



Pieter Schoolwerth, *Unicorn Landing Page Real Estate (Rigged #16)*, 2022, oil, acrylic, and ink-jet print on canvas, 79 × 72".

Pieter Schoolwerth

PETZEL GALLERY | EAST 67TH STREET

With a mood that often suggests a trippy twenty-first-century recapitulation of Richard Hamilton's iconic 1956 proto-Pop collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*, Pieter Schoolwerth's newest works propose a world swollen to the point of disfigurement with the flotsam and jetsam of the capitalist now. The consumerist heartache at the core of Hamilton's sardonic dream home was founded on a welter of newfangled appliances, product logos, and hypertrophically idealized male and female forms. For their part, Schoolwerth's virtuoso paintings swarm with low-budget products hailing from the virtual realm—digital bodies and settings bought off commercial CGI marketplaces such as

TurboSquid and then subjected to an array of deformations that disorientingly toggle, like so much of our contemporary image sphere, between the repellent and the mesmerizing, the funny and the ominous.

“Rigged,” Schoolwerth’s show at Petzel’s East Sixty-Seventh Street space in Manhattan, took its name from the “rig,” i.e., that infrastructural element of a digitally rendered body (effectively its skeleton) onto which the figure’s outward appearance is attached. When the surface form, or “mesh,” is dislocated from the underlying armature, derigged forms can be made to wobble and melt however the operator wishes. Large and strategically chaotic in their compositions, Schoolwerth’s paintings typically focus on ensembles of these gloppily contorted bodies interacting in spatiotemporally garbled environments, each element translated from its algorithmic origin to the canvas with a mix of media and gesture—passages of boldly impastoed acrylic, flatly brushed oil paint, and photographic ink-jet imagery. Variously torqued and liquefied; pixelated and polyhedral; transparent, stretched, split, and slumped; disaggregated and absorbent, these “poor images” are sent out into the world to walk a perilously strung tightrope. Though they are obviously impoverished—their psychophysical integrity thoroughly demolished—they are also liberated from the corporeal logic of their more conventional applications. Thus emancipated, they’re free to embody the instabilities that shape intersubjectivity in our epoch of simulation, dispersion, and ever more etiolated modes of presence.

The eight paintings and half-dozen short, looped NFT animations (produced collaboratively with Philip Vanderhyden and featuring sound by Aaron Dilloway) on view, all from 2022, were giddy in their narrative incoherence, depicting scenes as perpendicular to reality as the cast of creepily synthetic elements that populated them. Schoolwerth has been working in this general vein since the mid-2000s, but this newest suite ups the ante considerably, and any attempt to describe what’s going on in a given image quickly runs up against the perplexities of the artist’s berserk compositions and their puzzle-like unrealities. In *Unicorn Landing Page Real Estate (Rigged #16)*, for instance, a group of what initially appears to be five figures gather along a perspectively impossible beachfront, though closer inspection reveals that the crew in fact consists of just three bodies. One lounges in a chair *Mad Men* style with a cig in his geometrically unfinished hand, while the remaining four are actually just two entities and their shadow twins, a pair of source images that have each been duplicated and then radically altered. (This accounting does not, of course, include the titular mythical animal that rears in the center of the work, its hide covered with a distorted human face like a weird faunal vehicle wrap.) The whole thing has the feel of a script for some sort of light-beer commercial fed into a defective AI with the express purpose of causing a system error.

Some works seem organized around slightly more legible categories of behavior: *Jungle Zoom (Rigged #6)*, for example, proposes a sort of ménage à trois (quatre? cinq?) in which a gaggle of taffy-like bodies fade in and out of presence, engaging in various coital mergings for which genitalia seem entirely optional. But most cannot be parsed with any degree of narrative granularity, and are rather designed to function primarily as cautionary examples of the metaverse’s collective bad trip into the depths of the uncanny valley. Every painted image is, of course, a fiction and a phantom, but in that zone where resemblance threatens replacement and virtual identity constantly slips just enough out of sync to open up a chasm to revulsion, Schoolwerth conjures an even more monstrous contemporaneity, gesturing toward just what it is that makes our own present day so different, so appalling.

— *Jeffrey Kastner*