

David Schutter

Rhona Hoffman Gallery

Few artists over the last century have ventured to travesty the work of an earlier painter while remaining faithful to the original image's mechanics, mood or general charisma. There are some relevant exceptions, perhaps most notably Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* (1953). But while Rauschenberg's defiant gesture was an entirely subtractive one, David Schutter's paintings generate their own pictorial spectacle as much as they eclipse an original. If Schutter's work draws in part upon Rauschenberg's conceptual precedent, he also holds fast to the institution of painting. Taking as his touchstones John Constable and Gianbattista Tiepolo, Édouard Manet and Jacob van Ruisdael, he invokes the exact dimensions of their works, only to turn their figurative depictions into non-objective, slate-grey canvases. Studying individual works *in situ* and in detail – often for weeks at a time – Schutter is as much an art historian as he is a painter's painter. His mark-making remains as historically-grounded as it is radically present.

His latest exhibition, 'What is Not Clear is Not French', included his trademark, monochrome paintings alongside a new series of drawings. Given the murkiness of the paintings, the clarity alluded to in the exhibition's title begged certain questions. Schutter excavates the phenomena of brushwork from within the long arc of art history – focusing, with this latest work, on French paintings from the mid-17th to the mid-19th century. Of course, the 'French' approach to pictorial space – from Rococo to Romanticism and beyond – is too historically vast to be evoked by a few abstract canvases. Yet, if we consider the genealogy of Modernist, European art history, its seemingly inexorable conclusion was abstraction itself. Grounded in sources from academic studies – from Barbizon School salon painting to Romantic works – each image is reduced to the phenomena of spare surface events. Charles Le Brun's late 17th-century taxonomy of painted 'passions' forms an important reference point here. Le Brun's drawings attempted to codify human affect in a series of expressive gestures. Schutter's canvases seem not to represent expressiveness, but to perform it in a more muted, even allegorical, sense. From Aleksandr Rodchenko to Piero Manzoni, a certain strain of 20th-century monochromatic painting aimed to assail individual authorship – and its presumed origin in the brushstroke – as

About this review

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David Schutter, *NCG M 5*, 2012–13, oil on linen, 50 × 61 cm

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a conduit of intuitive genius. Schutter short-circuits that avant-garde trajectory. His 're-made' works remain suspended between the basic act of his own painting and a larger, framing Conceptualism.

The works' shorthand, abbreviated titles – *GSMB W 21* (2014); *NGS C 3* (2009); or *AIC C 224 4*, (2014), to name a few – invite acts of decryption. These acronyms likely serve more as a means of personal inventory than clues to interpretation, and their serial nature defuses any literary redolence. Whereas Schutter used to reveal the original sources of his painterly glosses, he now withholds such information. Presumably this encourages closer focus upon the work at hand, rather than its stated 'origin'. Of course, some portion of Schutter's efforts is dedicated to undertaking a kind of painterly empathy with the 'original' composition. Recent paintings like *NCG M 5* (2012–13), reveal more white, wispy areas than past examples, suggesting closer attention to inflections of light, and to how these might be suspended in paint, as if between a microscopic slide.

A series of chalk and crayon drawings on paper evoke the bulging muscles of academic nudes (*L LB dc 46* through *L LB dc 60*, 2011–14). Detached from recognizable limbs, these works' cross-hatching congeals intermittently into some kind of description then flickers just as quickly into a frenzy of intersecting lines. A foreshortened nose or neck comes into view, then disappears amid autonomous marks. These drawings form a new and welcome point of departure for Schutter, whose painterly and intellectual nuances risk flattening under the doctrinaire weight of his monochromatic/conceptual gambit.

Of course, an unabashed flattening is what this artist's work stakes itself upon: the insistence upon a common phenomenological experience of painting. Voluntarily exiled midway between an ironization of abstract painting and its earnest undertaking, Schutter's images make many viewers uncomfortable. They appear doubly brazen in their non-objectivity: at once non-representational, and yet indebted to an untraceable figuration. In the ascetic dogmatism of his brush, Schutter recalls the efforts of a Piet Mondrian or a Giorgio Morandi – returning to the same pictorial problems with an ever-renewed source of energy and purpose. But I would push him to extend his endeavours to new painterly terrain, even if they remain within the aesthetic terrain of abeyance – midway between paint and idea.

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