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# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

## INCONVERSATION

# DANA SCHUTZ with Jarrett Earnest

Dana Schutz, known for her large paintings, which combine riotous color with distorted figurative forms, producing scenes as emotional as they are ambiguous, first came to attention with her inaugural exhibition *Frank From Observation* (2002), based on the conceit of Schutz as the last painter, representing the last subject "Frank"—a kind of quirky and sincere endgame to the history of art and civilization. Her retrospective *If the Face Had Wheels* opened at the Neuberger Museum at the end of 2011 and a new exhibition of recent work, *Piano in the Rain* (May 2 – June 16, 2012), opened at Friedrich Petzel Gallery last month. In her freshly empty studio in Brooklyn, Schutz sat down with Jarrett Earnest to talk about her paintings.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

**Jarrett Earnest (Rail):** In reading across the accumulated interviews that you've done since 2004, it's really amazing watching the dance you always have to do around questions of "influence," and the context in which you want your work discussed. Does a lot of that have to do with the fraught legacy of Neo-Expressionist painting from the '80s and its relationship to the market?

**Dana Schutz:** Maybe. But I also think that expressionism or painterly painting can be looked at differently today; it's only recently, like in the past five years, that people have been able to see it without all the baggage that has been attached to it. Style and influence are so much more fluid now and painterly painting is another mode of communication. I remember when I first started thinking about contemporary painting in the late '90s—there was a feeling that if you were to make something "painterly" it had to be a quote of what painterliness could represent. I feel that maybe the discussion around those Neo-Expressionist painters in the '80s was not quite accurate. It's almost like, in a way, Schnabel could have been performing what it is to be a painter coming out of a time when there was not a lot of painting.

**Rail:** I would actually love to talk specifically

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about Schnabel, not just because I think that he's an artist that we're getting ready to look back at again—maybe a little more generously—but because I feel like when I was in art school he and “Neo-Expressionism” were off limits.

**Schutz:** Right. But it's funny people don't have that kind of aversion to Kippenberger and I think that they had so much in common. Maybe because Kippenberger more consciously engaged persona and failure there was less backlash. He was also less commercially successful, I think, in his lifetime so there is that, too. There was a kind of historicism to the way that Schnabel was written about that was probably very off-putting.

**Rail:** It was very clear: Schnabel = bad. But then you look at some of the paintings and there are passages that are actually quite wonderful and beautiful. And then the films are great. So one of the things I wanted to ask you about relates to Schnabel: How conscious have you been of the legacy of Neo-Expressionism in what you're doing?

**Schutz:** I am conscious, but I wouldn't say it's a hang-up and maybe it was more of an issue when I was first trying to figure things out when I was in art school.

**Rail:** How has it shaped the way you talk about your work?

**Schutz:** Expressionism is tricky; there is a style but that doesn't necessarily mean that the painting is all about the artist's feelings. Everyone has their own way that they secretly desire to make things, a kind of personal skill base. I actually enjoy working with material—moving it around. But early on, I read essays in undergrad about why you should not make these types of paintings—I'm thinking of Buchloh's essay about “Ciphers of Regression”——

**Rail:** “Figures of Authority!”

**Schutz:** And there I had my drippy brush in hand and there was this voice saying, “Whatever you are about to do, don't do it!”

**Rail:** There was also a moral tone to that discourse—you felt like somehow these artists, Kiefer et al., were morally wrong.

**Schutz:** Yes, ethically and politically wrong. At the same time as I was exposed to these arguments, I was looking at painters like Laura Owens—people who were using a painterly language but without that kind of heaviness. With Laura Owens's paintings it was like there was just barely enough subject matter, just enough color. They were very *light*. It was actually a very permissive time for painting. For me, in 2000, the decision to make an all-out painterly painting was really a conscious decision. And it seemed to be at the expense of seeming savvy—at that time, I could have been seen as being totally out of it. But also, the older arguments about painterly painting didn't seem to make as much sense. Even the avant-garde could be seen as a style; different modes of representation, gesture, and attitude didn't seem so clean cut. I thought this was a type of painting that I wanted to see, so why not make it myself and see what happens. I remember first seeing Katherine Bernhardt's show way back in 2001 and being really shocked—it was just so raw I didn't know what to make of it. I think that it's really important to be at least a little bit uncomfortable with what you are making.

