



Dana Schutz, *Beat Out the Sun*, 2018, oil on canvas, 94 × 87 1/2".

## Dana Schutz

PETZEL GALLERY | WEST 18TH STREET

Americans do not see eye to eye on much these days, but we have, as the writer Nitsuh Abebe notes, “reached a weird, quiet agreement that the most potent force in our politics is . . . a stew of unease, fear, rage, grief, helplessness, and humiliation.” Dana Schutz is rendering our deeply anxious times with rare bravura. Her latest New York exhibition delivered twelve mordantly funny visions of modern agony: high-speed collisions of the mythic and the banal executed in a searing palette that is part German Expressionism and part underground comics. Photos fail to convey the tectonic textures of her canvases. Each surface is a battleground, a frenzy of assaults and counterattacks. Lesser artists use thick impasto as a cheat, as though mashing around entire tubes of paint automatically equals audacity and derring-do. Here,

every thumb-thick squeeze and bubble-gum wad of color feels essential to the vitriol and vulnerability of the work. With brushes the width of baseball bats and kielbasas, Schutz serves up social commentary with the dark, sardonic humor of Otto Dix and Peter Saul. What distinguishes her paintings, however, is the empathy with which she depicts their tragicomic inhabitants.

In *Treadmill* (all works cited, 2018), a fish with legs runs frantically, head thrown back, mouth open, earbud cords flying: a victim of the self-conscious panic that can turn something theoretically pleasant like exercise into psychic trauma. The seven reluctant thugs toting bones, clubs, and two-by-fours in *Beat Out the Sun* approach their target wearing clownish war paint and fretful expressions. A knife juts from the heel of the man closest to us, injecting the scene with Homeric notions of arrogance, weakness, and prophetic doom. The gang's mission, an act of senseless violence, evokes the environmental destruction (and attendant self-annihilation) we as a species seem bent on pursuing. In *Washing Monsters*, a stockbroker type in a pin-striped suit kneels to scrub the feet of a skull-headed beast who might be his worst qualities made flesh. The man looks over his shoulder uneasily, as though afraid someone might discover the sadomasochistic pact he's struck with his own hideousness.

Schutz's subject matter has remained fairly consistent. As in previous work, her latest outsize canvases portray grotesque cartoony figures grappling with their own neuroses, avatars of personal mortification and social meltdown. But the new work breaks stylistically with the paintings that formed her last pyrotechnical solo show at Petzel, in 2015. Those had a flattened, Art Deco mosaic quality, with sharp angles and frenetic shards of color, confrontational and stupendous in the manner of oncoming trains. One wanted to step—or rather, *fall*—back. These new works are roomier: The characters inhabit bleak landscapes with distant horizons, inky voids, and rocky summits. To linger in these spaces—and to become infected with their angst and nervous energy—was easier.

Painting is a full-contact sport for Schutz, so it's not surprising that she would attack hunks of clay with the same manic brio. This exhibition included five stocky effigies cast in gray-patinated bronze displayed on plinths. They were the first three-dimensional works she has

shown. The artist packed on fistfuls of clay, then gouged it away with palpable urgency and violence. Eye sockets and ass cracks were inches deep. The sculptures occupied their own room, which was too bad. It would have been wonderful to see them alongside the paintings, extending that wild, calamitous world into our own.

The late painter Philip Guston, a strong influence on Schutz, often likened canvases to courtrooms. To paint, he said, was to become prosecutor, defendant, jury, and judge. Schutz experienced a more public kind of trial at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, where her portrait of Emmett Till, mutilated in his casket, sparked a firestorm of protests from viewers who condemned the work as racially insensitive, and testimony from supporters who felt freedom of expression was at stake. Many of the reviews of this more recent exhibition at Petzel framed it as some sort of chastened return to the fold following the controversy, but to read these works as concessions is to diminish their significance. Schutz is at the height of her powers, and this show saw her bringing those powers to bear.

— Zoë Lescaze

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