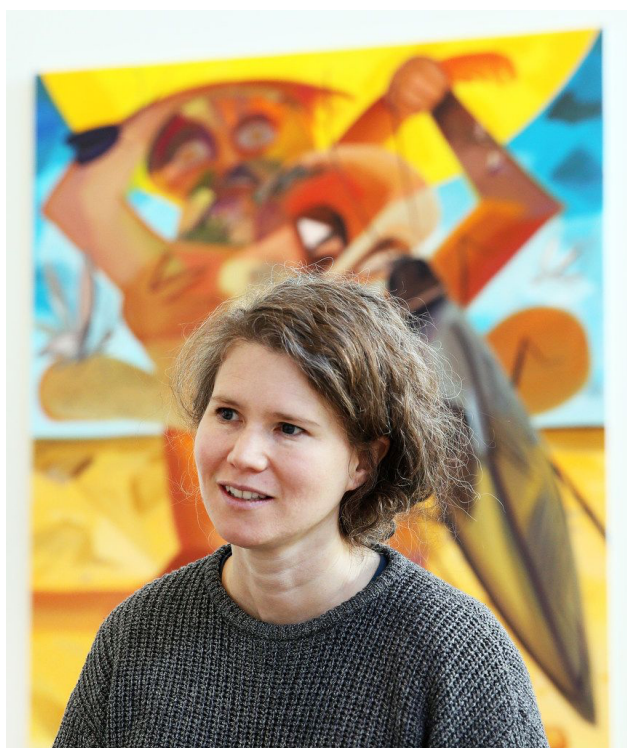


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Dana Schutz Q&A on Cleveland, Emmett Till, national mood under Trump, and new directions in her art



Gallery: The Dana Schutz Q&A: a major contemporary artist speaks at Transformer Station

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Dana Schutz, the renowned contemporary artist whose recent paintings and drawings are on view at the Transformer Station gallery in Ohio City, is a star with a strong local connection.

Before her swift rise to acclaim in New York in the early 2000s, she earned a bachelor of fine arts degree at the Cleveland Institute of Art, the independent art college located in a city that helped shape her work and career.

In a conversation at the gallery before the opening of her show on Friday, Jan. 19, Schutz, 41, a native of Livonia, MI, spoke about her work and her ties to Cleveland.

She also shared her latest thoughts about the controversy she stirred last spring during the Biennial exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Black artists protested Schutz's decision to exhibit her painting of the murdered and disfigured Jim Crow victim Emmett Till in an open coffin.

For Schutz, the episode raised questions about what it means to paint such difficult, historically specific subjects after having focused for years primarily on imaginary subjects, such as her series on humans who could eat parts of their own bodies and regenerate them.

Entitled "Eating Atom Bombs," the Transformer Station show, organized by the Cleveland Museum of Art, explores America's current mood of division and conflict under President Trump, but without referring to specific historical moments, such as the Emmett Till painting.

What follows is an edited version of the conversation.

Q: In an interview last year with Calvin Tomkins of the *New Yorker*, you mentioned that you stayed up all night during the 2016 election. What were you thinking at the time?

A: You just think, 'oh is the world going to be on fire next? At that time, it felt very uncertain. I can't tell if it's really Trump or the way that things are going right now in the world in general, in terms of media. It's a divisive time and there's not a lot of compassion. It feels like everyone's at each other's throats. I don't think Trump helps.

Q: Are you reacting to the current administration as an activist in some way?

A: I don't make activist art. The paintings are more about problems, something I don't know how to represent.

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Q: The painting in the show entitled, "Crawling" depicts a bearded man carrying what looks like a plague victim through a desert, as they're both under attack by insects. How does that relate to America's situation now?

A: I made this ["Crawling"] in the summer of 2016. It felt like things were all happening at once. There'd be one news story and then the next thing, and the next thing. And so I said, 'what does this feel like?' It feels like everybody's on top of each other. It felt hot and claustrophobic, like people crawling on top of each other, and bugs crawling on top of them.

Q: Many of the paintings seem to refer to specific historical works that may have influenced you. For example, "Conflict," from 2017, which shows two people fighting, brings to mind "Stag at Sharkey's," the great 1909 George Bellows painting of two boxers that's owned by the Cleveland Museum of Art.

A: I love that painting. When I was a student at the Cleveland Institute of art, I would always go to that painting. It's such a great painting.

Q: What do you think of the museum now, after the recent renovation?

A: It's such a great museum, and the new building is amazing. The galleries are beautiful, there's so much space and the courtyard is just incredible.

Q: Did you go often when you were at CIA?

A: We could go there all the time, and it was free. It felt like a home, like you could go there any time. It's also how I pieced together what I thought of contemporary art. When you're 19, you really try to piece things together. That was the way you could really see art. It was right there.

Q: What was it like moving from Livonia to Cleveland?

A: Cleveland felt really alive to me. It could have been because I was 20 and it was really wonderful being 20, but I loved Cleveland. You could see all these bands. Also the downtown was different than Detroit. It was more inhabitable in a way. It was just great.

Q: What did you take away from your years at CIA?

A: The work ethic. There were just great conversations in the painting department. There was so much space in that building. You could really experiment. We would stay there until the building closed.

Q: Your friend and former teacher at CIA, Dan Tranberg, died this year after a long fight with leukemia. How did that loss affect you?

A: I didn't know that he had been so sick. It was just a shock, really. I loved Dan. He was one of our teachers. He was also a great friend, and artist. He was so deep and so funny. It's hard to imagine that he's not here.

Q: The Emmett Till painting caused quite a reaction last year at the Whitney Biennial. What are your thoughts about that now?

A: I think about it all the time. It was intense and I think there were a lot of good conversations that happened. I feel like I learned a lot from it. And it's also clarified how I think about certain things. It brought up a lot of questions for me.

Q: Such as?

A: The biggest question for me wasn't so much about the painting, which brings up its own issues, but it was more about what do you do *after*, especially in this time? What do you do? After people see it, is it read differently than what I was intending? That was something I was trying to figure out as it was happening, and it's something I still question.

Q: Why did you take on the topic?

A: It's such an essential American tragedy. It should exist in art, but at the same time I felt it was impossible, too. You don't really know until you try. So I thought I would make the painting. I didn't know if I would show it.

Q: What's next for you?

A: A lot of the newer paintings I think are actually becoming more layered and more moody, more [about] volume, with forms. I'm interested in that right now.

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Q: You're coming at them with loaded brushes. You're painting flesh that looks more rounded and meaty. There's a lot of flesh in this show. It's all about the body.

A: I think of myself as a figurative painter, but one who often paints subjects that are inherently abstract. I don't mean abstract in terms of how they look, but in what they are.

Q: How do you begin thinking about a painting now?

A: When I make paintings I'll try to imagine a space. So with these paintings, and as I go forward, I'll try to imagine a space after it all. Not after the world, not really the end of the world, but sort of like, *after*. You start to think, 'what is that space?' Maybe tumble weeds, or the ground is made out of jawbones.

Q: You've had a lot of success, but you've got to put that aside and just be a painter.

A: It's about trying to find problems, problems for yourself. If you knew all the answers to something you wouldn't want to do it, because there would be no point.

I feel like even if you fail, you have to try to figure out something that's really difficult, that you don't know how to do.

http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2018/01/dana_schutz_reflects_in_qa_on.html