**Rail:** The other reason why I wanted to start with Neo-Expressionism is that I think a lot of the discussion about your work focuses on this “wunderkind market success story.”

**Schutz:** Yes.

**Rail:** “And fresh out of M.F.A. then she took off!” The art market blew up at the time, connecting you situationally and stylistically to this earlier moment of art market surge, the Neo-Expressionism of the 1980s—how did that affect what you were doing?

**Schutz:** Well, initially it wasn't like that—I think it was probably 2003 where all of a sudden it felt different, it felt weirder. The conversation stopped being so much about the work—but I think it was happening to a lot of people. This hypermarket blew in and, in a way, there wasn't much you could do about it, because then you would be reacting to this thing, which never was something that you intended in the first place, and also something that comes and goes. Looking back, what typified this moment in the 2000s actually wasn't handmade, big brushy paintings but

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more highly polished, fabricated, large-scale sculptures. In my case, “young, fresh out of art school” was what market articles seemed to focus on, not that I was making gestural paintings. So the story was really about speculation and youth rather than a particular style or attitude in painting. But, for a while, I was wondering about pictorial painting, thinking that maybe I wanted to make abstract paintings because they were more difficult to talk about, so you couldn’t pass them on as easily. They seemed more resistant to a currency of information. I don’t feel this way now. And ultimately I feel that narrative information is really important to my process.

**Rail:** I know early on you attended Skowhegan. Who was there when you went?



Dana Schutz, “Swim, Smoke, Cry #2,” 2010. Ink and gouache on paper, 38 × 50”. Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery.

**Schutz:** Byron Kim, Tom Friedman, Polly Apfelbaum, Suzanne McClelland, and Lorraine O’Grady. I was really young when I went. And it was weird, because I went back to Cleveland right away. It was strange going to this amazing place and being around all these people who had done performances in Berlin, you know, and I have nothing bad to say about Cleveland, but it was a little jarring to have to go back to school after that. [*Laughs.*]

**Rail:** One of the things that’s been a subject of oscillation when you talk about the work is the question of “narrative” in the painting. We all know that narrative is “bad” or was at least off limits at one time, but now it seems so absurd to think that.

**Schutz:** Right. I think it’s interesting how narrative works in a painting—it’s not dictated in real time, but it does have its own time. So you can read the painting and it can unfold, but in a slightly different way for everyone. Because paintings are typically still, it’s awkward to think of them as time-based, and it might be easier to think of a painting as fictional rather than narrative. Sometimes I’ll think about it like casting. Like, “what kind of guy is this, what’s he wearing, where would he be?” There is a painting in the show that just opened, “Small Apartment” (2012), which depicts two sad people in a really small, confined space. And that feels very narrative to me. There are subtle

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things that make a difference—if the guy was looking at the viewer for example. Or suddenly it could become very stupid if they were both looking at the viewer [*Laughs*]. The defeated gesture of the woman's hand on the table and the posture of the couple were important.

This idea that narrative is “bad” might be a leftover from Modernism; a notion that narrative is “kitschy,” too illustrative, or literary, but people might also not want to deal with other people's “stuff.” Colors and flat planes, no matter how subjective they are, are perhaps easier to take than, say, a painting of someone's mom. However, I think a sense of place, character, and event can happen simultaneously with the kind of singular, big-impact read of an abstract painting. Alex Katz's paintings do this perfectly. To make a painting with people and things is not just “subjective whatever-ness.” It's who we are and where we come from and can parallel the world, not just in a fictional or allegorical way, but also structurally. And paintings and images can feel so real! They can act as agents in the world.

**Rail:** Maybe it's because I just saw Dorothy Miller's *Twelve Americans* catalogue in your bathroom, but I wonder about someone like Larry Rivers. Because of the big, history-type painting that you were making around the last presidential election, and your strange relationship to figuration and ambiguity, is that someone that you're particularly interested in?

