

Petzel

Michael Stoeber, “Delirious Shadows: Michael Stoeber in conversation with Pieter Schoolwerth,”
Kunstforum International, June 2021 Issue #275.

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Delirious Shadows

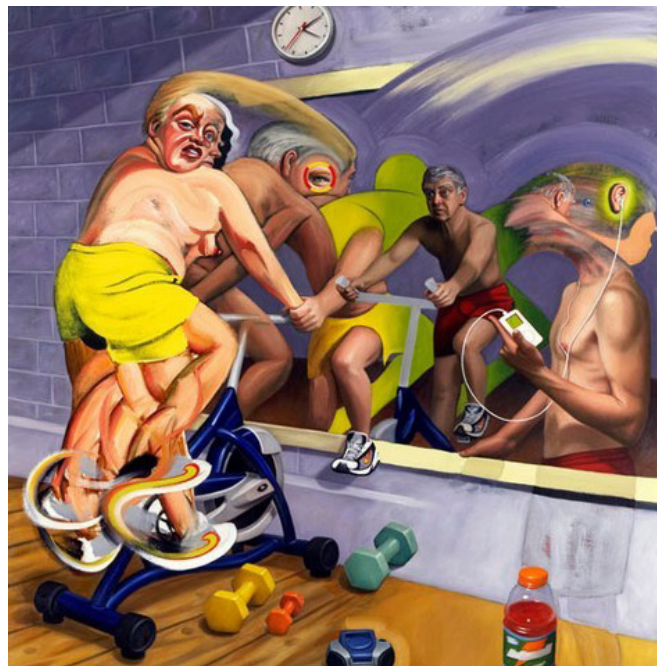
Michael Stoeber in conversation with Pieter Schoolwerth

English translation

„No Body Get a Head“ is the title of the first institutional solo exhibition in Europe by Pieter Schoolwerth, born in 1970 in St. Louis, Missouri, now living in New York. Presented by the Kunstverein Hannover and certainly worth seeing, the exhibition operates with this contradictory yet meaningful turn of phrase: No body gets a head, even though we have a head, and no bodies. The statement refers to the erased heads in the artist's work, but also, in a figurative sense, to the disembodiment of the contemporary human through digitalization. It is one of the major themes of Schoolwerth's multimedia paintings, which he has been creating since 2015 as part of a series entitled *Model as Painting*. With it, he has demonstratively reversed the title of Yve-Alain Bois's book *Painting as Model*, a 1990 classic that gathers essays on Modernist abstraction in painting. For painting to become a model today, as Bois insinuates, it must, meanwhile, according to Schoolwerth, resist the „forces of abstraction“ that dominate our everyday lives in the form of the Internet and its algorithmic discontents, which threaten to make our bodies disappear. The artist has already countered this in the subcultural spaces of downtown Manhattan by establishing Wierd Records, his legendary record label that hosted weekly live music and DJ parties for years...all to avoid fulfilling what the title of the Hannover exhibition threatens when we read it phonetically as „Nobody gets ahead“. Michael Stoeber spoke with Pieter Schoolwerth about his art.

MS: Pieter, your exhibition in Hannover comprehends 30 years of works from the early “Alphabet” to the “Shifted Sims”. Do they follow a logical evolution?

PS: Looking back over the years in selecting works for the show with Kathleen Rahn from the Kunstverein I was reminded of certain themes that I have always been drawn to – and I'd say that my approach to planning and composing projects has often mirrored the status of how I perceived human relations and identity construction to be evolving in the world in that moment.



Pieter Schoolwerth, *Workout*, 2006, Oil on canvas, 236.2 × 221 cm, Courtesy: The artist, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler und Captain Petzel, Berlin, und Petzel Gallery, New York.

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I've always thought of art as a vehicle to provide experiences and models to think through that might allow people to feel more free - even if it's just for a moment the realization that the state of things perhaps we've taken for granted, as static and fixed, could potentially be different can feel meaningful.

MS: “Alphabet” (1991) and “Thee Space Between” (1991) rely on your experimenting with language? What does language mean to you for the creation of art?

