

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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The Washington Post

For Dana Schutz, a new show after her controversial painting of Emmett Till



"Deposition" by Dana Schutz. (Dana Schutz/Petzel Gallery and Contemporary Fine Arts)

CLEVELAND — Feelings are still raw around the work of Dana Schutz, whose painting of Emmett Till in an open casket — hard to look at, even in reproduction — provoked uproar when it appeared last year in the Whitney Biennial.

Why did she paint it? Schutz claimed to have been motivated by empathy, and an awareness of Till's renewed relevance at a time when shootings of African American boys were so much in the news.

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL: +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX: +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdanegallery.com

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But to many, this was no excuse. “Even well-intentioned artistic empathy,” wrote A.L. William in a letter to the New Yorker, “can become a form of trespass when it comes uninvited and replays the damage done to the people with whom the artist seeks to stand.”

If you doubt that the controversy burns on, read the comments wall at Transformer Station, in Cleveland’s Ohio City neighborhood, where Schutz is showing 12 recent paintings and three charcoal drawings in a show, organized by the Cleveland Museum of Art, titled “Eating Atom Bombs.”

Most of the comments are supportive. “Regarding the Emmett Till painting at the Whitney,” writes Wendy, “I think it’s good for us to be reminded of the atrocities in our country. Why can’t a Caucasian [Schutz is white] feel distress, horror, sadness about a horrible act against a person of any race. His mother wanted everyone to know what happened.”

But two other commenters aren’t having it: “White privilege is painting Emmett Till, and collecting profit then having your work removed, and then opening a show in CLEVELAND like nothing happened,” writes one. “An insult to Cleveland and its people,” writes another. “If black pain is so profitable, why are we still in ghettos while y’all making money.”

Schutz, 41, who was born in Livonia, Mich., but spent part of the late 1990s and early 2000s in Cleveland obtaining a BFA from the Cleveland Institute of Art, has insisted that “Open Casket” is not for sale, never was, and never will be. But never mind that. Hurt, anger and dismay all hang acridly in the air around the work, and around Schutz herself. Expect it to stay that way for a while.

The Cleveland show’s title, “Eating Atom Bombs,” is at once throwaway and dark. It suggests that there is something appalling and uncontrollable not only in America’s body politic (the exhibit’s ostensible theme) but in creativity itself. Devour art, or enter the civic sphere, if you will; but it won’t always be good for digestion.

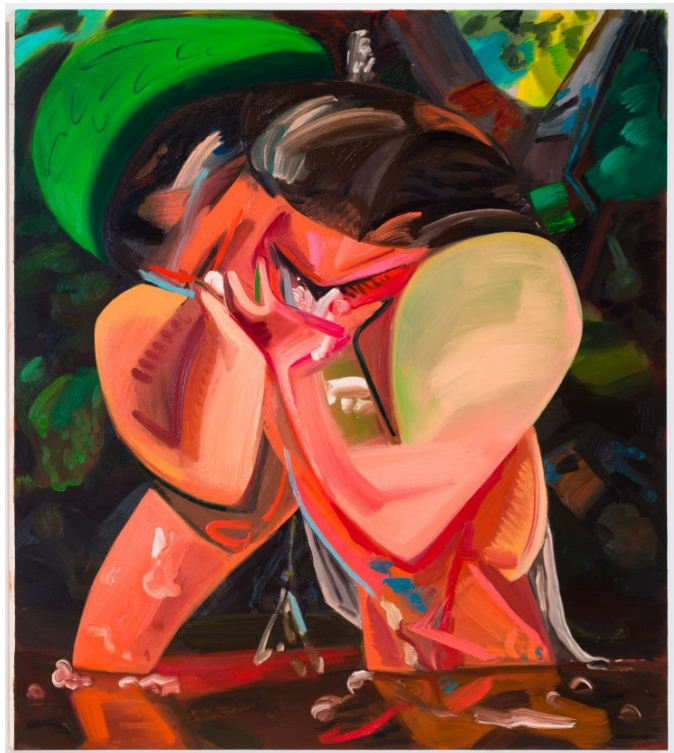
Aside from one painting and two drawings, everything in “Eating Atom Bombs” was made between 2016 and 2018. Some works — the Goya-inspired “Rage,” for instance — feel wobbly. But the cumulative impact is impressive. Schutz is so much better than “Open Casket” — an unsatisfying, ill-fated experiment — would indicate. The new works remind us how good she can be. They show her not only in command of her craft, but confident enough to risk failing.

It could easily have been otherwise.

The big lesson of the “Open Casket” affair, for Artsy editor Casey Lesser, was that “artists need to be super thoughtful and ready to be held accountable for their work.” Framing it this way — and softly chiding Schutz in the process — sounds laudable, and overdue. But it is, I fear, a kind of moral kitsch: a lovely idea undermined by a naivete about how high-level creativity works.

“It is easy for artists to self-censor,” wrote Schutz at the height of the furor. “To convince yourself to not make something before you even try.”

