non-Cartesian depth defined by the retinal effects of the image and causing it to float free from the wall into it's own anti-geometry.

The structuralist ideas underpinning Deschenes' work have been around for nearly half a century, but her endeavor, if not the rhetoric surrounding it, is given legs by the technological expansions which have occurred in that time, most notably the leap all imaging technologies have made into the digital. A smallish, cadmium red monochrome diptych addresses this issue in a sort of fussy way. These simple nonimages are printed using an outmoded process known as dye transfer, whose unrivaled color quality has been superseded for most applications by far more economical digital techniques.

Deschenes' work strikes me as specific to an esoteric and nerdy history, but like the moiré pieces, it gains currency in its knowing resonance with painterly concerns (Deschenes has long associated her photography practice with the ideals of monochrome painting; her last solo show in New York, at Andrew Kreps Gallery in 2001, also played heavily on the issue). The referent of this dead-ended process, for example, might be Alexandr Rodchenko's canonical "Pure Color" paintings from 1921, by which the artist claimed to represent the "end of painting."

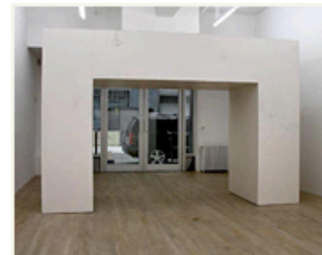
In a much-anticipated New York debut, the German-born, Los Angeles-based artist Sterling Ruby has just opened two concurrent exhibitions within blocks of each other, at Metro Pictures and at Foxy Productions. The latter show, in Foxy's very manageable space, is a handsome affair, wherein a single monolithic arch sculpture -- its white formica finish defaced by smudges and scratched-in graffiti -- is paired with a series of collages -- the medium in which the artist is most dependably good. But it is the outrageously ambitious installation at Metro Pictures that gives us our clearest picture of Ruby's position as an artist.

Ruby is perhaps destined to emerge as this decade's Damien Hirst figure. He has yet to display that artist's Napoleonic will to media power, but the esthetic proclivities of the two are startlingly similar. Like Hirst, Ruby attacks big issues with big art, taking on the contemporary experience of the body and the modern meaning of mortality with works produced in a studio *cum* factory by a regiment of assistants. But where Hirst's style has always been snazzy, clinical and scientific, Ruby's is messy, gothic, putrefied, mystical. Ruby is a master of the slather and the drip, of liquid on liquid, the material symbol of transformation and change. Standing in Metro Pictures among his towering geometric sculptures covered in layer upon layer of

poured plastic ($50,000-$100,000) is like standing in the bowels of a tumor-ridden giant or on some kind of science fiction set. These aren't loveable works, but the way they declare their own importance can't be written off.

ABRAHAM ORDEN writes on contemporary art.

Sterling Ruby, "Killing the Recondite" at Metro Pictures, installation view



Sterling Ruby's *Superoverpass* (2007) at Foxy Production

Sterling Ruby
Superoverpass Study / Crips & Bloods in Corltrola
2007
Foxy Production