PS: Many intriguing new discussions around identity formation were in the air when I was in school at CalArts. One of my first efforts, from which the show in Hannover begins, was to create an alphabet that consisted of each of the 26 letters of the Latin alphabet combined with every other – which allowed me to write words that literally denoted two signified objects simultaneously. I sculpted a bestiary of hundreds of small golden creatures that I multi-track-recorded the names of on a cassette recorder, which when played back narrated an allegorical cosmology of meaning-production in audio book form entitled *Thee Space Between*. I saw this book as a way of realizing a humorous, libidinal space of being that was fluid and multiple, and could only be articulated by ghostly machines.

MS: It seems to me that the center of your multifaceted art is painting. Why did you choose this medium?

PS: I came to painting in my late 20's through the unorthodox backdoor of west coast conceptualism of the 70s and 80s, which I think led me to develop a particularly analytic approach to the medium. I was always interested in how the ever-changing forces of abstraction in the world effected the task of representing the human body – both in art and building subcultural social bodies in music, such as my record label Wierd Records and long-standing weekly music party, The Wierd Party in downtown New York (2003-2013).

MS: Are there similarities between your musical practice and painting?

PS: I've always seen producing parties as a kind of painting in three dimensions: staging a sensitized balancing act between lights, colors, and sound through which human bodies and personalities glide like gestural strokes on a spirited surface. While my visual art efforts have focused on how our individual and social bodies are changing, my musical projects have aimed to help create new shadow spaces of enjoyment in the night to connect people and counteract the alienating digital forces we contend with each day.

MS: Do you concentrate on the body and on figurative art, because the singular and specific precede the abstract and general?

PS: Painting the figure has long been a way for me to construct different models for representing this ever-changing body we inhabit, and how we form an idea of each other's presence as a result. The show in Hannover presents several different periods of my work which have attempted to negotiate these corporeal questions.

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MS: Could you perhaps specify this using as examples the mentioned works?

PS: In *Wild Mountain* my shadow enters the picture from below to join a group of figures in mimicking the scopic penetration of the viewer’s gaze sledding into the frame down a snowy hill. *Workout* similarly stages an allegorical viewer looking into a frame in which he sees his aging body metamorphose in time. And *Couple* presents a therapy session in which the male partner’s feelings of invisibility are (dis)embodied by his presence being erased in a thick swathe of gestural strokes, as the therapist appears in a peaceful comingling of the two superimposed figures.

MS: What was your inspiration for the “Portraits of Painting” project (2008-12)?

PS: *The Portraits of Paintings* series, a few examples of which are included in room three, was another project that was primarily allegorical in nature: each work deliberately stages the act of painting and depiction itself. I’ve never been interested in an ‘expressionistic’ notion of painting – I always found the romantic, Greenbergian modernist idea of (typically male) gestural bravura and allegedly emotional paint handling to be gratuitous and comical, particularly at this point in time.

MS: But nevertheless you use gestural brushstrokes in them.

PS: During this period, I thought it would be interesting to utilize this same mid-century language of paint handling for an entirely different purpose: which I thought of as an anti-expressionistic, non-compositional effort to construct a model for the contemporary body through superimposing and compressing together appropriated images of paintings from the past. I would find a painting online from the 16th-18th centuries, trace each of the figures on a sheet of acetate, stack them up and transfer the contour drawing onto a monochrome background - then in one improvisational sitting I attempted to find a single, often monstrous new figure in this scaffolding of the past. I saw each work as enacting a scientific experiment



of sorts, with these historical bodies functioning as stable *constants* which I would use as raw material for understanding contemporary chimerical presence.

MS: How much do deconstruction and blotting out the human figure in your works mirror a contemporary condition humaine?

PS: I began to think about invisibility as a mode of being in 2004 – as evidenced by *Bluff*, and *Couple*.

