

David Schutter: *after NGS C*

**By Keith Hartley, Chief Curator & Deputy to the Director,
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh**

Paintings exhibited at the Scottish National
Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh,
28 November 2009 – 14 March 2010

Related drawings exhibited at sleeper,
Reiach & Hall Architects, 6 Darnaway Street, Edinburgh
EH3 6BG, tel 0131 225 8444, www.sleeper1.com
30 November – 18 December 2009



The fact that art has a history means that each artist (and successive generations of artists) builds upon the foundation of what has gone before. Many artists dream about starting afresh, about establishing a *tabula rasa*, which takes no account of previous art. But this is largely a delusion. No amount of self-willed amnesia can extinguish the memory of what art – more especially the art of our own culture – looks like, how we recognise and read it. Art is a language, or rather a family of languages, that has to be learnt by artist and viewer alike. It is in a constant state of development, as innovative artists forge new syntax and invent new words, but the basic structure remains.

With the advent of abstract art in the early years of the twentieth century it would, on the face of it, seem that a complete rupture with art of the past, with tradition in general, had taken place. But, although artists such as Kandinsky and Malevich saw their art as revolutionary and heralding a new age, at the same time they were careful to place it within a distinct historical development.

The American painter David Schutter (born 1974) works in an ostensibly abstract idiom, but central to his concerns is his desire to set each body of new work in relation to a way of working made understandable by an earlier artist (or artists) – what he calls a “trope”.

Since Schutter is a painter, he decided to analyse in some depth paintings by specific artists and subsequently to make paintings of his own that “related” to them. The works that he has so far chosen were a number of seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish masterpieces

from the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, a group of cloud paintings by John Constable in the Yale Center for British Art, and Chardin’s *A Vase of Flowers* in the National Gallery of Scotland. (Schutter was in Edinburgh in 2008 on the Randolph Cliff Residency run by the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh College of Art and Charles Asprey). The painting by Chardin is currently on display here, in Room 2.

The paintings by these artists had not been chosen randomly. They are all landmarks in the history of art and paradigmatic of certain types of painting. Vermeer, Rembrandt, Frans Hals and other Dutch masters of the seventeenth century all celebrated the rich material culture of Holland and were particularly adept at capturing the fall of light on varied surfaces. Constable, by contrast, tried to paint the intangible atmosphere and cloud formations of south-east England. Chardin tried to find the exact match between a closely observed domestic scene or still-life and a tonal pictorial harmony. As Schutter puts it: “Constable is about atmospheric effect in a natural science, Chardin is about a moderate painterliness. Constable is often, in his cloud studies, incorrectly seen as the beginning of Abstract Expressionism, of painting nothing. Chardin is about the immediacy of perception, eye and hand symbiotically functioning.”

Two basic questions about Schutter’s work arise. First, why should he want to make paintings relating in this way to various works by the Old Masters? In the past, when artists copied the Old Masters, they usually did so as part of

a long apprenticeship, learning how to paint. As such, their copies were usually youthful studies. The second question is: what actually does Schutter do when he makes these paintings? How do they relate to their “models”? In order to answer the first question, we must first answer the second, since establishing exactly what Schutter does – and doesn’t do – will help establish the purposes of his project.

Even a cursory glance at Schutter’s paintings and their “models” makes it clear that he does not copy them – at least not in the way we are accustomed to understand copying. In the case of the five post-Charidin paintings (Schutter calls them “after NGS C”) shown here, we are only aware of a ghostly suggestion of the flowers in the vase. Otherwise the paintings seem to be abstract. The second biggest difference is that they are to all intents and purposes grey monochromes. Why then are they so different from their “models” and how do they actually relate to them at all?

Schutter’s procedures differ fundamentally from those of the classic “copyist”. He does not set up his easel in front of the “model” and paint what he sees before him. Rather he spends days simply studying the painting, making copious notes, and sketches, about every aspect of it, including its physical make-up – paint, canvas, frame, its technique, its state of preservation – Schutter reads all the conservation reports about the work – and its immediate context in the gallery in which it is hanging. This research has more in common with a researcher – part-art historian, part-conservator, part-scientist – than with the traditional image of the intuitive artist.

