

# Dana Schutz

NEUBERGER MUSEUM OF ART, PURCHASE COLLEGE, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK  
David Salle

**TALENT AND IMAGINATION** are easily misunderstood. What passes for imagination today is often just a recontextualization of cultural signs; and talent is easily confused with knowingness or a desire for attention. Only occasionally does an artist come along who has both, and is able to use these capabilities to cast an original narrative idea into pictorial form. At age thirty-five, Dana Schutz is that rarity. Her paintings depict weird or funny characters and scenes cut from whole cloth. But the imagining is inseparable from the paint itself. The brush feels like an extension of the painter, visceral and often surprising. These paintings advance the role of imagination in art in a painting-specific way: It's one thing to see this or that image in the mind's eye, but it's another thing to paint it. Schutz does so in a way that feels natural and unforced.

"Dana Schutz: If the Face Had Wheels," a survey of some thirty canvases and a dozen drawings, curated by Helaine Posner, shows a decade of near-continuous

growth. From the very first, Schutz possessed an impressively confident hand. She works in a direct, unconflicted manner, laying down medium-wide, decisive brushstrokes in close-valued, high-key colors of good intensity and saturation. What she can do with a brush is real enough to herself that it becomes so for us as well—essentially the romantic temperament in art. But for Schutz, virtuosity is married to a pictorial vision that is situational—as in situation comedy. The paintings appear to answer offscreen questions, such as, "What if you could eat your own face?" Schutz's painting mind goes places where few if any have gone before.

Physically, the paintings are complex. Often they are built up with cascades of fractured shapes of pure color that make them feel subjective and spontaneous. Schutz seldom loses her sense of humor, nor does she take refuge in easy irony. Her confidence allows for improvisation and material perversity. She takes obvious pleasure in fucking up the surface of her paintings, breaking the image as much as making it. Her work makes me think of a child who can amuse herself with any material at hand—an empty spool of thread will work as well as an iPad.

Schutz's color has a 1960s period feel to it: Acidic greens, purples, tans, and pinks mix with orange, grayed and pure blues, and turquoise like they belong together, without a lot of blending. She is especially good with a range of greens—colors not found in nature but used to describe it. Her way of painting has what used to be called plasticity, a no-nonsense, unfussy way of building images. The scale of her brushstrokes is almost always right, and the gesture is used to architectural effect. Her style takes care of itself—it has real work to do. It builds rather than illustrates. Her approach to form doesn't come out of cartooning; she doesn't just draw with the brush. She is a constructor, and the structures that emerge from the paint

are the right ones—the connection of her arm and shoulder with her wrist and fingers is more convincing than that of any other painter her age.

Schutz makes good use of a first principle of representation: Where the plane changes, the value changes along with it. Shifts of value define the edge of a plane in space; a dark shape next to a lighter one at the point where the plane changes direction creates a sense of form. By exploiting this simple principle Schutz is able to barrel through densely packed scenes efficiently, using a big brush and not getting caught up in illustrational details. The light sources in her paintings do not always make sense, but it's not really a problem. She is intelligent and grounded enough to allow a wide range of influences into her work. In the larger compositions, such as *Presentation*, 2005, the presiding spirit seems to be James Ensor, but for the smaller, more focused paintings, the closest stylistic

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neighbor is David Park; both are American symbolists who can be taken for realists. But a wide range of resonances can be felt, from muscular '60s abstractionists like John Hultberg, to atmospheric pattern-y painters like I. Rice Pereira, to nineteenth-century social realists like Courbet.

As for the ambitious paintings that achieve a poignant social-satiric dimension, I think we have to go back to Goya to find this combination of pure painting drama and unsheathed, scabrous satire—the Goya not of the despairing late "Black Paintings" but of the tapestry cartoons that gave the newly emergent middle classes a chance to see themselves reflected in art's mirror. Schutz's paintings

have a similar function. And the resonances and influences keep proliferating. *Man Eating Chicken*, 2008, and *Abstract Model*, 2007, recall the *vache* paintings of Magritte as well as the last, deeply nihilistic phase of Picabia. These paintings may be even more subversive than Schutz's better-known images of self-cannibalization; the perversity resides not only in the *what* but also in the *how*.

