

Jean-Frédéric Schnyder's Paintings Aren't Kitsch!

by Paddy Johnson



“Wow, they’re serious about the white cube here,” a friend whispered to me as we entered the [Swiss Institute](#). He wasn’t kidding. The former [Deitch Projects](#) space is exactly square, totally white (shiny floors and all), and raised enough to make you feel like you’re walking on a stage.

This kind of presentation is a little much for the small work currently on display; it makes their show of Jean-Frédéric Schnyder’s landscape paintings *Landschaft (Landscape) I-XXXV* (through February 26) look like postage stamps in a space capsule. It’s no deal-breaker, though, thanks to the work: one three-channel video projection of toy wooden horses carrying airline-sized booze and 35 paintings, each 8.3 x 11.8 inches, most slightly cartoonish. Nearly every piece is successful.

There are a lot of reasons for this, the most obvious being skilled paint handling, which runs the gamut from loosely applied to caked-on and pasty. Schnyder’s careful without being self-conscious. In many of the paintings, evil and misfortune arise as an appealing element of the Swiss landscape. The artist claims he’s got nothing to do with this—viewers construct their own narratives and the images he’s using are “just motifs”—but it’s a hard line to buy. An aerial view of four homes that produces a smoke swastika over a star of David isn’t just about pleasing forms.

Indeed, it is a distinctly unhappy image, much like the mushroom cloud and sharp-rayed smiling sun beside it. Regardless, I laughed at the idea that inanimate objects and natural forces have chosen these strange ways to attack. “Landscape VI” (1990), a red and blue painting of a tulip, takes this theme to an absurd level, with a snowman looking longingly through a window at a warm interior.

Schnyder’s compositions are frequently symmetrical, an attribute usually used to heighten the viewer’s sense of disorder. The balanced proportions of the homes within many of his paintings are disrupted by some unusual element, be it grubby gingerbread men, flocks of tropical birds, or dying plants. Whatever the discordance, it’s almost always strange enough to prompt longer looking. Aside from the cottages, a vignette of two dogs watching a Goofy cartoon stands out. In Schnyder’s world, dogs are captivated by images of themselves.

Like much of the work, the piece has a thrift store flavor to it; unsurprisingly, kitsch is frequently referenced by critics in relation to Schnyder’s work—*The New York Times*’s [Roberta Smith](#) and *ArtForum*’s [Stefan Zucker](#), for instance—and even mentioned in the press release. But while Schnyder’s landscapes may engage in sentimentality, they lack the preciousness that defines much of today’s kitsch. Motifs are frequently reused, the canvas size never changes, and in one instance an entire composition featuring a house on green pastures is flipped upside down and painted in sinister purples. In short, Schnyder’s investment in the act of painting itself moves his practice further away from kitsch than his subject matter suggests.

This is particularly evident in the upside down painting. A closer look reveals those purples aren’t so sinister after all; the flowers, the trees, the house, they’re all “just motifs.” Of course, perhaps this too is just my own narrative, but I left the gallery feeling as though I’d shared in some of the pleasure that Schnyder must take from the act of painting. (*Images courtesy the artist, Swiss Institute*)