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# The Process: David Schutter, DP P 588 PR and DP P 587 PR

IN WHICH AN ARTIST DISCUSSES MAKING A PARTICULAR WORK

by Jude Stewart

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**D**avid Schutter makes paintings from earlier paintings. He chooses an existing work, often obscure, with painterly techniques that interest him—for instance, a strange nocturnal still life by nineteenth-century painter Adolph Menzel, or a corporate portrait commissioned by the Dutch East India Company from the seventeenth-century artist Frans Hals. For months he sits in front of the work at a museum, making sketches and notes, then enters his studio and re-creates it entirely from memory. On its surface the resulting work looks nothing like the original: it's usually a luminous, chromatic gray, sized to the scale of the source work. The paintings feel like apertures into alien yet somehow familiar terrain. His paintings' motion, light, coloration, and myriad painterly effects uncannily all echo those of the originals, but they are extraordinary works in their own right. David and I spoke in his University of Chicago studio the night before he shipped these works—cryptically titled DP P 588 PR and DP P 587 PR—to Documenta 14.

—Jude Stewart

THE BELIEVER: Where did this diptych start?

DAVID SCHUTTER: I spent a year in Rome, and I wanted a project to sustain me on my exit. When I work, I find a source material and get obsessed with it. I exhaust my interaction with it by looking at everything from the picture itself to object files, [and by] talking with curators.



*LEFT: DP P 587 PR by David Schutter, 2017. Oil on canvas. RIGHT: DP P PR 588 by David Schutter, 2017. Oil on canvas. Photos by James Prinz. Reprinted courtesy of the artist.*

BLVR: What are object files?

DS: The keepers of any collection track how many times a work has been conserved, if it's been realigned on a different support, when it's been cleaned and by whom. If it's had any X-ray, radiography, or spectral analyses. For an artist like Rembrandt, the object files can be dense. For lack of a better term, I tend to choose minor works that give off a sense of what painterliness is.

BLVR: What do you mean by “painterliness”?

DS: I don't want to have a strict definition. What interests me is that we keep using that word over time to describe painting, and we have to use the actual name of the thing it's describing. “This painting is painterly”; “This painting possesses painterliness.” It's teleological; it's not really describing anything.

BLVR: In that sense, all paintings are painterly—yet you wouldn't describe them all that way. What were these works' predecessors?

DS: [Documenta 14 contributing curator] Monika Szewczyk visited Rome, and we ended up talking about these paintings by Parentino, a little-known primitive Italian painter from the 1400s. He had a peculiar kind of rigid style full of glazes and lots of deep space. The palette was steely and punctuated by reds, yellows, and greens. I was really responding to this set of paintings Monika and I saw together in the Doria Pamphilj. In the painting on the left, Saint Anthony is giving alms to the poor. In the other painting [on the right], Saint Anthony shuns gold.

As it happened, Documenta 14 was also looking into paintings with similar themes: *Saint Anthony Abbot Tempted by a Heap of Gold*, by fifteenth-century painter Giovanni di ser Giovanni Guidi, and a nineteenth-century work, *Alms from a Beggar at Ornans*, by Gustave Courbet. The curators ultimately exhibited these two works in the same gallery with my paintings.

BLVR: It's interesting that you put them in that order. It makes more sense for him to see the gold, shun it, and *then* change his mind and give it away. The chronology feels opposite from what you chose.

DS: Well, I arranged them as they're hung in the Pamphilj. I usually play it as they are on the wall.

BLVR: You said Parentino was little known—so I assume his object file was thin?

DS: Yes, there was almost nothing for me to read. His name was Bernardo Parentino, and he worked in the style of [Andrea] Mantegna. He came from Istria and settled in Venice.

BLVR: Is this why you respond to minor works? Because it's possible to be completist about it?

DS: No, that's not tempting for me. What I like to do is ride parallel to the minor story or the incomplete story, and instead of completing it, I'm basically repeating it. By repeating it, my intention is—through the repetition—to reveal a different question.