Most painters have a few special subjects or themes, and Schutz is an exceptionally interesting painter of men. She paints them both singly and in groups, depicting their essential cluelessness, physical awkwardness, social infantilism, and self-regard with a combination of wit, disbelief, and sympathy. Yet her satire is seldom vicious. One of my favorite paintings in the show is *Reclining Nude*, 2002, a modest-size canvas that shows a naked guy (a recurrent character named Frank, whom the artist identifies as the "last man on earth") lying on a beach with an ultraviolet sunburn over his entire body, genitals included. She gets the gravity of the floppy dick just right. What makes it all work is the specifics of the pose—Frank looks back over his shoulder to meet our gaze with a completely relaxed, comfortable-with-himself expression on his face—and the strong sense of scale: He is stretched out end to end, running off the canvas on both sides. His body is rendered with a loose, unprecious, but just-accurate-enough touch, in a limited but vivid palette, and the background is given a wrist-inflected semiarabesque wash of thin color to define water, sky, pebbly beach. It's a work that has grown in singularity and reach since it was painted nearly ten years ago—a rare thing.

What I especially value about Schutz's paintings is her ability to pluck images from the lurid absurdity of our present reality (men's sensitivity retreats, Michael Jackson, P. J. Harvey, etc.) without her work feeling like it relies on popular culture for its identity. Even when a painting refers

to something on TV (such as *QVC [I'm Into Minimalist Tattoos]*, 2008), it doesn't feel like it's from TV consciousness or that it needs TV for its life pulse or that it even especially cares about TV at all. Schutz's work has more in common with paintings made before the advent of media altogether, when paintings were a way to think about recent history, not just send-ups of it. She understands that a work of art can be more than a bunch of cultural signs. This quality will allow her work to live beyond its immediate cultural moment.

Sometime after 2006, Schutz's work became more fragmented, and a variety of painterly approaches were made to coexist on the canvas. She started cutting holes in her paintings, generally treating depictive space with an attack so fast and loose as to feel at times a little daft. Some of the paintings of this period are rescued from surrealist kitsch only by the aplomb with which a painterly problem—that of how to rein in pattern and let it lead at the same time—is solved. In other works, the desire to try anything leads Schutz down blind alleys. Yet I am happy to see her taking greater license in her work, like one of her swimmers taking a big gulp of air.

This "try anything" approach can also produce astonishing work. One such unmoored picture is *Man Eating Chicken*. A man sits at a table, his face and arms mostly eaten away by a black-edged devouring "absence," opposite a few cleanly picked chicken bones resting on a table whose wood-grain surface is elaborately painted. Standing upright, as though occupying a different space altogether, is a giant wishbone, painted in a lovingly sure hand, with what looks like one perfect brushstroke per rib of bone. Behind the man is a pattern of irregularly spaced gray dots over a washy, light gray background. Hovering above is an enormous canary-yellow sun that occupies the upper right corner of the painting, just as it would in a child's drawing.

And radiating outward from this wobbly orb are more or less single-brushstroke yellow "rays" that manage to be limp and assertive at the same time and that give the painting a watery, "Oh, what the hell—it's all gone anyway" kind of feeling.

There are a number of heroically scaled paintings from the middle of the past decade in the show, and for the most part they are aging very well. Although less well known than the Museum of Modern Art's *Presentation*, another masterpiece is *Civil Planning*, 2004, which balances the grandiosity of its conception (dystopian future? Femdom utopia?) with a lot of cleanly depicted local detail, like the garden spade painted at the bottom edge of the canvas. The composition of this very large picture has the complexity and control of classic abstraction—looking at it, I found myself thinking about Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles: Number 11*, 1952—and the alternation of top-to-bottom, full-arm gestural forms with tiny notational marks that pull the eye back into deep illusionistic space feels unforced, something done for sheer pleasure, the sense of wonder that paint can embody. "I can do this—and this."

Schutz's paintings are the product of a kind of "what if-ness"—someone caught in mid-sneeze, a group of middle-aged men on a sensitivity retreat, a version of *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* as if burned to a crisp around the edges, a self-portrait as a pachyderm. These decidedly unnarcissistic images of humanity are not bleak or overly critical; they're not particularly shocking or cruel. They have the look of feelings made external. They give a sense of the great freedom of mind at the core of painting, the exhilaration of it. □

"Dana Schutz: If the Face Had Wheels" is on view at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College State University of New York through Dec. 18; travels to the Miami Art Museum Jan. 15–Feb. 26, 2012; Denver Art Museum, Nov. 10, 2012–Jan. 13, 2013.

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Opposite page, from left: View of "Dana Schutz: If the Face Had Wheels," 2011, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York. From left: *Her Arms*, 2003; *Twin Parts*, 2004; *Party*, 2004. Photo: Jim Frank. Dana Schutz, *Man Eating Chicken*, 2008, oil on canvas, 66 x 75". Dana Schutz, *Abstract Model*, 2007, oil on canvas with black velvet, 25 x 22". This page, left: Dana Schutz, *Reclining Nude*, 2002, oil on canvas, 48 x 66". Right: Dana Schutz, *Swimming, Smoking, Crying*, 2009, oil on canvas, 45 x 48".

