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ARTFORUM



Dana Schutz, *Slow Motion Shower*, 2015, oil on canvas, 78x72".

Dana Schutz

ICA - INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, BOSTON

This solo show at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston—Dana Schutz's first exhibition stateside since her controversial contribution to the 2017 Whitney Biennial—is distinguished by a shift toward compression. In the twenty-one displayed works, which span the past nine years, Schutz questions what it means to represent a subject in its entirety within a singular work. Tensions between wholeness and fracture manifest in a maximalist confessional mode. In the monumentally scaled *Shaking Out the Bed*, 2015, for instance, Schutz corrals domestic detritus in her portrait of a sleeping couple: A slice of pizza, a rolled-up newspaper, and a hammer are some of the few discernible items among the chaos. These minutiae interrupt the corporeal presence of the couple, which is indicated by a jumble of hair and distorted body parts. The artist's tasks, it seems, are to contend with incompleteness, and to mend breaches in a composition that may never resolve.

The paintings on view at ICA, though essentially figurative, are initially perceived by the viewer as all-over abstracts. The eye, never at rest, skitters between fragments of illusory depth, frantic and sensuous brushstrokes, and colors as ludic as they are lurid. Together, these visual qualities resuscitate the notion of painting as a heroic struggle—yet, paradoxically, many of the works depict everyday insignificances. The painter unsettles the banal by fusing it with the absurd: In *Getting Dressed All at Once*, 2012, a figure fumbles with the impossible task of outfitting each

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appendage simultaneously; in *Slow Motion Shower*, 2015, a woman with flailing shrimp-pink limbs performs an agonizing ablution. Compromised bodies are scattered throughout the show, whether trapped in a Gustonian hell in *Swimming, Smoking, Crying*, 2009; caught in the glare of a police spotlight in *As Normal as Possible*, 2015; or cramped in the titular vehicle of *Carpool*, 2016. Both their humiliating dishevelment and their constriction within Schutz's frames evoke the precarious status of the contemporary individual, whose image is endlessly circulated, manipulated, and scrutinized within digital information flows.

Accordingly, the show's dominant mood is dejection. Figures are incapacitated, self-absorbed, and fundamentally alone even when portrayed with others. Some, like the self-immolating eavesdropper in *Ear on Fire*, 2012, behave as though they are being constantly slandered or misread. Others are resigned to their plights: In *Big Wave*, 2016, two morose children build a pathetic sand castle as fish, faces, and froth crest behind them. Schutz reifies our malaise, suggesting that resistance is futile, if worthy of being conveyed in paint.

A palpable schism arises between the reflection of societal alienation and the indulgence of it. As Robert Burton wrote in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, "What can't be cured must be endured"; but whether Schutz's abstracted figurative works make our estrangement bearable or commodify melancholy as humor is unclear. In another vein, the paintings traffic in comfortingly familiar painterly codes and art-historical references: For *Building the Boat While Sailing*, Schutz recruits de Kooning, Nauman, Picasso, and Pollock to create her hodgepodge composition. (Nauman's *Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, 1966–67, is inserted here as several Naumans spouting water, in what must be the artist's equivalent of a comedian repeating someone else's joke.) Are Schutz's quotations meant to elicit more than a frisson of recognition from the viewer? If not, the works they adorn risk being seen as eclectic decoration. The artist seems to recognize this danger in *Elevator*, 2017, in which the sliding doors, rendered as AbEx pastiche, open up on a mass of writhing bodies—and also unveil, in the background, a figure pasting wallpaper to a surface.

In presenting human subjects as disfigured and perpetually mediated, these works recall Schutz's contentious representation of a 1955 photograph of Emmett Till in *Open Casket*, 2016, even if their subject matter is not so highly charged or historically specific. Despite *Open Casket's* absence from this exhibition, the conflict surrounding the painting has followed Schutz to the ICA: In an open letter to the curatorial team, protesters called for the cancellation of the exhibition on the grounds that the institution failed to adequately address "concerns raised and advocated for so passionately by Black artists and critics." Though the paintings on display in Boston are not capable of resolving these tensions, their commentary on our media-saturated culture and the overexposure of the subject merits further discussion.

—Kevin Hong

<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201708/dana-schutz-71270>