Why not do that then? Why not exercise better judgment?



“Shame” by Dana Schutz. (Dana Schutz/Petzel Gallery and Contemporary Fine Arts)

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Perhaps because artists, including those who try hard to be good in their ordinary lives, operate, as they create, in an amoral zone, and with a strange (possibly indefensible) sense of private immunity to the moral riptides of the day. Truth, which is not inherently ethical, calls out to them. Trauma, taboo and the unsayable all tempt them.

They will get what's coming to them, as Schutz discovered.

The new works remind us that Schutz's best paintings, even when they are harrowing, tend to be funny. ("Open Casket" was a perplexing exception.) Walking through "Eating Atom Bombs" is like being handcuffed to a great wit on the edge of a breakdown, but still spewing bon mots.

The funnier pictures include a rendering of Stephen K. Bannon ("The Painter"). He has a fresh, still-bleeding tattoo of an eagle on his back, and sits at an easel painting a mountainous landscape.



"Rage" by Dana Schutz. (Dana Schutz/Petzel Gallery and Contemporary Fine Arts)



"Expulsion" by Dana Schutz. (Dana Schutz /Petzel Gallery and Contemporary Fine Arts)

There is also a male head with the imprint of a baseball bat across his face ("Bat"), and a massive, baroque-inspired canvas depicting a foreshortened, upside-down man with orange hair, shredded shirt, and red tie, about to be thrown by a despairing crowd into shark-infested waters ("The Deposition").

Other paintings, with titles such as "Shame," "Expulsion," "Rage," and "Conflict," are best seen in the broader context of Trump's political ascendancy, and the ructions that fed it. What makes the paintings so taut, so explosive?

They gain dynamism from tensions between curving arcs, often merging or nesting inside one another, and jutting diagonals, often placed at acute angles. Thus, her favored shape is the love-heart. It forms the basis (ironically?) for "Conflict," in which two figures with dancing feet and mismatched shoes are caught in a clinch. Their heavy heads seem to mourn the realization that they are fated to fight.

Schutz enlivens her big, pressurized figures with all manner of local excitements. Her brushwork, up close, is thrilling. Sweeping strokes from brushes loaded with paint alternate with desultory, fuzzy-edged dabs. Bright colors harmonize then clash. Something repulsive is in the air.

In "Crawling," two men, arms flailing, struggle under a burning, biblical sun. Outsize insects alight on their limbs. At right, a giant cockroach appears to settle on the surface of the painting.

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Schutz's faces and figures are simplified but theatrically expressive. Picasso's "The Weeping Woman" lurks behind many. You feel the influence of his "Les Femmes d'Alger," too, in the blue, white, and pink palette of "Expulsion" — a depiction of Adam and Eve banished from Paradise (based on Masaccio). And Picasso's signature formal innovations — centripetal compositions and shallow, cubist spaces — permeate all her work. In none of Schutz's paintings is it easy to plumb her intentions. But why should it be?

Artists may enter the studio preoccupied by the same worries as the rest of us. But what they do there can't be predicted and can't always be parsed, even retrospectively.

Images, in the final analysis, are dumb. Infuriatingly, they fail to settle anything. Schutz's paintings can seem particularly so. What is her position? What are her paintings saying?



"Self-Exam" by Dana Schutz. (Dana Schutz/Petzel Gallery and Contemporary Fine Arts)

They make you want to know, not so much because she baits us with charged content but because the paintings themselves are so urgent, conflicted and pressurized. I'm pretty sure Schutz is no fan of the current president, but her paintings are not illustrations of a political stance. They go deeper.

Take "Self-Exam," the most audacious work in the show, and for me, the best. A woman in a tiled bathroom, one leg propped up on the toilet, backside pressed against the door handle, studies her body, which is simultaneously reflected in three separate mirrors.

It's an everyday, comical scene, with undercurrents of dread. What has forced the inspection? What medical calamity might be uncovered? Schutz transforms it into an extraordinary existential drama.

Already monstrous in itself (the figure resembles one of Francis Bacon's early mutant beasts), the body flies further apart under examination. As always with Schutz, the painting has its own tight logic. But it prompts a worrying notion: that the

imperative to Know Thyself inevitably collapses into baffled histrionics and will always be comically futile.

Imagine how hard it is, given this, to know the minds of others.

Dana Schutz: Eating Atom Bombs Cleveland Museum of Art at Transformer Station, through April 15. 216-938-5429, transformerstation.org.

Sebastian Smee is a Pulitzer Prize-winning art critic at The Washington Post and the author of "The Art of Rivalry: Four Friendships, Betrayals and Breakthroughs in Modern Art." He has worked at the Boston Globe, and in London and Sydney for the Daily Telegraph (U.K.), the Guardian, the Spectator, and the Sydney Morning Herald.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/for-dana-schutz-a-new-show-after-her-controversial-painting-of-emmett-till/2018/01/29/779330f6-02af-11e8-bb03-722769454f82_story.html?utm_term=.58eb84d4e19a