

After the Fall of Troy: The Paintings of Pieter Schoolwerth

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Installation view of Pieter Schoolwerth's "After Troy" (all images courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery)

Pieter Schoolwerth's recent exhibition *After Troy* (November 9–December 22, 2012) builds upon his previous show, tellingly titled *Portraits of Paintings* (October 30–December 23, 2010), at Miguel Abreu Gallery. Schoolwerth continues to address the question of what can be done after the death of painting by someone who loves to paint and draw. It is a dilemma that a number of significant painters of his generation — he was born in 1970 and studied at the California Institute of Art — feel they must grapple with, whether they like it or not. The options seem to come down to adopting a Warholian pose or electing to do something that doesn't necessarily have institutional approval.

Generationally, Schoolwerth is five years younger than Tom Burckhardt and around the same age as Wendy White, all of whom either incorporate digital imagery into their process or work on non-painting supports such as cast plastic. In contrast to the older generation of critics who pronounced painting dead, these younger artists want to discover how much painting can absorb without losing its vitality.



Simon Vouet "Aeneas And His Family Fleeing Troy" (1635)

For this exhibition, Schoolwerth begins with a reproduction and ends in paint, a process that underscores the arc of his desire. The first step is to make an inkjet print on canvas. The print is an enlarged version of a reproduction of one of two paintings, Lionello Spada's "Aeneas and Anchises" (circa 1615) and Simon Vouet's "Aeneas and His Family Fleeing Troy" (1635). In each of these 17th century works, the artist is focusing on Aeneas and members of his family fleeing Troy as it falls to the Greeks. In Spada's powerful painting, Aeneas is carrying his father Anchises on his back.



Lionello Spada, “Aeneas and Anchises” (1615)

The digital image becomes the ground on which Schoolwerth begins his painting. By starting with a reproduction and enlarging it to the size of a canvas that is more than six feet high and nearly five feet in width, the reproduction becomes pixilated (mechanical pointillism) and degraded. The first step is to decide what to cover with matte black acrylic paint, effectively reducing the image into a few discrete parts — hand, head, arm, leg or foot — limbs but not a body. The black overpainting focuses our attention on the remaining figural presence, which I think helps us see what the artist is up to. In earlier paintings of this kind the dissonance between the figure(s) and the surrounding landscape struck me as too busy and hierarchical.

In these works, Schoolwerth is more restrained in the way he dismantles the bodies in the print and reconfigures them into a single body made of discrete, often widely separated parts, a kind of Frankenstein’s monster. In “After Troy 7” (2012), two heads seem to be kissing each other, but there also seems to be only one body, suggesting that the two heads belong to solipsistic Siamese twins cut off from the world.

By covering over much of his source material, Schoolwerth is simultaneously erasing it as he is making it into a painting. The next steps include drawing in oil pastel and laying down thick bars and swaths of oil paint. The palette he uses — reds, blues, and mustard yellow, for example — is in keeping with his source.

It is easy to say that Schoolwerth is a conceptual painter, but that postmodern designation ignores his interest in composition (or is it recomposition?), in the depiction of the human body and in the ambiguous space he arrives at through the interactions of his layering. It also ignores his evident love of drawing and the materiality of paint. In other words,



Pieter Schoolwerth, "After Troy 7" (2012)

everything in his process can be linked to an old fashioned view of painting and drawing.

Schoolwerth complicates his relationship to painting even further by picking a grand subject without succumbing to the by now familiar options of parody or ironic citation. Within the severe constraints of his procedure he has found a way to permit improvisation. This is further heightened by the pristine state of the painting's matte black surface, which suggests that no erasure or major alteration took place during the process, that premier coup painting and drawing into a set of discrete decisions in which revision isn't allowed.

There is an obvious and not uninteresting way to read these paintings. The decision to base the

works on historical paintings in which the artist focused on the moment after Troy was overrun by the Greeks and its citizens had to flee to survive, can be read as an analogy to the position contemporary painters find themselves in after the death of painting. They have gotten away, but they haven't yet arrived. Schoolwerth's work is haunted by a reflexive self-awareness.

There are other ways to read these paintings, which is what elevates them into another realm. Schoolwerth's breaking down of the bodies in the original painting as well as his reconfiguring them into a series of detached body parts recall the first series of "Woman" paintings that Willem de Kooning did in the 1940s. I am thinking of *Seated Woman* (c. 1940) and *Pink Angels* (c. 1945). Schoolwerth is trying to synthesize his predecessors — among them, in addition to Kooning, I would include Arshile Gorky and Francis Bacon — without making work that cites them. Schoolwerth isn't interested in either parody or irony, which is one of the accepted modes of postmodernist art, particularly when it comes to painting.



Pieter Schoolwerth, "After Troy 10" (2012)

Schoolwerth's use of a pixilated image as a starting point introduces another level of possibility regarding the internet. How do we view the way our body exists now that we can be in a room and simultaneously on a screen in another room, miles away? What does it mean to have an avatar? This current of consideration runs through Schoolwerth's recent paintings. His figures are unstable constructions. The figures consist of different materials, with the parts connected yet separate.

In *After Troy* Schoolwerth has started synthesizing his wide range of sources and techniques into a potent possibility. As strongly as I feel about his paintings, I don't think that he has quite gotten to the promised land of Italy yet.

Pieter Schoolwerth's After Troy continues at Miguel Abreu Gallery. (36 Orchard Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) until December 22.



John Yau