Pieter Schoolwerth, *Alphabet*, 1991, Pencil on Paper, 45.7 × 61 cm, Courtesy: The artist, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler und Capitain Petzel, Berlin und Petzel Gallery, New York

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Pieter Schoolwerth, *Couple*, 2005, Oil on canvas, 200,7×254cm, Courtesy: The artist, Kraupa- Tuskany Zeidler und Captain Petzel, Berlin, und Petzel Gallery, New York.



Pieter Schoolwerth, *Bluff*, 2006, Oil on canvas, 96,5 × 108 cm, Courtesy: The artist, Kraupa- Tuskany Zeidler und Captain Petzel, Berlin, und Petzel Gallery, New York

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Installation view: Kunstverein Hannover, Pieter Schoolwerth, No Body Get a Head, 1991–2020, Foto: Raimund Zakowski



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As email, texting and social media soon become ubiquitous I often felt I was in the room with people that were in fact far away, and I was set on representing a figure that has been visually deleted.

MS: Which happens in your film *Your Vacuum Sucks*.

PS: Yes, invisibility is also an important theme of the paintings and two films in room four which I made in collaboration with Alexandra Lerman. *Your Vacuum Sucks* is a film in which the lead character has been digitally erased from the image. Appearing as a hole, a shadow, or a mirror reflection of his properly embodied friends and coworkers he pays a friendly visit to in each of the seven scenes. The moving image on screen is composed of two disparate moments in time compressed, and running alongside each other in parallel as separate filmic layers. Everywhere the lead figure’s body appears in the top layer it is ‘sucked-out’ to create a hole, and the empty space of his silhouette filled in with a different take of the same shot showing through the bottom layer, depicting a moment just before, or is it one soon to follow?

MS: What is the result of this superimposition?

PS: The result of this superimposition (which occurs in my both the paintings and the film) is an image of both spatial and temporal compression – two discrete moments in space and time are represented with a single image of a body. The figures the lead character is interacting with are feeding back their own images on themselves, (which is how a platform like Instagram works: you take a selfie, post it, and it comes back with ‘likes’). This visual model has an inverse relationship to that of cubist space: the cubists depicted one body from multiple points of view; I am depicting multiple bodies from one point of view - which is so often the case today when one’s body is firmly planted in front of a screen opened up onto multiple space-less vistas.



Pieter Schoolwerth, *Your Vacuum Sucks*, 2014, Installation view What Pipeline, Detroit

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MS: The works in the “Model as Painting” project combine complex digital practice and painting. When did you have the feeling that brush and canvas alone were insufficient for your intentions?

PS: By the fall of 2015 I had been painting in a conventional way, applying an inert material to a support by hand, for close to twenty years, and this ‘direct’ mode of paint handling had come to feel inadequate and questionably nostalgic. So much of the substance of everyday life experiences had become abstracted, as we now performed basic tasks from a once-removed space behind the screen. We shop with money without currency through credit, have sex and friends without bodies through websites, and enjoy violence without blood through video games: so I began thinking about what an accordingly ‘indirect’ idea of painting might be, perhaps painting without paint? Several examples of this period are included in room four.

MS: In how far is the “model” important in this process?

PS: I proceeded to invent a multi-media process to compose paintings that I saw as echoing the way technology produced digital space in the world. I took the model to represent this new space that existed in between the artist and the canvas (or our bodies in the world) - a blank digital template similar to a smartphone or desktop computer - through which visual information passes and is composed within. I began by taking photos of my friends from which I made a drawing, which I then built out into a 3D monochrome relief sculpture in foamcore, and I photographed. In the computer I embedded fragments of the photographic material into the model, and printed it out on canvas. As a last step I added a series of gestural brushstrokes on top of the print - putting the paint back into the painting, as it were – adding a final layer of enhancement as occurs with sharpening color and contrast filters on a cell phone after taking a picture.



