

ARTFORUM

1000 WORDS

PIETER SCHOOLWERTH

TALKS ABOUT "MODEL AS PAINTING" • INTRODUCTION BY MOLLY WARNOCK



Pieter Schoolwerth, *Fuck Me #1*, 2016, oil, acrylic, and ink-jet print on canvas, 90 × 120". From the series "Fuck Me," 2016–, from the project "Model as Painting," 2016–.

PIETER SCHOOLWERTH has always played around with words, and the title of his current project is no exception. As the artist readily acknowledges, "Model as Painting," 2016–, immediately conjures *Painting as Model*, Yve-Alain Bois's classic 1990 collection of essays on modern and primarily abstract exemplars of the medium. Yet true to the painter's subcultural allegiances (he was for many years the animating spirit behind New York's Wierd Records and the label's legendary weekly party), it turns that rubric on its head. This reversal, Schoolwerth notes, is keyed to the rapid proliferation of "forces of abstraction in the world," the internet and digital technology foremost among them. What better name, then, for a body of work—manifestations of an expanded practice of painting that incorporates photography, ink-jet printing, and relief sculpture—that centrally involves both analog and virtual templates, inventively looping manual labor and digital processing.

Schoolwerth's painting has repeatedly posed the question of its relationship to prior models. Earlier series draw primarily from European tableaux of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, though each does so differently: "The Z-axis Cycle," 2008, shows the artist combining freely re-created elements from separate works, while "Portraits of Paintings," 2009–12, offers radically concentrated and selectively edited mash-ups of the disparate elements in a given landscape, still life, or history painting. "After Troy," 2012, particularly foregrounds the iterative nature of Schoolwerth's output: Every picture is based on either Simon Vouet's or Lionello Spada's rendering of Virgil's Aeneas carrying his father, Anchises, from the burning city. The "After Troy" canvases, significantly, presage the admixture of digital and analog procedures the artist deploys to such startling effect in "Model as Painting": Fragments of the source pictures (gathered from the internet, as is generally the case with Schoolwerth's appropriated images) were subjected to digital modification, printed, and further enhanced with hand-drawn marks and brushstrokes. In their resulting chimera-like condensations, as in their mixing of traditional and contemporary materials and processes, these paintings appear hybrid, knotted, self-interrupting things, echoing the unprecedented compression of space and time paradigmatic of communication today: the new baroque of the digital screenworld.

That contraction is also central to "Model as Painting." In Schoolwerth's newest works (which will be on view at Berlin's Captain Petzel gallery from January 21 to February 25), the scenography derives for the most part from online images of generic living spaces—templates of another sort, one might say, waiting to be filled with content by their occupant-users. Illusionist, human-shaped depressions appear as if excised from different layers of the virtual space, leaving only isolated photographic vestiges—a rudely gesturing hand, a sneaker-clad foot—and distended shadow-forms. (Here, as in Schoolwerth's immediately preceding project, "Your Vacuum Sucks," 2014–15, the artist draws on his own photographs of posed figures.) From one iteration to the next, the painter flips, selectively warps, or otherwise reworks the digital model, adding and subtracting information to obtain compositions of varying complexity. The effects, both in the resulting canvases and in the monochromatic, wall-hung relief whose production marks the end of each series, are at once visceral and vertiginous, even as the steady recurrence of select features brings us unerringly back to the method behind the seeming madness.

—Molly Warnock



Pieter Schoolwerth,
*Green Model of a Couple
Arguing About Their
Abysmal Financial
Situation*, 2016, oil, acrylic,
and ink-jet print on canvas,
90 × 120". From the series
"A Couple Arguing," 2016–,
from the project "Model as
Painting," 2016–.

In many of my projects over the past several years, including the "Portraits of Paintings" series, in which I used bodies depicted in old paintings as raw material to build a model for the ever-unstable contemporary body, I try to create a model for representing your presence to me by compressing the image of your body with the image of your shadow. If your shadow represents your presence when you're not here, and your body is "you" when you *are* here, I thought maybe one way to represent an overall model of "you" would be to compress those two together to discover an average of sorts—by warping the image of your body into the contour of your shadow.

There's obviously a play on the word *model*, as it now refers to a digital template but could also refer back to the nude or the history of the muse or the figure that poses. I'm always trying to allow words to simultaneously occupy conflicting meanings. In this case, if human labor really is at the root of every digital network, the model is always, ultimately, a human figure (or millions of figures) working in the shadows.

With the wooden models that mark the conclusion of the process, I began by looking at midcentury modernist reliefs by artists such as Louise Nevelson, Hans Arp, and Charles Green Shaw—these objects started to look so contemporary to me in their futurist organicism. Nevelson in particular, if you squint, is nearly a perfect precursor to the iPhone 7 campaign! What became interesting was to try to conflate the shallow space of modernist painting and relief sculpture with the shallow space of the computer screen, as both present a paradigm shift away from the conventional model of perspectival space. So it made sense to have this relief space become the thing that I would call the model, and photograph and embed under the surface of this pixelated world on the canvas—which I take to be the schematic, analog foundation of digital space today.

One model often lends itself to producing a series of paintings. I frequently repaint the model a different color, flip it horizontally or vertically, and reembed the fragments of information back into the image of the sculptural relief. These alterations yield an entirely different composition out of the same raw materials. I'm always trying to make variations within each series that articulate the fact that the model exists independently as an object apart from, yet inside of, the final painting, and that it by necessity precedes the painting process. And the final image of the depicted world depends on the model's presence beneath the surface.

