

ARTIFICE INTELLIGENCE

PATRICK SCHUCHARD: OBJECTS OF MEMORY AND DESIRE

St. Louis Art Museum

PATRICK SCHUCHARD: SELECTED WORK 1975-1991

Nussbaum/McElwain

Patrick Schuchard's exhibitions at the St. Louis Art Museum and at Nussbaum/McElwain illustrate the underlying connections between authenticity and artifice. Visual artists — in fact, most people interested in visual arts — have probably wrestled with this psychological puzzle: Why does authenticity as a



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purely conceptual theme have such a hold on us?

Authenticity has many guises, each contributing something essential to our calm satisfaction with the genuine. Authenticity of *object* is especially fascinating because its pull is entirely abstract. The art of replica making has reached such sophistication that often only the most informed professional can now tell the difference between, say, a genuine art object and a well-made cast. The real and the replica are effectively alike, yet we feel awe in the presence of the real object and mere interest in the copy of almost identical appearance. Or do we?

The objects in Schuchard's work challenge our ideas about authenticity and artifice in ways that are not easy to pin down. As a young artist straight out of graduate school, Schuchard made large, abstract paintings. In an interview with the St. Louis Art Museum's chief curator, Michael

Shapiro, which is included in a gallery guide for the museum's installation, Schuchard says: "When I moved back to St. Louis in 1977, I had just left a teaching position on the East Coast. The large, abstract paintings that I was doing ... were already changing in a direction of figuration. Fields of forms were starting to break down into single forms. Certain of those single forms emerged so frequently that I knew they had special meaning for me — almost symbols. I wanted to isolate them and build real objects of them, so I could look at them and paint them. From there I began to put them together into still lifes and worked from them."

Some of these single forms included a chair back, a folded fan, a table, a rug, guitars, drapes and a ventilator cover that Schuchard carefully carved and constructed out of felt and wax. In working with these objects, he felt himself groping with the idea of focus and the start-and-stop tension between seeing the object and trying to paint it.

"It took about 10 to 12 years of working with still-life objects before I was able to do what I really wanted to do with objects and space in figurative ways," Schuchard continues. "I've never really viewed myself as a realist artist, even though I work from recognizable things. I use representation as a means to another end: It is a way for me to place myself within the relationship of an object and its significance."

Schuchard's considerable realist skills are demonstrated in "Custer's Last Battle" and "Antiquity (View and Plan of Toledo)." These objects, based on an old print of the famous battle and El Greco's masterwork of the Spanish city, are made of wax, felt, encaustic and oil paint. Although they simulate the subject matter and styles of the original works with surprising exactitude, they are sculptural objects, not solely painted images. They are replicas that capture the flavor of the idea, situation or sense of place in the originals. El Greco's "View and Plan of Toledo" shows a perspective view of the city with the architect in the foreground holding up the city plan. It was appealing to Schuchard because it allowed him to put El Greco's two representational conventions together

with one of his own.

"Western Painting" was a pivotal shift in Schuchard's development away from still lifes and realistic landscapes. In it the artist used encaustic to flesh out the surface qualities of the painting. The subject, a lumber mill set in an impressive landscape vista framed by mountains and huge stacks of timber, was a remembrance of a Colorado landscape that he had seen as a child.

"Framed Western Painting" was a second, smaller version of the first. In this case, however, the frame and the entire landscape were done in wax and felt and paint. "It was the same image, but different because it was more of an object than an image. It was like making an artifact," Schuchard explains.

For the past 16 months, Schuchard has continued to free objects from painted space. "Piano," "Relic" and "World's Tallest Man" are completely sculptural. Perhaps the most compelling work in the museum's installation is his full-scale sculpture of Robert Wadlow, who was also known as the Alton giant. The sculpture is 108 inches tall and constructed of wax, felt, clay and other mixed media. Schuchard says that in this work he was most concerned with scale, but that he didn't want to simply make a monumental sculpture. He had to find a source from the real world, something with which he could establish a clear-cut relationship: "If I were only interested in the formal values of verticality, I would have used the leaning tower of Pisa or some other form." Like the forms that evolved from his still lifes, his sculpture represents ideas that hold special meaning for him.

"World's Tallest Man" is impressive for many reasons, perhaps the most important of which is Schuchard's ability to invest the figure with a unique identity and dignity. Wadlow's head is turned to the side so that it doesn't engage the viewer in a frontal, flattened gaze; the gallery visitor must move toward the work to see the face. The wonderful tension and uncertainty



*"World's Tallest Man,"
1990-91, Patrick Schuchard*

between the turned gaze and the giant's clenched hands further animate the figure. This stunning evocation of the man forces us to rethink our notion of authenticity and artifice.

In both the interview and in his lecture given at the opening, Schuchard mentions the myth of Pygmalion: "I work and rework everything, sometimes over a period of years.... This process ... reminds me of one of those television psychics who focuses his energy so hard that he can bend a spoon, or make a clock run backwards.... The myth of Pygmalion and his power is like

felt, this, too. The artist who longs so much to form his Ideal that, at the critical moment, the woman he is sculpting comes to life. A moment when it is no longer a mere representation, but something real."

The work in Schuchard's exhibition at the St. Louis Art Museum clearly establishes him as one of the most gifted artists at work in St. Louis today. I urge you to see this show and the one at Nussbaum/McElwain, which presents works done by the artist over the last 17 years. Included in this exhibition are his early abstractions, still lifes, portraits and other recent sculptures. It is a wonderful complement to the museum's installation.

Objects of Memory and Desire will continue at the St. Louis Art Museum through March 15. *Patrick Schuchard: Selected Work 1975-1991* continues through March 6 at Nussbaum/McElwain, 5595 Pershing, from noon-5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday. ■