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Susan Tallman: "Gray Matter: David Schutter"



EDITION REVIEW

# *Gray Matter: David Schutter*

**By Susan Tallman**

David Schutter, *Study for Autograph Repetition* (2013)
Photogravure, inked à la poupée, 23 3/8 x 35 1/2 inches. Edition of five. Printed by Renaissance Press, Ashuelot, NH. Published by the artist and Aurel Schreiber, Berlin. $7,000.

*David Schutter,* ***Study for Autograph Repetition*** *(2013).*

David Schutter's paintings are ravishing paradoxes: copies that don't resemble the originals, replicas that cannot be replicated. From a distance, and in most reproductions, they appear as rectangles of cloudy gray; up close the layered brushstrokes build and scatter and reassemble with authority. Schutter's recent photogravure, *Study for Autograph Repetition,* is still more peculiar: a dazzling semi-photomechanical portrait of one of the artist's paintings, itself rooted in another painting made by a different artist a century and a half ago. If the references chase each other back into the depths of history, the visual experience keeps one rooted in the exact moment of viewing—this time, this place, this light.

Schutter makes paintings about painting, both in a general sense (the material exigencies of pictorial processes) and a specific one: each is made "after" an extant historical painting that he studies assiduously, absorbs and recasts. He spends months viewing and sketching the target work in situ; he reads its conservation reports and researches the social and material world in which it was made as well as the context in which it now sits. Having done this, he returns to the studio and paints without reference to his notes and drawings. He has worked his way through van Ruisdael landscapes in the Gemäldegalerie Berlin, Constable's clouds at the Yale Center for British Art, Chardin still lifes in the National Gallery of Scotland and on and on.

His 2013 exhibition, "Rendition," addressed four paintings by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot housed in gallery 224 at the Art Institute of Chicago.[1] (The curator for the exhibition was Monika Szewczyk, now a member of the curatorial team of Documenta 14.) Within the University of Chicago's Logan Center exhibition space an architectural shell was constructed that mimicked the Art Institute gallery; inside hung four paintings matching the dimensions and positions of the Corots in the museum. Though Corot was the guiding principle of "Rendition," Corot *qua* Corot was hard to see. In place of the downy clouds and fluttery foliage that so beguiled American 19th-century collectors, Schutter's canvases offer storms of muffled hues that conceal and reveal simultaneously. (Ornithologists tell us that birds, who see more ultraviolet than we do, see the black feathers of a grackle as a riot of color. Even human eyes can catch a glint of emerald or indigo—a momentary glimpse of optical riches lying just beyond our perception. Schutter's paintings have a similar quality—as the raised edge of a brushstroke stroke catches a passing glimmer, or matte scumble folds light into itself, the surface of the painting springs to variegated life.)

The press materials for the 2013 show referred only to "a 19th century French landscape painter," and while Schutter acknowledges his sources in his titles, he does so in code. The resulting diaristic notations document encounters

between the artist and specific objects, places and times; they are not crib sheets for the viewer. That said, codes always suggest a sporting challenge and anyone with reasonable Google skills can pull up the source pictures to play compare-and-contrast. But that would be missing the point. The reason to bury the reference is that when the source is absent, the viewer must come to terms with what is present. The new painting cannot rely on its résumé, it must carry its own weight.

The photogravure, however, is overtly a reproduction of photographic origin—it points unambiguously to another thing in another place—which is a critical divergence from Schutter's previous practice. Schutter is not an old school copyist, he is a contemporary artist for whom process is not simply a means to an end but an overt element of content. When we consider his densely worked surfaces, we must also bear in mind all of the looking and studying that led to it—the cognitive transcription, the mutability of memory, the clumpiness of time. His process of intuitively internalizing information—which is to say, abjuring photography—is essential to the concept and the outcome of his paintings. The gravure is not simply photographic, it is almost fetishistically so. The resolution is so fine that the impressions left by individual hairs of Schutter's brush on the canvas are clearly visible, but so is the tender granular gradient that produces the illusion of an object in space.

The gravure doesn't repeat the composition of the painting, it shows the painting hanging on a wall. Shot from the side, the painting's surface becomes a trapezoid. We can see the unpainted edge of the canvas as it wraps around the stretcher; shadows below and (more faintly) to the left attest to the object's dimensionality. The uninked paper of the margins is a different color than that surrounding the painting—we are looking at a picture of a picture of a picture, but we are also looking at a picture of a wall.

*David Schutter,* ***AIC C 224 4*** *(2013), oil on linen, 23 1/2 x 28 1/2 inches.*

Schutter uses the phrase *mise en abyme*, the heraldic term for nested emblems that André Gide borrowed for conceits like the play-within-a-play or looping Droste effect recursion.[2] The *mise en abyme* is a dislocating device; it muddies the distinction between the world and the fiction, the watcher and the watched. In this case, Schutter's painting *AIC C 224 4*, which had been a kind of terminus for the painter's consideration of Corot's *Arleux-Palluel, The Bridge of Trys*ts (1871/72), becomes itself the subject of further consideration. The tactics, however, are entirely different.

The *mise en abyme* must not only include its own framing, but it also needs to be a convincing enough rendition of its subject/self to keep us in the game. This is tricky because many of the qualities that make Schutter's paintings captivating in person die in reproduction, where the fluid layering of strokes and the elusive chromatic motion are made flat and static. Paul Taylor, who made the gravure plate, suggested they might recreate the painting's chromatic tease by inking the plate à la poupée with multiple tones of ink. This enabled them, Schutter says,

> *to bend space in the picture, to make the anamorphic qualities of the image extremely present when viewing the work obliquely and always pushing the beholder to other points of view that break that illusion, perpetually sending one to another position, and therefore another perspective.*

Each of the five impressions was inked slightly differently and carries its own individual color shift.[3] "Autograph repetition" was a term employed in 19th-century France to distinguish an artist's repetition of his own work from that of student, workshop assistant, or hired

hand, but Schutter notes that Corot's dealer sometimes sold his variant editions using this term. *Study for Autograph Repetition* is not a flatter repetition of *AIC C 224 4*, it is a different thing altogether.

The goal, Schutter explains, was "to make a print that denied the promise of a return to the object ... [but] insisted upon returning to itself in such a way that it would highlight a spectatorship that is constantly in negotiation."

As with any great reproductive print, we find ourselves suspended between the seductions of the translation and those of the image nested within. But here the thing being represented is itself doubled, in ways less evident but no less real. Schutter's habit of explaining his process while thwarting instantaneous comparisons asks viewers to hold two things in mind and one in view when they look at his paintings. *Study for Autograph Repetition* tosses us another ball to juggle while we puzzle out the endlessly fascinating questions of how pictures work. ■

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***Notes:***

*1. Gallery 224 usually also contains three paintings by Jean-François Millet, but during the summer that Schutter was studying the room the Millets were temporarily de-installed. He says, "I liked this off-kilter presentation that allowed me to re-see the room as it was off balance. That was one reason why the model of 224 was set at an oblique angle, diagonally across the width of the Logan Gallery."*

*2. "Placed in the abyss" sounds wonderfully romantic, but the* abyme *was simply the center of the shield. The more down-to-earth "Droste effect" refers to the early 20th-century Dutch cocoa tin that shows a nurse carrying a tray on which sits a tin of cocoa that shows a nurse carrying a tray…*

*3. The inking and printing was done by Courtney Sennish.*