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Ena Swansea
Princess Elisabeth
2006
André Schlectriem Temporary



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Some People
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André Schlectriem Temporary

IMAGE ALCHEMY by Adrian Dannatt

Ena Swansea, "New Paintings," Feb. 23-Apr. 7, 2007, at André Schlectriem Temporary, 524 West 19th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011.

"Painting may not be dead, but I'm just about ready to kill it with my bare hands," said my friend from out of town as we toured the New York fairs and galleries. "Clearly, nobody would have thought of reviving 'painting' if they'd known beforehand that there wasn't anyone around who could actually do it."

For without a doubt, never has so much dreadful dreck been daubed since the 1980s nadir of Neo-Expressionism, with the added suffering of now having to witness its witless acceptance by an art world devolved 25 years further down the slope from any sort of serious historical or contextual knowledge.

Which only makes the exhibition of new paintings by Ena Swansea at André Schlectriem Temporary all the more exceptional -- to stand out quite so boldly, to excel as exception-to-the-rule in a sea of similarity, can only be due to such retardaire traits as talent, skill and plain hard work.

As this show demonstrates with almost sadistic panache, Swansea "knows how to paint," a venerable cliché that due to current state of practice has actually come to mean something, even if reduced to the anecdotal admittance that no, I definitely could not do that, let alone my child of six.

It may well help to have been painting for over 20 years, as opposed to, say, five, and to be fluently conversant with the long history of the medium. But best of all is just to be luckily blessed with the gift of being able to do it.

These new works by Swansea, eight canvases from the last year, are distinguished by scale, subject matter, palette and technique. Perhaps what is most immediately remarkable about these works is the manner of their making. . . no, that's not true, the genuinely most immediate thing is of course their striking imagery -- but let's get back to that.

Since 1990, Swansea has developed her own unique technique, in which she builds up on the canvas a solid graphite ground, a palpable layer of dense metallic texture that serves as pictorial base, background and preparatory stage, theatrical as well as practical. This surface is not just some hyper-chic special priming for the canvas, however; rather it's a key element in the optical mechanism of the picture, both dominant and subservient to the subsequent deployment of overlying imagery.

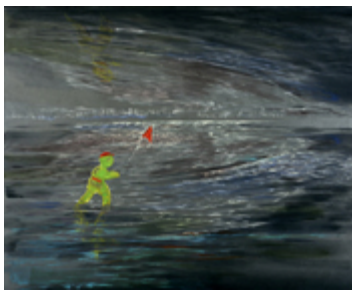
The potency of these paintings arises from the contrast and



Ena Swansea
Casey Spooner
 2006
 André Schlectriem Temporary



Ena Swansea
Watching TV
 2006
 André Schlectriem Temporary



Ena Swansea
Slow Man
 2006
 André Schlectriem Temporary

confluence of the two layers, graphite below and a lighter, delicate application of paint above, which creates an ambiguous space of figurative traces, a shimmer of meaning easy to "read" yet tipped to dissolve into a shiny darkness. The graphite element is highly attractive in itself, almost edible in its tactile physicality, especially that thick lip that sticks over the unprimed linen edge. Much pleasure is granted simply by the stroke of paint across lead, the texture of the two as an abstract element, comparable to the rewards of Günther Förg's oil wash over dense lead sheet.

Like all great figurative painters, Swansea uses seemingly abstract elements, bold nonrepresentational devices, as an essential part of her repertoire, and indeed would probably make no distinction between those tired old categories "abstraction" and "figuration" -- which the act of painting subsumes.

But greeted on descending the gallery ramp by a gigantic image of a beautiful woman on horseback, no viewer could resist the immediate visual satisfaction of this initial encounter, followed by an increasing recognition of its outstanding technique, the haptic physics of its making, on gradually growing closer. It is a sort of alchemy, not quite trompe l'oeil and not yet illusionism, the way the eye is made to conjure this grand portrait from swirls and flurries, dabs and daubs of paint which by themselves, from a few inches, are beautiful because they seem to spell no meaning.

The title *Princess Elisabeth* cannot but force one to, yes, make yet one more comparison, in this case to the greatness of John Singer Sargent and his highest of European high-society paintings, to the genius of his brush which could create the most perfect portraits from single smears of oil.

From up-close to a canvas by either of these artists one is granted an exemplary lesson in the sheer craft and cunning of the painter's arsenal, that dexterity beyond us. And upon such close comparison we should be unafraid to proclaim Swansea the greatest American exemplar of the single brilliant stroke of titanium white since John Singer lui-même.

Unlike in Sargent, the surfaces of Swansea's paintings are impressively flat even though they seem to be richly clotted with paint. This impasto is an illusion (not unlike the paradox of Glenn Brown's painted sheen) to the extent that as with the late works of Roy Lichtenstein one feels these so very evident brush strokes are almost paintings of brush strokes, signifiers of paint built from paint itself.

Also unlike Sargent, Swansea creates some very peculiar, hauntingly strange pictures of almost occult intensity, the subject matter of which is as disturbing as its handling is reassuring. *Slow Man* (2007), an image of a fluorescent cartoon figure in an apocalyptic seascape, has a nightmarish, inexplicable presence and is one of the most ambitious sky-sea painting in a long while.

Likewise, *Child in Tree and Man with Saw*, also from this year, has a near-psychedelic potency, with Swansea radically pushing her technique, the bright silver of the saw and sheer oddity of the actual composition, the smeared day-glo flare and symbolist flourish, conjuring a vision adjoining the mystic.

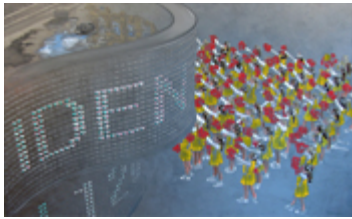
Swansea has also produced some of the weirdest parade scenes since



Ena Swansea
Child in Tree and Man with Saw
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James Ensor and three outstanding examples are here displayed, the real masterpiece being *Identity*, with its fascist or Soviet pom-pom girls created from the boldest strokes, a near-floral LED display and dashing reflection of water.

Ernst & You is titled after the Times Square sign, the final "ng" of the advertising agency's full name cropped out, as similarly "tarbucks" has lost its "S." Part of Swansea's daring is in dealing with such Pop iconography, neon publicity and flashing ads, with so completely un-Popean sensibility. Instead, these paintings are about time, the different "times" of painting and parading, of blinking signage and oil on canvas, the long time it takes to create a gigantic Macy floating figure and the few seconds it takes to see it pass by and be forgotten. In *Picture Plane* we have the time of the Sullivan building, early 20th century architectural ornamentation, the instant time of reflected advert lights in the windows, and a sort of eternity in those humans looking back at us through the glass, ghosts or permanent witnesses.



Ena Swansea
Identity
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With these bravura works Swansea reminds us that painting has its own entirely unique temporal agenda unlike any other artistic medium, a magical relationship to time itself that remains its fundamental importance, an importance she has here confirmed and extended both for our sake and that of its continued history.

ADRIAN DANNATT is a New York-based critic and writer.



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Ernst and You
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Picture Plane

2006

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