**Schutz:** Not particularly. [*Laughs*.] Although, I do have a soft spot or more of a sore tooth for Diego Rivera. I grew up near Detroit and for class field trips, we would always go to the Detroit Institute of Arts. I remember being in awe of Diego Rivera's huge mural, “Detroit Industry.” Regarding ambiguity, though, I actually don't think my paintings are all that ambiguous. Often they are pretty literal. I do like when more than one meaning can open up or when pictorial and painterly tangents can coalesce. But I usually begin with a specific action or subject in mind and I do like physical cause and effect. My intention is not to make things mysterious and my narratives are not as disjointed, say, as Neo Rauch. But I love painters like Robert Colescott.

**Rail:** Really? He's one of my favorites.

**Schutz:** He's amazing. And a part of it is his figures—this particular sloping quality to their faces, even the composition has that, too.



Dana Schutz, “Small Apartment,” 2012. Oil on canvas, 57 × 83”. Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery.

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**Rail:** The thing about Colecott and those '70s “bad painters” is that they are obviously/actually such good painters. I wonder about Judith Linhares—how did you come into contact with her work?

**Schutz:** She's great. When I was younger, getting my MFA at Columbia, someone had given me a postcard of one of her paintings. I really liked her work. Maybe it has something to do with what I was talking about earlier, but she was one of the few painters that was making something painterly, but not having it be like a “painterliness” in quotes. Her paintings did feel almost like a construction—that she was constructing a space out of genres and brushstrokes.

**Rail:** Another interesting intersection between you and Linhares is that she is very upfront about the kind of painterly lineage she's working with. She says “I like Munch and Ensor and Picasso, but I'm working through these things as a woman artist.” When you see the way in which critics try and describe your works, they usually draw connections to the same artists Linhares lists. But I also wondered about your position as a “woman painter”—someone who is making these paintings from the position of the woman artist.

**Schutz:** See, I actually don't think about it that way. Ever. I never think “I'm a woman” when I'm painting. You think you're “you” when you're making it, and that includes not having certain genitals. [*Laughs.*] All your experiences come into it as well as anything you can imagine. It's the idea of a specific feeling, a specific experience. I don't have that kind of revisionist relationship to the “canon.” I'm a feminist, and I am thankful for artists who have moved the conversation forward. But my experience is different. I mean the '90s was a great time for women artists. In my formative years, it just happened that a lot of my favorite artists were women, like Cecily Brown and Laura Owens, Nicole Eisenman, Karen Kilimnik, Lisa Yuskavage. These artists were a big part of the discourse. I mean, in Cleveland, all the art students were ripping off Laura Owens, not because she was a woman, but because she was cool—her paintings spoke to us.

**Rail:** In a lot of your paintings the figure's gender has weird ambiguity, which is its power. You also made a series of paintings of female musicians from the 1990s and the performers that you were focused on blurred gender in their own persona. Like the painting you did of PJ Harvey—

**Schutz:** Oh, she was so masculine!

**Rail:** Yes, but then she did this hyper drag queen thing that was a full circle—gender was collapsed and performed in very complicated ways. The thing that is so great about female alt music of the 1990s is that it purported to have a kind of a rawness—maybe even honesty—that was entirely unmediated; aren't these also the stakes of Expressionism? It's like, how do I find a way to move these formal elements around on this surface to articulate a feeling or a concept?

**Schutz:** I think it's a mistake to think that Expressionism was all about the *artist's* angst. Maybe for some it's really about their own angst, or something—but I would feel that for the most part, not really. And then you have artists like Josh Smith who show that painterly paintings can actually be cold, or Jutta Koether whose paintings perform as objects outside of her in a network or as an extension of her performance. With these female musicians of the '90s I think angst operated in a unique way. It was so raw, it also wasn't arena rock or showboating, but something that seemed more like a howl that could oscillate between being both felt and disconnected. I'm thinking of the way that Kim Gordon lists off girls' names in Sonic Youth's “Swimsuit Issue.” Her voice has this chanting rasp and a coldness about it, but there is an angst there, too, or a kind of pain. And part of that comes from the way she performs a part, or as a different speaker. In that song she is a secretary with the rage and ambivalence of a teenage boy. Like you were saying earlier, gender with these musicians seemed to reverberate back on itself in really twisted ways. It actually felt closer to my experience as a woman. The issue with painting maybe, is that people always tend to see it as being in first person. But I think that's not quite true. The experience of painting is much more diffuse and complicated, actually disembodied in a strange way. I love that *Art 21* Mike Kelley interview when he says that people initially thought his work was about his personal abuse, and then he says something like, yes, but it's not just my abuse, it's *our* abuse.