Then, after a certain amount of time has elapsed, Schutter begins to paint, quite removed from his “model”, in his own studio. He uses canvases the same size and type as the “original”. (Schutter usually makes several paintings in an attempt to come at his quarry from different angles.) He does not refer to his notes and sketches but relies solely on his memory. But, he insists, his procedure is not a feat of memory. He prefers to see his paintings not as repetitions, recastings or least of all copies, all of which involve memory as the key element in their making, but as “rehearsals”.

It is significant that the word comes from the performing arts. An “original” in this arena, whether score, play or film script, does exist, but the emphasis is on how that “original” is interpreted to create a new living performance that has a relevance to today. Rehearsals are also not definitive productions, but attempts at refining and honing a vision of what that ultimate performance could be. Thus, when Schutter paints his “rehearsals” he is trying to synthesise two things: remembering what he has learnt from looking long and hard at the “original” – not so much the external end-result as the material process that led to it; and translating those insights into a contemporary painterly idiom. This is a delicate balancing act between relating to the “model” and creating something else.

Schutter is acutely aware that his paintings could tip over into inventions, where personal expression plays a dominant role. To prevent this happening he diverts any sudden impulses to be more expressive into drawings which he keeps near his paintings. He likens these eruptions of mark-making and

“scribbles” to “tourette syndrome”, that is, something that is unavoidable and whose causes are difficult to fathom, Schutter shows these drawings, but separately from his paintings. The drawings related to *after NGS C* will be exhibited in Edinburgh at the same time as the paintings, but in a different venue: sleeper, at 6 Darnaway St.

Schutter lays great stress on the act of looking, on perception, not only when he himself paints the re-collected motif, or trope, but, he hopes, when the viewer looks at his paintings. We usually take perception for granted, seeing only those things that we need or want to see to satisfy our immediate requirements or desires. Looking at works of art is one of the few times when we are asked to spend time examining what we can actually see: not simply what the artist has depicted – if it is figurative – but how and why he or she has created it. Because Schutter’s paintings hover in a liminal area between figurative and abstract, where the image is ghostly and hard to pin down, the viewer has to work hard to pick up and interpret those marks that signify the artist’s “rehearsal” of his motif. Schutter does not regard this exercise of our perceptual and reflective faculties as a rarified process, only of value in the narrow context of the visual arts, but “as an active way of thinking about the world.” What he surely means by this is that we can all learn to be more (pro-)active in the way that we look at and interpret things in our everyday life. The visual arts help to make our looking and thinking about what we have seen more acute.

Schutter does not set out expressly to make grey paintings. In fact, he uses a

lot of colour in his work and is intensely aware of the colours in the paintings that he uses as his “models”. In the case of *A Vase of Flowers*, Chardin used only five colours. Schutter uses the same palette in his five “rehearsals”, but arrives at grey as he tones down the colours, realising that the task of accurately matching the colours in the Chardin is an impossibility. Each of the five paintings that he made after the Chardin is another attempt to come close to the “original”.

To return now to the central question asked earlier: why does Schutter feel the need to base his paintings on the works of earlier artists? There are certainly many reasons, but a key one seems to be that he has understood the role of the schema in the way that artists deploy their art. Ernst Gombrich, one of the great writers on the history and theory of art, showed how artists take established artistic forms and adapt them to their own needs. For example, Constable’s cloud studies were not based only on his observations of natural phenomena, but on the cloud schemata established by fellow artist, Alexander Cozens. These schemata provided Constable with a ready-made filing system or language that he could adapt in the light of his own insights and observations. As Gombrich wrote: “...I consider it a heresy to think that any painting as such records a sense impression or a feeling. All human communication is through symbols, through the medium of a language, and the more articulate that language the greater the chance for the message to get through.” By going back to a range of paradigmatic artistic schemata Schutter hopes to broaden and hone his own painterly language. ■