David Schutter
Rendition

Feb 15 – Mar 31, 2013
Confronting David Schutter’s works at the Logan Center Gallery, it is not unlikely that the visitor will draw a blank. This sense of unknowing, which attends the experience of certain works of art, might cause some discomforts. Rather than quell or otherwise compensate for the pain, this short text is offered with the hope that nothing that is written will “explain” or otherwise flatten what is rendered. Like the oblique perspective that the artist casts on his own work in the photogravure Study for Autograph Repetition, 2013 (seen in the smaller gallery), what follows is a specific angle on the work.

David Schutter’s paintings of the past years have been characterized by deft modulations of gray, leaden, and steely pigments, which may suggest oceanic depths but which offer few if any stable perspectival coordinates. The hint in his titles at the existence of specific historical sources for each work is important, not because it supplements the solid ground that eludes the canvases, but because it hinders these works’ easy equivalence to what they might at first glance resemble: namely, modernist monochromatic abstractions. The monochrome – that singularly 20th Century contribution to the art historical canon – is less pertinent here than the works of Jacob van Ruisdael (1628-1682), Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) or Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796–1875) – and other artists of centuries past, each of whom may have inhabited different epochs but who nevertheless shared (and helped to establish) the regime of Cartesian perspective which governed painting roughly between the 17th and the late 19th Centuries, when painting was less a specific medium than the pictorial organization of thought.

In Schutter’s titles, we are given these artists’ last initials – vRu, W, C – but not as a visual clue that might immediately call up a specific image. Rather the titles may be taken as a form of notation without lyrical leanings, more personal inventory than suggested meaning. For meaning, we must partly forget the label (the way the artist partly forgets his sources) and remain present with the work at hand.

Schutter works up the surface of his paintings with great attention to the way paint creates effects of space and even time. It takes a particular patience to model the nebulous depths that seem to retreat for eternity into the canvas, and this becomes all the more palpable with certain more sudden decisions, that one sharp stroke or (less visibly) the evidence of erasure. This mark-making does not carry the kind of blobby bravado that we witness from artists who want to assert paint’s materiality, its facticity and its modernist self-referentiality. Schutter does not resist painterly illusion, the possibility that paint could evoke something other than paint. With his work, you can have it at least two ways – a sense of paint as a material and as a means to create a space-time, a physical sensation, the meandering of the mind.

Schutter’s foundations as an artist, particularly his undergraduate studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, which was made famous by its controversial pupil-cum-director Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), are grounded in the academic realist tradition that begins with human anatomy – and dwells on the body. Scale has always been a key concern for the artist. Indeed the size of his canvases, scaled 1:1 vis-à-vis the historical works which they aim to render, is – in the absence of representational relationships – the most direct nod to his given sources. And yet, the variations in and strange specificity of size, which we see as a result, may not be so much about revealing sources as about achieving a more profound incarnation.

The four paintings in this exhibition were the result of several visits to Gallery 224 of the Art Institute of Chicago, to which the artist has often returned on his habitual visits to the museum. One must be told this, as the works do not resemble the four paintings by Corot that they putatively reference.1 Which raises the question, does this type of information matter? What Schutter’s canvases most palpably share with the Barbizon School landscapes is scale. Measure up to them, and you discover that specific ‘medium’ proportion of the emergent bourgeoisie of the 19th Century – a medium size for a middle class, which patronized art and artists in ways that continue to impact making, showing, seeing, acquiring and other paradigmatic enjoyments.

Theirs is the scale of the conversation piece – artwork understood as a projection surface and a material conduit for that most effervescent of activities which is the exchange of human thoughts. This is not a model of art that assumes all information about a given work must be contained within it, so as to prove its perfect autonomy, stimulating silent reverence. A conversation piece is less about information or belief than about speculation – conjectures, judgments and (hopefully!) jokes, which a certain

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Standing inside the newly opened Logan Center Gallery, it might be interesting to consider how this space, purpose-built in the twenty-first century to be a gallery, still carries in its scale some of the sense of the bourgeois salon, albeit in the guise of that domestic space's close cousin, the white cube. Upon his invitation to exhibit here, David Schutter made a decision that distinguishes this exhibition from any of his previous presentations—namely, he chose to erect another chamber inside this one, specifically lit to simulate his working environment and purpose built to the exact scale of the Art Institute's Corot room.

This new construct might feel almost virtual in relation to the old sensuous space on which it is modeled, devoid as it is of the moldings, the well-worn wooden floors, the closed doorway (now only hinted by indentation) and the muted wall-paint. And if, in its streamlined state, the gallery within the gallery feels closer to a computer rendering than the neoclassical antechamber which it references, there might be something to this feeling. After all, in order to recreate Gallery 224 inside the Logan Center Gallery, Hannah Givler (the Logan's Shop Manager) made use of CAD software. Here a question arises: Just how do such invisible processes affect the appearance of the thing being produced?

I suspect that Schutter's four new paintings will look somewhat like they do in the artist's studio. That is to say—strange. By strange, I do not mean something vaguely quirky, offbeat or simply odd. For Schutter's straightforwardness rivals the deadpan stance of Buster Keaton. Rather, I mean something that looks familiar but feels rather foreign—and (like Keaton's unwavering stoic stance) funny. Having spoken to the artist about his work on several occasions, what comes through is a love of the process, but also a desire to produce effects that were perhaps best captured by the Russian term ostranenie which translates as 'defamiliarization' or 'making strange.' The technique is probably as old as art, but it was first articulated as such by Victor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay "Art as Device" which asserts that the very purpose of art is: "to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known [...] to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." Lingering in a museum with David Schutter, one is treated to precise information about a given artist, their technique, their position in history, etc. Schutter knows a great deal about what he is seeing. And yet, he continues to return to the same works in order to look for what perhaps cannot be known, the way some people visit a cemetery, pursuing an infinite conversation...

