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"I definitely like the fact that they could be at the beginning of something or at the end."
–*Dana Schutz*[1]

Dana Schutz's paintings are full of beginnings and endings, and it isn't always easy to tell them apart. In the 2002 series that first won her critical attention – both congratulations and puzzlement – Schutz depicts the last man on earth, Frank. Frank – a slightly sweet, hippie burnout type – poses languorously in a lonely beachscape, takes on the features of a proboscis monkey in a jungle scene, looks out on the empty world at night. More bewildered than either liberated or terrified, he seems vaguely aware that despite his aloneness, his last-man status, someone is watching. From this vantage point Schutz herself obviously becomes the last painter on earth. (Do I hear a sigh of relief from certain critical quarters at the trade-off of the apocalypse for the overdue eradication of painting?) What is their implied relationship? The bare facts of this setup are complicated: "Man" of course is the sexist, outdated synonym for "human," so if he's the last human, what does that make the last artist? A distant, more-than- or less-than-human figure? Or if he is literally the last man, and Schutz is the last woman, are they Adam and Eve? More likely the schlumpy guy calls to mind the phrase "not if you were the last man on earth."

In all the different settings of the series, Frank reminds one of a desert island castaway, a figure central to the Western social imagination, especially recently. *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gilligan's Island* have been updated in a variety of movies and television shows, including Tom Hanks's *Castaway*, myriad *Survivor* reality episodes, and *Lost*. Why? Maybe the pastoral, escapist, back-to-nature sensibility kicks in when politics go bad, when the end seems plausibly within view, and the world looks particularly hopeless. The castaway scenario always issues from an all-too-civilized, self-destroying society. Whether it involves stranding a handful of people on a desert island, or leaving a few final occupants after a globally scaled apocalypse (à la *Planet of the Apes*), the end nevertheless evokes the nascent society of the past, the natural beginnings, before the rules were set, before things were named. Stranded on a desert island or roaming the empty canyons of Wall Street, the survivors are left reinventing the wheel, making radios out of coconuts, acting like Adam and Eve, or even like monkeys. Originality just doesn't figure into the equation when you're forced to start over.

If we think of Frank as the first man as well as the last, that makes Schutz herself the first artist (again, gender complications arise – think of Barnett Newman's famous essay, "The First Man Was an Artist"). And in one of her occasional self-portraits, this lovely young woman portrays herself in an amusing if rather unflattering Neanderthal light, all heavy eyebrow and not-yet-erect posture. A kind of primitivism permeates her subsequent work as well, less in the making of it – which, despite occasional critical references to "outsider art," is sophisticated and varied – than in the subjects. Animals and totemic masks make appearances,

as in *Console* (p. 37) and *Death Comes To Us All* (p. 39; both 2003), in which the characters wear headdresses that recall those of Northwest Coast Indian or Pacific Rim figures. Like the proto–Abstract Expressionists of the 1940s, Schutz seems to have an interest in the power of traditional myth to evoke strong feelings, to touch the universal experiences, such as death, that are left unrepresented and unaccounted for by contemporary Western culture.

Unlike those artists, we now know better than to call these societies and objects "primitive." But Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, et al. didn't mean to put down the indigenous cultures they admired and imitated; in the midst of World War II they took a rather dim view of what civilization had on offer, where it had gotten the world. Schutz seems to share their ambivalence. Most notably, *Party* (2004; p. 59) depicts the Bush cabinet on the beach (like Philip Guston's *Nixon*) in an unseemly tangle. What at first appears to be a free-for-all soon coalesces into a Deposition from the Cross in which Condoleeza Rice and others bear the body of former Attorney General John Ashcroft (a fanatical fundamentalist Christian who once anointed himself with Crisco in a private Old Testament inaugural moment). Schutz painted the image before the November 2004 elections, and you don't know whether this is the end, or merely the prelude to resurrection.

More recently, Schutz finished a brilliant canvas titled *Men's Retreat* (2005; p. 67). Here we see the most magnificently corrupt products of our civilization, including Bill Gates and Tyco tycoon, art collector, and recent convict Dennis Kozlowski, going native in the woods. The scene splits the difference between the touchy-feely drum circles of Robert Bly's Iron John and the yearly ruling-class power powwows of Bohemian Grove. Both kinds of gathering are intended to serve as antidotes to the emasculating effects of civilized society, depending on Druid and Native American rituals to awaken the inner warrior, if not the latent caveman. In Schutz's rendering, a blindfolded businessman carries a tambourine and a bongo, while Gates paints the face of a naked companion and someone who resembles former White House Chief of Staff John Sununu falls backward, arms outstretched, caught by another man in a version of the "trust" game favored by summer camps and office retreats. In the background, naked men give each other piggyback rides. Hilarious and pathetic without their briefcases, Blackberrys, and three-piece suits, the men reveal the silliness and artifice in the modern romance of the primitive. Unlike Newman and Pollock, from her later vantage point Schutz is equally suspicious of the past and the present, the primitive and the civilized, the raw and the cooked.

