DANIELA SCHWEITZER: THE PREPOSSESSION OF PAINT

By Peter Frank

The mythos of painting resides in its unique and predominant place in Western art history, but also in the perceptual conundrum it poses. Paint, of any kind, manifests a physical presence but is traditionally tasked to depict material things that are not really there. The argument between the pictorial possibilities of painting and the substantive actuality of paint has motivated some of the most compelling painted art. But the question remains unanswered: where does the image end and the medium begin – or vice versa?

This question, age-old and ever-fresh, is the engine that at once drives Daniela Schweitzer's art and compels us to look at it, or certainly to give it more than a glance. Schweitzer is a confident colorist and her painterly gestures are relaxed and expansive; but her real skill lies in the visual ambiguities she invents in, or invites into, her paintings. No matter how recognizable a particular subject might be in a Schweitzer painting, its identity serves as experiential armature for a vision whose breadth leaves the particularities of the subject well behind.

This, of course, is the process of abstracting – the modus operandi of the representational modernist, relying as Cézanne or Monet or Matisse did on quotidian circumstances seen out the window or across the field so as to allow all sorts of visual invention. Once liberated by photography from its indexical responsibilities, painting became capable of such self-reference and self-cultivation, growing every which way and ultimately allowing the artist to join spirits, as it were, with the medium. Many generations later, Schweitzer maintains this conflation of painter and paint. She may be motivated to paint by what she sees, but it is that motivation to paint, that need, that her work embodies.

However merited, then, Schweitzer's abiding reputation as a representational painter, rendering figural subjects against or within spatial contexts, belies the fundamental character of her approach to painting not only in spirit but in actuality. Her *raison de peindre* is optical and material, not pictorial. Her pictorial works are compelling less for what they depict than for how they depict it. Indeed, the picture per se is not always necessarily evident, or even present.

In fact, Schweitzer's recent work engages subject matter in three ways, or perhaps three "degrees." Concomitantly, her work subdivides into three groupings: the inarguably referential, the broadly but not distinctly figurative, and the purely or almost purely abstract. Schweitzer sets out these three positions with notable clarity, and equally notable imprecision: just as the referential work remains physically and optically painterly (i.e., sensuous), the abstract work, straining as it does towards complete non-objectivity, never quite leaves the seen world entirely. And the work between these two polarities oscillates freely between them, sometimes verging on the abstract itself, sometimes coming close to the pictorial without ever reaching the level of description characteristic of the more directly figurative paintings.

Clearly, Schweitzer is working consciously, even self-consciously, in this trio of related but distinct manners. Each manner displays its own earmarks, not only in its relationship to notions of painting and picture-making, but in its technical and stylistic character. The "in-between" works, for instance, take a structured, even rhythmic approach to the displacement of forms, figural or otherwise: if these works do not necessarily display buildings, they can be considered "architectural." By contrast, the abstract works run riot not only with color and brushwork, but with fluid, organic form, sometimes derived from the

human body but just as often from (just barely discerned) still life subjects and the artist's purely formal response to the plane of the canvas.

It is perhaps a bit misleading to cite Schweitzer's semi-abstract paintings in particular for their quasi-architectonic qualities. Those qualities, after all, are hardly absent from her other work. Schweitzer's approach to form is, if anything, choreographed with the architecture of the body in mind. In this regard her painting bespeaks its source not only in Matisse and Kandinsky, but in De Kooning and Mitchell, and in the work of the so-called Bay Area Figurative School. In fact, Schweitzer's engagement with the clarity and brilliance of California light, which she employs as a fundament of vision, aligns her the more with the figural painting of Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff, et. al. Further, of course, her equal embrace of figuration and abstraction, and her interest in modulating between them to explore a range of pictorial possibilities, position Schweitzer as a direct inheritor of the thinking as well as practice of mid-century northern California post-abstract expressionism.

Schweitzer thus draws on a range of mid-20th-century painterly practice; indeed, even a strong soupçon of the École de Paris – with its dependency on broad (often palette-knifed) strokes, out-of-the-tube colors, and cubistic but still pliable figures – wafts through her painting. But Schweitzer's tableaux are not governed by the formulas of late School-of-Paris painting, of Abstract Expressionism, even of the Bay Area Figurative School. Rather, they are impelled by these (and, certainly, older) models into a more personal practice, one which permits and finally benefits from the inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies inherent in a body of work produced on impulse rather than by design. Schweitzer does not imitate her forerunners and her influences, she reflects and blends them.

That is to say, Daniela Schweitzer works in no one's shadow, even as she works in the sunlight of so many predecessors. Her work is highly cultured and highly sophisticated in its sourcing and reasoning but does not take a sophisticated eye to appreciate. This is painting that by and large gratifies without indulging (and when it does indulge, it does so with grace and lightheartedness). Matisse sets the standard here: relish the color, relish the form, and never let it out of your control. Dr. Schweitzer, accomplished in a very different vocation, is still no Sunday painter: she has developed a distinctive style that yet bespeaks its roots, and extends a painterly tradition that in this day and age would hardly seem extendable. More importantly, she makes art not to admire its philosophical intricacy, but to share that intricacy with her viewers. (It is finally up to us to decide for ourselves how "figurative" or "abstract" a painting is.) And she paints not for the pleasure or challenge of it, but for the sharing of such pleasure – and such challenge.

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