If a certain chthonic sensibility pervades David Schutter's practice, it is certainly not connected to a simple sense of death—of painting or any other form of material thought. Take the image that has been printed on the reverse of this page: a photograph of a letter containing a thought fragment from the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander, perhaps the first lover of wisdom to write down his ideas. His words—as ominous sounding as the title of this exhibition—were translated from the Ancient Greek by the young Friedrich Nietzsche, perhaps already pondering his notion of the eternal recurrence or eternal return. Now, the Anaximander Fragment is gracefully rendered in turn, on the artist's request, by his mother. A jesting gesture to lay down at Dr. Freud's grave, perhaps. But it is also, like all of the artist's work, a way of making a thought live.

The photograph of the written letter borrows its composition from the aforementioned photogravure, Study for Autograph Repetition, 2013, which complicates the notion of recurrence further still. Another venture into new territory for the artist, the print was produced at Renaissance Press in collaboration with Paul M. Taylor. According to the master printer, the size and subtle variations of gray in Schutter's image push the almost-two-centuries-old technology to its limits. One of the most difficult details of the printing process, the shadow, asserts painting's three-dimensionality. Time, the forth dimension, is also invoked. And with time, there is always the question of history. A painting after Corot is destined, through a photographic process, for autograph repetition. If this thing obeys the "ordinance of time," the latter is a Janus-faced god, not the paragon of one-directional progress.

Gertrude Stein once observed: "In the nineteenth century painters discovered the need of always having a model in front of them, in the twentieth century they discovered that they must never look at a model." Working in the twenty-first century, can they forget this binary altogether, or rather continue to turn both ways?
Related Events at the Logan Center

Fri, Mar 1, 2013, 6 pm
Gallery
Reception and exhibition tour by the artist.

Wed, Mar 6, 2013, 7:30 pm
Logan 901 (Penthouse)
Matthew Jesse Jackson (Associate Professor of Art History, the Department of Visual Arts, and the College, University of Chicago) and Dieter Roelstraete (Manilow Senior Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago) join the artist and curator in conversation.

Thank you to everyone who helped in making this exhibition possible:

Nancy Briggs, Cindy Chen, Stephanie Harris Trevor, Saori Den, Nicole Foti, Hannah Givler, Mike Gibisser, Katherine Harvath, Adam Holtzman, Matthew Jesse Jackson, Joseph Mault, Lucille Schutter, Jim Prinz, Dieter Roelstraete, Fred Schmidt Arenales, Hamza Walker, Yechen Zhao; as well as Aurel Scheibler and Bendetta Roux of Aurel Scheibler, Berlin; Lisa B. Dorin, Adrienne Lynn Jeske, and James Rondeau of the Art Institute of Chicago; the faculty and students of the Department of Visual Arts, University of Chicago; Paul Taylor and Courtney Sennish of Renaissance Press; Seaberg Framing; and all the dedicated staff of the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts.

Image on Reverse

The Anaximander Fragment, translated from the Greek by Friedrich Nietzsche, hand written by Lucille Schutter.

Photo: Saori Den

Logan Center Exhibitions
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arts.uchicago.edu/logan/gallery

Gallery Hours
Tue–Sat 9 am–9 pm
Sun 11 am–9 pm

Works in the Exhibition

Large Gallery
(clockwise from left to right)
A/C C 224 1
2013
32 1/2" x 39 1/2"
Oil on linen
A/C C 224 2
2013
22" x 16 1/4"
Oil on linen
A/C C 224 3
2013
38 3/4" x 52 7/8"
Oil on linen
A/C C 224 4
2013
23 5/8" x 28 1/2"
Oil on linen

Small Gallery
Study for Autograph Repetition
2013
28 3/8" x 35 7/16"
Photogravure, Edition of 5
Printed by Renaissance Press, Ashuelot, NH

All works are courtesy of the artist and Aurel Scheibler, Berlin.

Essay by Monika Szewczyk
Visual Arts Program Curator

Notes

1 For several years, the gallery housed five paintings by Corot – three pastoral landscapes, a small canvas of a woman sitting on a rock and tending to her foot (Wounded Euridice, 1868/1870), and Interrupted Reading from c.1870, which hung opposite the entrance. With the centerpiece temporarily removed to hang in an exhibition in Frankfurt, the room has been reconfigured. Witnessing the space in flux after beginning work on his canvases, the artist has chosen to present the four paintings, which relate to the four works by Corot that remain on view in Chicago – now, temporarily, alongside a suite of small landscapes by Jean-Francois Millet (1814–1875), which he has chosen to omit.

2 We cannot forget that the Museum of Modern Art in New York began as a rented apartment in the Heckscher Building at 790 Fifth Avenue in New York.

3 Photogravure is an elaborate intaglio printing process that yields relatively few prints per pure copper plate, but each at a level of crystalline verisimilitude that surpasses most conventional photography. Its quality and rarity helped to assert photography as a Fine Art. And, rather than rivaling painting, as photography is often said to have done, the process helped painters enter the market by enabling them to disseminate their imagery to a burgeoning middle class.

4 Photographic images, which result from a measurable exposure to light, tend to be read as temporal more readily than painting, though both processes involve the transformation of a pictorial surface over time.

5 The term is used to distinguish an artist’s reproduction of his own work from its copy by another hand.