The future doesn't look too shiny either – Schutz certainly doesn't join in the fashionable embrace of utopia in contemporary art. Although she shares an interest in social groups and schemes, they tend to look doomed to failure. Often the failure is hilarious: In *Run* (2004; p. 53), a group of people in the woods run, one after another, into each other, piling up against a tree. Like the satires of social behavior in Aernout Mik's videos, the painting demonstrates the pitfalls of group action. Taking on the same subject from a different angle, *Fanatics* (2005; p. 73) stages a protest at a wire fence that could be outside a factory, an abortion clinic, or a government building. Rather than acting as members of a united group, each of the protestors has his or her own cause: assorted religious fanatics, a suicide bomber, a *Star*

Wars fan in full drag, and several unidentifiable devotees, waving plans and shouting in a wild parody of the recent political concept of "the multitude" formed from splintered agendas, identities, and affinities. *Civil Planning* (2004; pp. 60-61) is set in a forest thick with drafting tables and drawing boards, littered with plans and body parts. In a small central clearing, two girls talk and pile small rocks; it is their modest activity, rather than the grand and ridiculous schemes in the background, that hold our interest. *Reformers* (2004; p. 43) takes a similarly wry glance at a group of people working on a project on a collapsing, broken table. They are trying to build or rebuild something out of strangely disparate parts; one of the reformers is trying to construct a model using his feet. Many of the actors in Schutz's pictures are damaged or limited in some way; several in *Men's Retreat* are blindfolded (and in fact the composition resembles a reversed version of Pieter Brueghel's *The Blind Leading the Blind* of 1568). In these paintings, ideology is ridiculous at best and disastrous at worst, representing belief without clear, commanding ideas and master plans, where everything seems doomed to fail.

Schutz's fascination with beginnings and endings, and her complicated understanding of them, is apparent on the individual as well as the social level. From the start, she has depicted subjects trapped in their subjectivities, at once destroying and trying to make something of themselves. Thus one of her most original, mysterious themes, sustained over the past few years, has been that of the "self-eater." Although critics often refer to the "cannibals" populating her work, in fact these figures only eat themselves. In the numerous paintings titled *Self-Eater*, as well as related works like *Mulch* (2004; p. 50) and the more recent *Man Eating His Chest* (2005; p. 64), figures open their mouths wide, flash their teeth, and stuff in pieces of hands, fingers, feet, chunks of limbs and other body parts. At first glance, they seem bent on self-destruction: one can easily imagine that if the paintings unfolded in time, their subjects would gorge themselves until they had erased themselves, leaving only a swollen speck behind on the brightly stroked ground. But they don't disappear; it's clear that something else is going on. They can, of course, just as easily be seen as feeding themselves, in an amusingly literal version of that American type, the self-made man. These characters are stranded in their own consciousnesses, their own subjectivities, just as the castaway is stranded on a desert island. This isolation is revealed in paintings like *Blind* (2004; p. 56) and *Myopic* (2004; p. 58), whose single subjects cannot see, or cannot see past their immediate surroundings; in *Stare* (2003; p. 54), a girl looking downward is fixated on her own hands. Schutz depicts this solipsistic containment literally in *Self-Eater 2* (2003; p. 41), in which a horizontal figure painted in slashing, high-contrast darks and lights, like a figurative Franz Kline, curls up against the edge of the canvas, a body in a box. We feel the pressure of her limbs against the rectangle, and sense that she couldn't leave even if she wanted to. These figures are forced to make themselves out of what is, literally, at hand.

