



## David Schutter – SPOLIA – Istituto Centrale per la Grafica, Palazzo Poli, Rome

micheletocca / 4 days ago



Rome's Istituto Centrale per la Grafica is one of those rare places that today allow for incursions into graphic art as a specific field of inquiry – testing, expanding and asserting its limits and possibilities. With a vast collection spanning five hundred years of drawing, print, calcographic works, matrices and photographs, the Istituto is the ideal frame where to look at and discuss the drawings of David Schutter (b. 1974, US), currently the subject of *SPOLIA*, his first solo exhibition in a public space in Italy.

Schutter is widely known for his pondered, gradually built-upon yet immediate paintings that record the process of the re-enactment of paintings from the past painstakingly scrutinised in museums – Schutter protracts the observation, almost stretches the time of their making, re-involving them as part of an ongoing aesthetical investigation into the present. Removed from their status as documents of the author's personality and of a given historical moment, the original sources are re-realised in the artist's re-stratification of their constitutive decisions, gestures and tropes, inexorably losing their figural appearance and symbolic meaning. Yet, their identity qua paintings is empathetically retained and re-implied as they take on a new life together with and through Schutter's interpretation. Fruit of this phenomenological accumulation, the densely layered, chunky surfaces of his canvases inhabit the present as autonomous creations, that however are reminiscent of how painting can only exist through a time-traversing critical re-exploration of its formal, conventional and metaphoric *raison d'être*.

The exhibition gathers a suite of fifty works the artist made after studying the museum's collection of XVII century drawings while on a year-long residency at the American Academy in Rome. Unlike his paintings, the drawings do not engage with the re-construction of particular, distinct pieces. Instead, they can be seen as bestiaries, as compendiums that mingle memories, annotations and perceptions of the visual grammar of works he has observed, studied, analysed.

Borrowed from archaeology's lexicon, the title of the show itself, *SPOLIA*, refers to the practice of reusing both structural and decorative elements, materials and fragments of buildings from the past to generate new designs – a practice common since late antiquity, seen in eminent monuments like the Arch of Constantine in the Roman Forum. The meaning of *Spolia*, a Latin word that literally stands for booties plundered during war, has also been extended to describe anything plundered from oblivion, from the implacable flow of time, in relation to the task of art and literature to originate new meaning, protecting and re-framing the memory of the past.



In fact, in a hang that echoes both the arrangement of remains adorning façades and the *quadratura*, a recurrent illusionistic framing device among XVII century frescoists, the works turn the collection into a quarry of styles, techniques, images, perceptions and gestures that reappear in Schutter's drawings in the form of capricious new configurations.

Indeed, notwithstanding that each drawing is to be appreciated autonomously for its character and agenda, the genre of *capriccio* seems to be central to access the whole ensemble both formally and metaphorically. What we see or what we seem – architectural elements, decorative motifs, draperies and limbs, for example – is constantly juxtaposed, confronted, subject to transformation, eccentrically assembled. Delicate calligraphies, vaporous and vigorous pencil strokes, traces of chiaroscuro, white *lumeggiature* appear, recede and overlap. Additions and erasures involve each other, restlessly conducting the gaze around a seemingly intuitive, almost instinctive orchestration, crystallised in rather enclosed, centralised compositions. The works continue to oscillate between frenzy and rigour, automatism and logic, irregularity and elegance, expounding and reactivating something of the Baroque's emblematic pursuit of inventiveness, dominated chaos and far-fetched classicism.



David Schutter - RPro - 013

Rooted in the artist's complex view of history, one that is open to a continuous re-discovery and a critical re-discussion of its most concealed, overlooked or controversial aspects, the exhibition is however neither a complacent homage to Baroque nor a mere take on the collection. As per the tradition of the spolia, his is more of an act of re-contextualization, an attempt at a critically fresh perspective on both, which invites to reconsider the formation of the period later known as Baroque regardless of aesthetical expectations in terms of "masterwork" and the museum's highlights. In this respect, the display of a selection of drawings from the collection curated by the artist and Fabio Fiorani in an adjacent room, is a probing coup.



Rooted in the artist's complex view of history, one that is open to a continuous re-discovery and a critical re-discussion of its most concealed, overlooked or controversial aspects, the exhibition is however neither a complacent homage to Baroque nor a mere take on the collection. As per the tradition of the spolia, his is more of an act of re-contextualization, an attempt at a critically fresh perspective on both, which invites to reconsider the formation of the period later known as Baroque regardless of aesthetical expectations in terms of "masterwork" and the museum's highlights. In this respect, the display of a selection of drawings from the collection curated by the artist and Fabio Fiorani in an adjacent room, is a probing coup.



The works of such diverse, variably renowned figures as, among others, Pietro Da Cortona, Claude Lorrain, Francesco Mola and Salvator Rosa, all émigrés who worked in Rome, have been championed by Schutter to reflect on the multitude of approaches, syntaxes and imaginary jargons, the major and minor contributions that came to shape the city's sumptuous XVII century artistic season. With his interest in their idiomatic traits, revelatory of their origins as much as of their individual responses to Rome's art scene, Schutter is surely questioning his own condition as visitor, a guest artist himself, subsuming reflections on cultural identity in relation to our state of globalised mobility and our experience of the local.

As Baroque still plays a dynamic role in Rome's everyday life with the convoluted, elaborate and ever-mutable shapes of its monuments, palaces and paintings reminding one of the inflexible passage of time, fuelling imagination whilst continually revealing the present's intricacy of events, so Schutter's drawings resort to connoisseurship to fantasise about and transform the past to make sense of the present.

*Michele Tocca*

© David Schutter

Courtesy of the Artist and Palazzo Poli