

ART IN REVIEW

PIETER SCHOOLWERTH: 'Portraits of Paintings'

By Roberta Smith

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Miguel Abreu Gallery

36 Orchard Street,

near Hester Street

Lower East Side

Through Thursday

Over the last several years Pieter Schoolwerth's paintings have become nothing if not cerebral and calculated. Neither quality tends to be good for painting; in combination they can be deadly. How Mr. Schoolwerth manages to evade the deadliness is hard to say. Perhaps he doesn't quite, and that's the point. Nonetheless his paintings assert a bizarre, freeze-dried clarity that is very much their own.

The amalgams of brushstrokes that dominate each work — usually in the form of a centrifugal central mass — are painstakingly derived from the motifs of 16th-, 17th- and 18th-century European paintings. Traced drawings, some of which are on display, facilitate the translation by layering all the elements in the original composition into a single tangle. There are hints of the original image: tufts of green and signs of raw meat in the portrait of Luis Meléndez's "Still Life With Beef, Bowl of Ham and Vegetables, and Receptacles," or a pair of shocked froglike eyes in that of Bernardo Strozzi's "Healing of Tobit" (who regained his sight). The prevalence of earth and gravy tones evokes an old-masterish palette, while the brushwork parodies Baroque bravura.

The result is a kind of stop-action painting in which each stroke remains distinct, caught in a moment of Disneyfied suspended animation. The works constitute tender homages that are also deliberately hilarious in their excruciating self-consciousness. This turns out to be a form of visual life.

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