

Captain Petzel

Art in America

PIETER SCHOOLWERTH

Miguel Abreu

Pieter Schoolwerth is known for reworking old-master paintings to create nearly abstract compositions. Tracings from images he finds online are combined with pixelated inkjet prints and spare but ostentatious brushstrokes. Schoolwerth's process is informed by postmodern critiques of authorship, but it's possible simply to admire his Cubist-influenced compositions as well as his smooth, decisive handling of paint.



Pieter Schoolwerth: *Take Out #1*, 2014, oil, acrylic, charcoal and inkjet print on canvas, 78 by 58 inches; at Miguel Abreu.

His new group of works, "Your Vacuum Blows, which Sucks" (2014-15), was inspired by something more humble: a frustrating encounter with a vacuum cleaner. Schoolwerth finds Surrealist perplexity in contemporary domestic appliances. In addition to vacuum cleaners, this series features fragmentary images of a blow-dryer, a fan, a face mister, a sewing machine, a turntable, and leaf and snow blowers. In an update on Jim Dine's presentation of hand tools within his canvases, some of the paintings were presented in tableaux that included actual machines, extension cords, fake plants and other objects—all arranged on and around gallery walls that were either partially finished or painted bold colors. A sewing machine, part of one such setup, yammered away the hours. Elsewhere, a microphone stand was outfitted with the hose and brush-handle of a vacuum cleaner, a juxtaposition that may derive from past musical performances in which Schoolwerth incorporated a vacuum roar. (The artist is an experimental musician and the founder of New York's Wierd Records.)

A 35-minute video that Schoolwerth produced in collaboration with artist Alexandra Lerman was presented at the gallery's second location. Its script, a series of comic dialogues that were also exhibited in printed form, seemed to be the real heart of the project. Characters with names like "No Body" and "You" banter in groan-inducing existential puns like, "Ever since you stopped making yourself up, you left my mind," and "I'm not hear so I here everything." Similar to the painting's fragmentary but lush representations, the video dialogues are flat-footed skits captured with vivid cinematography.

Much of the video was shot against a green screen onto which background images were later added. Some of the actors wore green suits, rendering them mostly invisible and creating digital distortions as they moved. The most strikingly visible exception is a heavily made-up transexual "mail-woman" who has been "losing wait" and who epitomizes the notion of a divided self. His/her invisible suitor, an alter ego/mailman, brings fake flowers and provokes a blustery argument.

Most of the paintings incorporate digitally warped images of characters from the video, creating a feedback loop between the canvases and the recorded performance. The images, rendered on a white ground activated by gray shadows, are in places overlaid by thick acrylic brushstrokes that sit on top of the canvases like scabs, or seem to vanish back into the ground. The most prominent colors evoke industry (safety orange) or automotive design (cherry candy red). In the 9-foot-wide *No Body Gets a Head*, an enlarged eye and brow are painted in more subtly handled oils, and other printed images—body parts, a ladder, a razor—flare outward from the white silhouette of an absent plant. The twisted forms of *No Record #2* create a stylish and immaculate abstract composition, with all the messy revision of early Abstract Expressionism now Photoshopped away. Action in this body of work is separate from the act of painting and relegated instead to video. This may deplete the paintings at first—they tend slightly toward "zombie" abstraction—but the verbally rich performance also informs and animates the canvases.

—P.C. Smith