**Rail:** So much about the reaction against Neo-Expressionism is there's a whole constellation of things that we're trying to sort through, one of those is “authorship,” and now everyone gets very uncomfortable at the idea of art expressing the feeling of an artist. We don't want biography in our criticism. Whereas the truth is it's both! Of course

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you're a person and you make things because you have feelings and reasons, but if it doesn't exceed into something else, it's actually not a very interesting painting.

**Schutz:** Right. I also think that we might be so aware of constructing ourselves anyway now, with Facebook, etc. So our feelings about authorship are much less of an issue, or at least we feel that we are always under construction and not some singular fixed being. Ryan Trecartin is probably the closest thing we have to Kirchner today. Although Trecartin's work has a kind of social expressionism and Kirchner is so interior, I think those boundaries are beginning to blur.



Dana Schutz, "Build the Boat While Sailing," 2012. Oil on canvas, 120 × 156".

Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery

**Rail:** One of the aspects of your work that is talked about a lot is color and your role as a colorist. In a very early interview with Amy Sillman you mentioned you have a hard time with color. How do you feel about color now?

**Schutz:** I love color! Color is essential to the way that I organize space in the painting.

**Rail:** You've mentioned early 20th century abstraction like Kandinsky; for him color was articulated in relationship to music. How does color relate to the experiential construction of your paintings?

**Schutz:** It can direct you and describe space and objects. I always feel like red is so heavy. If you have a small red painting, it feels almost too heavy and too small. Or just too much like an object or a brick. Color has a physical effect; it works differently depending on the scale.

**Rail:** Do you go see the "Red Studio" at MoMA, the Matisse?

**Schutz:** That's a great painting. I love how Matisse talks about color like discrete musical notes. To have one uninterrupted color next to another; it resonates so clearly. It's not just like throwing a ton of color in there.

**Rail:** In Dore Ashton's book on Rothko, she talks about him sitting in front of the "Red Studio" every day for weeks and weeks and weeks, and that is the thing that transitioned him toward the later paintings, the full out abstraction, because of Matisse's understanding of the way that color creates space and experience.

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**Schutz:** Wow. Yeah, it's true! You physically adjust to color. Certain colors feel endlessly deep. Even some "bright colors" feel like they always recede.

**Rail:** I want to ask about the "conditions" that you use to make paintings. Could you talk to me about that a little? How did you get to that? Because they're almost like little experiments. Or assignments.

**Schutz:** Initially, I used fictional situations or conditions as a way to provide limitations. Recently, these conditions have been coming from language. A certain phrase can open up into a painting. But the choice of what to paint or not is very important. It's not random or Surrealist parlor games. I choose situations that can open up into something larger than themselves or those that rub up against painting in an interesting way. A couple years ago, I had been focusing on impulsive thoughts that could come to mind. Thoughts that are not worth saying because they are out of context, usually anti-social, non sequiturs without any real narrative significance. These are thoughts that probably come from the same part of your brain as swearing. But I was interested in focusing on them specifically because they are unusable. I wanted to see how these tics could be repurposed, to open up into the context of a painting. The unusable impulse provided information to begin a process of imagination and depiction. I was also interested in this approach to generating images because I was noticing all sorts of impulsive acts and unscripted hostility in the media, like the Tea Party, or offhand comments that are suddenly recorded on cell phones, or political missteps on Twitter that blow up into big news stories. The nation seemed like it was suddenly afflicted with Tourette's! There can also be a potentially awkward exchange, a kind of dissonant empathy that can happen between a painting and a viewer, and I wanted to see how that experience could play out with these subjects. People bring up Philip Guston a lot with my work for stylistic reasons, but the thing about Guston that was really a big influence for me was his use of "what if" situations, narrative situations that were simple but generative.