This framework enables a new agency for paint, allowing it to play a different role than it does in conventional abstraction or representation. The actual matter of paint is put into an uncomfortably conflicted situation, raising the question of what it's doing here. In one sense, it's liberated, because it's unburdened from the need to represent anything; that's been taken care of digitally with the print. It has an abstraction of being, analogous to the way that paint functioned under the reductive logic of modernist abstraction—like gestural marks in Abstract Expressionism. But at the same time, this matter is also completely subservient to what I call the script of the composition: the formal dictates of the underlying color and contours. The matter of paint functions as a final layer or enhancement that simply reiterates the digitally printed material support—kind of like decorative ornament in architecture, adorning the building as a last-minute excess, or the filters you see in digital cameras or on social media platforms, in which the push of a button instantly intensifies or enriches the surface. This last stage of "filtering," or gestural enhancement, is where I put myself back into the tableau, reiterating the material support of the canvas by marking it with the human hand.

The most literal embodiment of the model as the painting would be if every painting were created by the same template, whether it was flipped, painted, warped—and it would really insist on this analog foundation for the production of a world. At the end of the line in each of these worlds, there's a foundation that's a thing I made. It's not a thing or a formal style that Apple made or that Adobe made. I'd like my work to contain something more than the activity of just clicking around on image-processing programs to fetishize the look of Photoshop; there's a lot of painting out there that just looks like an ad for Adobe. I want the thing at the end of the line in my paintings to be an object that I actually created myself.



Pieter Schoolwerth, *Leave/Remain #1*, 2016, oil, acrylic, and ink-jet print on canvas, 90 × 120". From the series "Leave/Remain," 2016–, from the project "Model as Painting," 2016–.

THE PROCESS THAT I'M USING to produce paintings echoes the way that technology produces digital space in the world. I build a multilayered sculptural relief articulating a figurative composition into which I distribute both digital information and the matter of paint. This template is like an operating system, an analog sculpture that lurks beneath capitalism's seductive, lifestyle-producing illusion of dematerialization, the cloud driving so many commercial industries.

The initial version of that model is in foamcore. The foamcore compositions come together organically, and I make them intentionally rough. There are ragged edges and dashed-off brushstrokes because I paint them by hand. They're quite laborious to sculpt, each taking three or four long days to make, as I cut out the hundreds of puzzle pieces with a knife, duct-tape them together, and screw them onto a wall for photographing. I upload the photographs, rework them in an image-processing program, print the result on canvas, and apply a final layer of gestural marks in oil paint. The last stage in the process, after I compose the painting from the model, is to go back and format the composition of the model as a multilayered series of PDF line drawings, which I cut out in wood with a CNC router and reassemble as a sculpture. So the model in fact ends up fed back in a loop, as both the first and last stage in the process, existing as both a model to produce the painting and a sculptural memorial to the completed painterly process. I think it's important to insist on the fact that, behind the digital smoke screen, and undergirding it as an indispensable foundation, there is a sculptural object that's built and operated by people—whether it's internet infrastructure, server farms, or another product of human labor.

In the same way that your computer or phone is a blank template onto which you distribute information to compose and perform your life, the models are empty vessels in which the narrative changes depending on what information is dispersed into them. Most of the recent models depict groups of people arguing. The hysteria of argument is very much a visual ground for day-to-day life now—you walk down the street or turn on the news and it seems all there is to watch is people screaming at each other in a panic, or people babbling alone into the vacuum space of anonymous online posts and comment threads on social media. So this image of an argument is the sculptural "model" I start with. For an exhibition in London I digitally compressed the Union Jack and EU flags into the pulverized "bodies" of the arguing figures, while for the forthcoming show in Berlin I've swapped the logos of two local rival football teams representing the East and West into this same model, a compression that confronts the viewer with the sacrilegious position of the potential of "liking" both teams, which symbolically and historically represent conflicting social classes in the city. In other, more formally motivated works, I've warped a sample image of paisley or '80s new-wave fabric design and an image of a randomly shuffled Rubik's Cube grid, each ready-made compositions of color and line of sorts, over the image of the model in the computer, an activity that digitally allegorizes the activity of stretching a canvas over an empty frame. I've been thinking about how the "once removed" model in each painting, a printed photographic image of a ("lost") relief sculpture that functions as a blank compositional template, might function as an appropriate "model" for a virtual space in painting . . . as in painting *once removed from itself*. The phrase *once removed*, apart from connoting virtuality, has another meaning that in fact actually describes the process of abstraction—as in "once *taken out*" of the frame, as I named it in an episode of the video *Your Vacuum Sucks*, 2014–15, which I made with Alexandra Lerman and which provided the narrative organizing structure for a series of three exhibitions I had a few years ago.

I've always been interested in the ways in which the ever-changing, and often invisible, forces of abstraction in the world affect the task of representing the human body. I've come to use the photographed shadow to represent the performance of your digital body when we're not together. It's interesting how certain people come off so differently when you e-mail or text with them, or how their personality appears on digital platforms as opposed to when you speak with them in person. And so many of the ways we communicate now, obviously, are not in person, so the shadow seems an appropriate image for your noncorporeal presence when I communicate with you through digital means—your elusive, malleable shadow (body).