Pieter Schoolwerth, Model for Personality Inventory, 2019, Oil, acrylic, inkjet and mixed media on foamcore, 199,4 × 172,72 × 48,3 cm, Courtesy: der Künstler, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler und Captain Petzel, Berlin, und Petzel Gallery, New York



Pieter Schoolwerth Model for Behavioral Surplus Capture, 2019, Oil, acrylic, inkjet and mixed media on foamcore, 261,6 × 180,3 × 96,5 cm, Courtesy: der Künstler, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler und Captain Petzel, Berlin, und Petzel Gallery, New York

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Pieter Schoolwerth,
Shifted Sims #4 (Dine
Out Expansion Pack),
2020, Öl, Acryl und
Druck auf Leinwand,
170, 2 x 259, 1 cm,
Courtesy: The artist,
Kraupa-Tuskany
Zeidler und Capitain
Petzel, Berlin, und
Petzel Gallery, New
York

MS: What does the “model” contribute to the impact of the work?

PS: The model produces a photographic simulation of space which is visually quite different from the illusionistic space of conventional representational painting. When you look at the works built off of a model what you’re seeing is a photo of a sculpture (a self-contained 3D space) with paint on it. I see the discarded sculpture as the operating system of the painting, and its *removal* from the picture mirrors our distance from the world today. In the same way that server farms produce digital space in our phones and homes, my use of models continues to be an effort to depict virtual space in painting

MS: Do you use humor in your art the way Beckett did who said: “Nothing is funnier than bad luck,” he also spoke about “failing better” in art (and life) which supposes an aim – at least implicitly?

PS: I’ve always embraced humor as a hugely important life-affirming force: we laugh together because we feel a connection, even if we don’t realize exactly what it is (we’re laughing about). Similarly, in my work I utilize punning and other non-sensical approaches to writing – the pun liberates words from their traditionally representational function. I see the pun like the shadow space of a word, and the delirious shade it throws on daily experience can be a refreshing expression of pleasure in the face of the absurdity of life.

MS: Do you think that art can make people better?

PS: As non-verbal forms of expression I think the visceral impact that visual art and music have on the nervous system (and the body over the brain, in particular) can allow people to experience the world in profoundly different ways than literary and other time-based artforms do. One of my attractions to painting, is the potential that the visual picture has to speak to another plane of sensorial communication that can bring people together like nothing else.

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Automelodi performing live at the Wierd Party, NYC, 2009, Foto: Naomi Elena Ramirez

PIETER SCHOOLWERTH

Born. 1970 in St. Louis, USA; 1994 Graduated from California Institute for the Art ; Lives and works in New York City, USA

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2021 Kunstverein Hannover, Hannover; 2020 Petzel Gallery, New York City; 2019 Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin;
2017 Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York City; Capitain Petzel, Berlin; 2015 356 Mission, Los Angeles; 1st Gate, New York City; 2014 Gallery SKE, Neu Delhi; What Pipeline, Detroit; 2013 Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Brüssel; 2010 Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris;
2008 Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; 2005 Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York; 2002 MC Magma, Mailand; 2001 American Fine Arts, New York; 1996 Greene Naftali Gallery, New York City; 1994 Thread Waxing Space, New York City

Selected Group Exhibitions

2020 „Infinite Games“, Capitain Petzel, Berlin; 2018 „Bubble Revision“, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York City, „FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art, Cleveland; 2017 „The Happy Fainting of Painting #2“, Galerie Krobath, Wien, „The Curator’s Eggs“, Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York City; 2016 „Dreamlands“, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, „Everybody Is Crazy, But Me“, Maison Particulière, Brüssel; 2015 „June: A Painting Show“, Sadie Coles HQ, London, „Can You Hear Me? Music Labels by Visual Artists“, Onomatopee, Eindhoven; 2014 „Jonathan Lasker & Pieter Schoolwerth“, Galeria Marta Cervera, Madrid; 2011 „New York to London and Back: The Medium of Contin- gency“, Thomas Dane Gallery, London; 2008 „Des Jeunes Gens Modernes“, Galerie du jour agnes b., Paris; 2006 „Tomorrow Land: CalArts in Moving Picture“, Museum of Modern Art, New York City; 2004 „Ciao! Manhattan: Recent Painting from New York“, Perugi Artecontemporanea, Padua; 1997 „Gothic“, ICA, Boston