

On Pieter Schoolwerth's *Portraits of Paintings*

In his recent *Portraits of Paintings* series, Pieter Schoolwerth furthers the exploration initiated in his *Z-axis Cycle* by eschewing the traditional impulse to 'critique' or 'express himself' through painterly depiction. Instead, he literally *uses* paintings of the past as the raw material upon which to ground his practice. As the rubric suggests, the *Portraits of Paintings* are allegorical in nature: each work stages the act of painting and figurative depiction itself.

The process enacted to create every work in the series is identical, yet it is notably streamlined when compared to Schoolwerth's preceding efforts. Things begin by selecting primarily Dutch and Italian pictures from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Schoolwerth at first rigorously traces, and then overlaps the figures from the source image to form a new, single hybridized body. In what could be described as a reverse Cubist effect, in lieu of the articulation of one figure from multiple points of view, what emerges is one chimera like mass from the superimposition and compression of several. The resulting imaginary 'figure' stands in as a depicted 'portrait of' the original group.

In *Portrait of "Esau Selling his Birthright" with Candle* (after Ter Brugghen), for instance, the body of the young Esau, capped in a gold gown, is collapsed into the bodies of Rebecca and his brother Jacob, cloaked respectively in mauve and red attire, to produce a 'portrait of' Ter Brugghen's narrative tableau. Schoolwerth then displaces the newly shaped 'multiple' figure to the right of the canvas. The candle, fixed squarely at the center of the classical image – allegorically representing the 'locus of the stable subject' as well as the spatial nexus of action – is for its part pushed to the left of the composition, thereby literalizing the destabilization process at work in forming the new emptied out, subject-less body in its vacated surroundings. The viewer is thus presented with two main areas of painterly activity: a simply rendered candle alongside an ambiguous figure that might call to mind, like an insistent murmur, the collected bodies of the Utrecht School painting from 1627. As Schoolwerth transforms the Ter Brugghen image, his new composition at once scrambles the adapted narrative and offers no singular body or subjectivity other than the one afforded by the material action of paint itself. What transpires is a kind of double movement: abstraction followed by re-presentation, or rather extraction and re-incarnation.

In more general terms, all of the *Portraits of Paintings* to date address the subject of making figurative paintings at a time when the physical body has become increasingly unstable in the world. Today's image of one's self exists as an amalgam of multiple, contiguous and competing images circulating instantaneously on the various screens of the digital realm. If our current experience of time and space is one of compression, superimposition, extrapolation and multiplication – all four characteristics owing to a certain order of abstraction – then the contemporary body might be considered a direct product of these forces. In a sense, the pictorial operations in the *Portraits of Paintings* methodically reflect, and even refract this pulverized state of things. What distinguishes Schoolwerth's project, however, what constitutes its element of resistance, lies in the final stages of the painting process, at the precise point when something akin to a new body appears, like a memorial to the flesh and blood body in flux. The delicate question then becomes that of the living dead.