

The Eye and the Mind

Ben Lima

It's very easy for a viewer to be so swept up by the enormous visual appeal of Ludwig Schwarz's paintings, that one momentarily forgets about all the interesting questions that his work asks us to consider. His work incorporates both the power and the beauty of the medium of painting, and a probing exploration of how painting fits into a larger context, as framed through its installation.

I might classify Schwarz's work as "conceptual painting," starting from the observation that, as the great art historian and critic Leo Steinberg wrote in 1953, "The eye is a part of the mind." Steinberg recognized that, starting with Jasper Johns (whom Steinberg was one of the first critics to take seriously) much serious contemporary art would preoccupy itself with such problems as how to make sense of the way that sensuous aesthetic forms of art fit in with the forms of life that surround them.

All art relies on the intoxicating power of the look that hooks the eye, but what does that ultimately mean? Schwarz's art always encourages the viewer to think about these things, rather than simply having us enjoy a nice-looking painting, which would be the easier, more crowd-pleasing approach. Like Sigmar Polke or Martin Kippenberger (both of whom also set paintings within larger installations), Schwarz explores such questions by using wicked humor in a serious way: that is, to deflate the gassy pretensions and mythologies of the cult of the artist. Even as the paintings exert a kind of magical pull on the viewer, the installations surrounding them deconstruct any kind of mysticism about painting. Schwarz's investigations demystify art and the artist.

Whenever I have seen Schwarz's work in person, I have gotten to appreciate a new development in his exploration of the relationship

between the individual art object, and the totality of the environment in which it is set. The first of his shows that I saw was *Taos (Taos Thrift Store)* at Conduit Gallery in 2012. At that point, I had no previous knowledge of his work at all, and was immediately intrigued. While my attention was drawn to the four paintings, each six feet square, hung in a row on one wall, the floor space was given over to zany assemblages such as *(The) Suburban*, with its bicycle and guitar, and *Decoy, Primate Collection*, incorporating half a dozen plastic ducks on a tire. Meanwhile, a soundtrack of electronic music set the ambience. This is the most unusual thrift store I've ever seen, I thought.

In the tradition of Claes Oldenburg's 1961 *Store*, the *Taos Thrift Store* placed painting within the context of commerce—forcing aesthetically-minded viewers to remember that art is also a business. But whereas other artists (for example, Asger Jorn or Jim Shaw) would appropriate actual thrift-store paintings and declare them as their own work, in a Duchampian speech-act, *Taos Thrift Store* seemed to suggest that Schwarz's own stunning paintings might as well turn up in a thrift store, as in a serious gallery like Conduit. It was a disarmingly self-deprecating move.

A few years after that, in 2017, Charles Dee Mitchell curated a selection of Schwarz's works on paper at The Box Company with the statement that "Art is philosophical decoration... Art is the broad category of things and experiences that may cause some awkwardness and tend to get in your way when you are trying to get where you think you need to be." On the walls of the former box factory hung Schwarz's collages of years-old packaging material, whose bright colors badgered the eye into paying attention, while the mind laughed at the incongruity of the juxtapositions (example: Diet Coke 12-oz can pack, Dunhill cigarettes, Irish Spring Sport, and Band-Aid Sheer Extra Large). While the Madison Avenue-approved colors were as bright as they had ever been, seeing the long since obsolete or redesigned brand logos was like turning on a TV mysteriously broadcasting from 1999. The collages were poised on the knife-edge between very serious and very funny, which made them very compelling.

When the Dallas Museum of Art acquired the eight paintings that had originally been shown as part of Schwarz's *DESKTOP* exhibition at Conduit in 2016, I had the pleasure of sitting down with Schwarz for a

podcast interview, during which he spoke about his trajectory of, at one point, walking away from painting, and then later, returning to the medium once again. While studying at the School of Visual Arts in New York (at a time when people were saying “Painting is dead!” shortly before Cady Noland and Jessica Stockholder broke out into prominence), Schwarz recalled, Allan D’Arcangelo had said “Use anything and everything to get your ideas across!” These attitudes encouraged Schwarz to work mainly with found objects, and to abandon painting to its eventual demise. But later, having returned to Dallas, and noticing the endless Pop-style highway landscapes of Central Expressway (US-75; the kind of subject that D’Arcangelo might well have enjoyed himself), he started painting again. Ever since then, he has continued to use the medium, but not in isolation; instead, he places it within the context of the installations with which we are familiar.

In the present exhibition, viewers will see a set of eight large paintings, all human-sized, in vertical portrait orientation. (They are “scaled to the American flag,” Schwarz notes.) Each of these paintings appears to have 12 eight-by-ten-inch white rectangles scattered across it, in a way that reminds me of Jean Arp’s *Collage with Squares Arranged according to the Law of Chance*.

However, rather than a chance scattering, each of the small white rectangles (12 per canvas, or 96 altogether) is in fact the trace of another, small painting, which had once rested on the larger canvas while it was being painted, and has since been removed. Thus, each white rectangle, in semiotic lingo, is an “index”; that is, a sign that points to (or “indexes”) something else (in this case, the missing 8x10 painting). Originating in field of linguistics, the concept of the index was famously applied to art by the historian and critic Rosalind Krauss in her essay “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America.” There, Krauss traced artists’ use of indexicality back to Marcel Duchamp’s 1918 painting *Tu m’*, observing that Duchamp and subsequent artists used the index to play with, and complicate, the distinction between things themselves, and images or pictures of things.

Like Duchamp (and Duchamp’s heir Jasper Johns), Schwarz’s work also plays with the distinction between things and images. Each of these eight canvases presents both an abstract composition (the arrangement

of a dozen rectangles against a swirling, red-white-and-blue background) and the index of the act of making (the traces of the dozen missing 8x10 paintings). It seems to me that the works make us think about the idea of labor—the actual practice of painting. While the abstract composition hooks the eye, the indexical trace of the process keeps the mind thinking. As always with Schwarz’s work, the viewer’s eye and mind are engaged together as one. While the appeal of purely visual painting (or, as Duchamp would disparagingly say, “retinal” painting) inevitably fades with time, conceptual painting, such as this, will endure.

Ludwig
Schwarz

Moving Pictures