It's detective work. I study the painting and its material for a while: its pigments, its application, the way the painting is built from the ground up. I use historical techniques, the same ones used in the original paintings. For me, that parallel repetition of the form is where the meat is.

I pick minor works because I don't want to engage with things I've been exposed to repeatedly through reproduction. I like works that come through fresh.

BLVR: What does the research phase look like?

DS: I went to the museum and made studies of the compositions. In the alms one, I noticed an inverted golden section among the figures. There's Saint Anthony, there's a beggar, and here's a line of figures. These conspirators over here are judging Anthony for being frivolous in giving away the gold.

I took notes about how Parentino might have transferred a cartoon to the panel, affecting the underpainting and the pentimenti, these raised marks that might indicate revisions. I made sketches of major lines and movement, the lightest lights, the darkest darks. But the notebooks are only useful during research. Once I start painting, all that stuff is put aside. It's just to build a mnemonic bank.

BLVR: How much time did you spend on research?

DS: I'd say three months of notebook study with twice-weekly trips to the Pamphilj. When I visit, I go from opening to closing time.

BLVR: Wow, all day.

DS: Yeah. I didn't start painting until I was back in Chicago. First I made the canvases. I prepared the ground Parentino used. It's many layers and extremely smooth, like a refrigerator-door enamel without the sheen. It's a beautiful ground, not absorbent, and you can make a lot of revisions on it.

BLVR: Which painting did you start with?

DS: I started with the alms.

BLVR: What you're doing is technically reproduction, but your end result doesn't look at all like the original painting. What's your focus while painting?

DS: I'm interested in mattness, reflection, space, color, and if I can get the painting to do what the other painting does without doing it directly.

BLVR: What was the first color?

DS: The colored ground is like that saddle soap-colored leather from the 1970s. It's faint but provides a lot of light. The reason why [older artists] used intense white grounds was to help the painting beam light through the many glazes applied over it. But after the ground layer, everything falls apart.

BLVR: How so?

DS: The process isn't alpha to omega. I don't say, *I have to do my painting in these steps in order for it to do what the [source] painting does*. I know I have to do certain things, like not cancel out the light provided by the ground. I know if there are certain textural things I have to do in order. If I want these ridges to appear, I have to do it in a certain layer in the painting; I can't do that at the end. Otherwise it won't give light off the same way.

BLVR: What was your biggest mistake with these?

DS: The same mistake I make in almost every painting: I try to go for the first thing first. Whatever it is that the painting gives off, I go for that right away. I end up circuiting through what the painting is giving off second, third, fourth, what its paradoxes are—all that stuff. You think you've got this thing figured out, and then it's a horrible surprise that's generative almost every time. I hate it, and I

enjoy it at the same time. It's what makes painting renewable for me.

BLVR: Did you work on both paintings simultaneously?

DS: I worked only on the alms painting for a few months and got it to do certain things I thought the source was doing. I thought I should start working on the second painting and think about each in relation to each other, so I halted the first painting and kept it in this indeterminate zone where I knew I could work with it again.

BLVR: What was the big effect you tried for with number two?

DS: In the second painting, I wanted it to feel as if it were moving. There are invisible waves in the Parentino painting, in the repetition of the vertical figures and the vastness of the landscape they're standing in. I stayed with this painting a long time, pushed it beyond the first picture. Then it was time to put it next to the other. I wanted them to be shown together in Documenta 14, but I didn't want them coming off the wall at the same rate. I started to think about the alms picture as a dramaturge pointing to the other painting. Because [both] have inverted golden sections. Diptychs are often narratives, and I wanted this connection between two frames. I wanted the [shunning] painting to receive the point, and the [alms] painting to be the pointer.

BLVR: How do you know when the work is done?

DS: When the painting feels like it doesn't need me to be doing anything to it anymore and it's doing things I wanted it to do. I don't consider it a failure if that lack of comparison [with the source] is there. It's a painting I came upon in life, I studied it, and then I made this painting. It's whatever is at the end of that experience. It's a way of forgetting.