**Rail:** I wanted to ask you about Guston because the painting on the cover of your retrospective catalog *If the Face Had Wheels* seems like the most Guston out of all of the things you've done: it's a head that is an island, with the sun and the cigarette. As much as the iconography is Guston-like, the actual mark-making isn't Guston.

**Schutz:** Yes, it's not as heavy and has a different emotionality to it, a feeling of not being able to breathe or be heard. It's more about transparency, tears, and smoke than mass and weight.

**Rail:** One work that relates to the questions of conditions is Guston's Kafka—how do you do something specific that's also a larger symbol?

**Schutz:** The thing that is phenomenal about the "Metamorphosis" is it takes an absurd situation but follows it completely through logically. You wake up as a bug, but then you're still living with your family, so then what happens? The "every day" of living as a bug is what actually makes it horrific.

**Rail:** What are the things that people say about your paintings that you really hate or you think are really misguided?

**Schutz:** I'm not the best public speaker, and sometimes after a lecture I will feel that I have failed. Usually at the question and answer part, there will be someone who says, "I think it's great that it's just, you know, that there's just no ideas," or something. [*Laughs.*] I'm always like, "Oh my god, I did a terrible job!" Or they'll say, "Oh it's just paint." *It's just paint.* I don't like this sense that somehow I am so enamored with the paint—I feel like sometimes I actually don't really notice or think about it as "paint" while I'm painting. Another is sometimes people say that my work is Surrealist, which I actually don't think it is. Oh, and fantasy, I don't like when people use the word "fantasy." I hate it. Also, when people say "figurative painting" it makes me want to puke. [*Laughs.*] It really does! And I never think about the figure when I'm painting. I think more about the structure of the painting than the actual anatomy. In some cases I do deal with figuration, but I'm more interested in how the subject exists, the personality. I never think about it like there's this sort of torch to carry with the figure. I do love Otto Dix and George Grosz. Or Balthus is great but not because these guys were great at painting hands. Early on I really liked Soutine, but that was so much more about *how* something was painted, on a more abstract level.

**Rail:** With artists like Grosz or German Expressionists like Kokoschka, I feel like their work is about the physical reality of *being* a body which is also a psychic experience. Those artists, and your work, I feel, try to articulate the lived seam of those simultaneities—but it's not necessarily about "representing" the appearance of the world. And

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that's what makes it Expressionist, I think.

**Schutz:** Yes. I love that Soutine painting, “Young Girl at Fence”—just the way that her head is, or the way her eye goes down and her hands slip off each other. Everything about it swirls in the same kind of design—the horizon lunges up, the trees swirl in, it just really feels like shame. But also the space she is in is bright and happy. I guess that would be Expressionism! [*Laughs.*]



Dana Schutz, “Ear on Fire,” 2012. Oil on canvas, 40 × 36”. Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery.

**Rail:** So many of your paintings are in dialogue with early painting from art history—it's very clear that there is a deep awareness of the history of images and how they function. It's not something you've talked about much——

**Schutz:** I think people have a very intimate and personal relationship to paintings and images as opposed to having an intimate relationship to the canon of art history. As an artist, you are always looking for what you can use, and I think it has always been this way. I love paintings and am constantly looking at books in the studio. But it's important that references are fluid and not just citations. There's a painting that's up at the show right now “Building the Boat While Sailing” (2012). When I was painting the figure in the center I was thinking about Bruce Nauman, the awkward pose, where he's feeling the room with his body, and I wanted the figure to be measuring the space he is in, as well as the literal space of the canvas he occupies. But inevitably, the configuration of the body and his central placement in the painting, he really had this Christ-like feeling. And it freaked me out! [*Laughs.*] Someone else said it reminded them of a police outline, which I liked. I think there is always a negotiation in painting, where images

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begin to infect one another, and you decide what you can accept and in what amount. Images can be used like material and not just as appropriation or pastiche; they can be more slippery and nuanced. When they actually begin to play off each other and open up new meanings, it can be the best feeling in the world.

### **CONTRIBUTOR**

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