Art in America

July 2002

Peter Schuyff at Bill Maynes New York

Michael Amy

In his latest series of paintings, Peter Schuyff put his signature abstract motifs to playful use. First, he used the digital technique of Iris printing to reproduce Raphaelle Peale's Venus Rising from the Sea--A Deception (After the Bath), ca. 1822, onto 31 canvases, each measuring 37 by 30 inches. Peale's trompe l'oeil painting depicts a standing female nude almost entirely covered by a handkerchief pinned to a strip of cloth at the top of the composition. Still life--Peale's specialty--has thereby supplanted the noble art of figure painting. Schuyff then applied his own patterns to the blank "canvas" of Peale's pristine handkerchiefs, in his turn wittingly proclaiming the triumph of abstraction over figuration, and expanding upon the earlier master's conclusion that all painting is a construct.

John Cage once stated that if something is boring the first time around, one should repeat it until it becomes interesting. Schuyff has heeded this directive. Hung 5 inches apart on seven walls, his paintings produced an effect reminiscent of that achieved at l'Orangerie with Monet's paintings of water lilies, or at the Dia Center with Warhol's "Shadow" paintings. (The order in which Schuyff's pictures were hung could be changed, and the works could be purchased separately.) Like those artists, Schuyff explored the endless variations repetition allows for. Peale's warped and folded cloth, sagging under its own weight, became a support for fields of colorful dots, stripes, grids, black numbers on white, yellow letters on various monochrome expanses, and the American or Confederate flag, each expertly foreshortened in conformity with the predetermined fold pattern of the fictive fabric. Only one kerchief remained blank to remind us of the Peale, and to highlight the extent of Schuyff's interventions.

In one picture, the letters of the word "love" are designed in close conformity with Robert Indiana's famous logo and allude--exceptionally--to the forsaken goddess behind the kerchief. The letters are painted in red bordered by black, and the spaces between them are filled with alternatively green and blue fields, all executed with thinly applied strokes of oil paint. The creases in the kerchief almost obliterate the word. Another contemporary art reference occurs here, in an untitled work; blocks of yellow and green stripes separated by black hark back to Sol LeWitt's early grid patterns.

Schuyff reminds us through his appropriation and transformation of Peale's image that all art is inevitably born of art that came before it. He successfully combines diverse sources, mediums, genres and styles in paintings that continue to highlight his strengths as a master of optical abstraction.

COPYRIGHT 2002 Brant Publications, Inc. COPYRIGHT 2002 Gale Group