Of course, not everybody makes it in Schutz's paintings. But while death may or may not be cruel in her world, it's not a simple ending but, as the artist puts it, "a charged moment where things could begin to form into something else."[2] In *Headless Dog Living* (2005), the eponymous canine is out for a romp, but without its head, so that its collar and leash have slipped off its bloody stump of a neck and fallen on the ground. Was decapitation a punish-

ment or a liberation? In *Vertical Life Support* (2005; p. 71), the painting itself keeps a woman suspended between life and death in a state that seems more mystical than terrible. What should be a horizontal Terry Schiavo–like figure with her head on a pillow is tipped vertically like a conventional portrait, an orientation contradicted by the movement of the paint toward the right side of the canvas, seemingly against gravity. Several works feature patients or specimens laid out horizontally, on display for a gathering of people, who look on impassively or probe the unfortunate's wounds. In *Presentation* (2005; pp. 68-69), a curious but calm crowd (reminiscent of that peopling James Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* of 1888) surrounds two prone figures, one of whom is strung up in a crude traction mechanism that seems contrived more to hold than to heal him. The audience is rendered complicit with the painter in the figure's nakedness and immobility.

Painting itself hangs somewhere between life and death: both inert – a still life – and animate, particularly in paintings, like Schutz's, that speak so vividly of their making. As in the work of many artists, particularly of her generation, something about the subject matter feels like an allegory for the process of making art. This is obvious in the self-eaters, who remind us that the artist must make and remake herself, to some extent trapped within the preferences, habits, and experiences that make her who she is. (Traditionally, the link between the mark of the expressive painter and her identity has been especially strong, captured by the idea of the signature style which both expresses and confines the artist's self.) By rendering the process of creation as one of drawing on oneself, recycling oneself and making oneself anew, Schutz creates a model of creation that blurs beginnings and endings, avoiding the dramatic genesis of the modernist blank canvas, as well as the nihilistic cul-de-sac of the appropriated media image.

Sculpture, not painting, is the medium that Schutz often takes as an explicit subject. Her oeuvre is filled with strange, lumpy, and often just not very good sculptures, the kind you might find in a high-school art class or an evening extension class at the local college. (There is something infinitely touching about *Night Sculpting* [2001], the field of rickety art-school tables bearing gray biomorphic shapes that twinkle in the twilight like a constellation of yearning souls. Now a sophisticated professional, Schutz evokes here the memory of days hiding out in the high-school art-room closet.) There is also something sculptural in her additive painting process, in which layered and broken strokes build complex, thick surfaces. This affinity for the tactile is long-standing, revealed in the two stories Schutz tells most often about her younger years. One is about an aptitude test she took in school at age fourteen: "Because of my love for the outdoors, physical activity and working with my hands, my test told me that I would make an excellent brick layer."[3] The other story involves her first art memory: going to the Detroit Institute of Arts with her mother, who pointed out a portrait by Vincent van Gogh, saying that you could "pick it up by the nose." The image is charming, treating art as something at once wonderful and ordinary. What did her mother mean? That because of the Xeuxis-like effectiveness of Van Gogh's illusion the nose seemed real enough to grasp? Or that the materiality of the thickly applied paint made it something one could literally sink one's fingers into?

This interplay between the illusion of the image and the reality of material is one reason that so many artists have made paintings of sculpture. For example, both Paul Cézanne and Henri Matisse played with the fascinating material and conceptual ambivalences found in a three-dimensional object translated into a representation, in turn highlighting the material presence of the painting itself, an ostensibly two-dimensional image. Tintoretto made small sculptures in order to render "real" the things in his imagination, and then turned them into painted images. Like other contemporary painters who use sculpture, such as Lisa Yuskavage and Alexander Ross, Schutz is attracted by similar complications: "I like painting things in a concrete way that are not necessarily concrete or actual.... I like that slippage between something being very actual and imaginary."[4] Her paintings often give us the sense that they have interiors, despite their nature as flat, exterior objects. *The Autopsy Michael Jackson* (2005; p. 77), for example, holds a tension between the plastic surgery that has obviously created his strange appearance, and the giant chest scar that tells us someone has opened him and reached inside.

If there is something that unites the wildly disparate painters of her generation – a generation to which she very much belongs, despite her acknowledgments of and affinities to earlier art – it is that for them, representation doesn't mean illusion, and abstraction doesn't mean materiality. You can paint something imaginary or ephemeral in a heavily material style, one that acknowledges the canvas edge and the viscosity of oil paint; you can paint a field of colors and shapes that contradicts the flatness of the picture plane, creating space where it doesn't exist. This flexibility allows for many of the complex and fantastic effects of Schutz's paintings. She makes her imaginary people and events real for us.

In other words, there is no historical imperative, no moral superiority, no necessity, to any one position or possibility for painting. Without the blueprint of a modernist historical trajectory (or a postmodernist conclusion), without the conviction that painting the figure is going backward and painting a square is moving forward, it's hard for critics to discuss painting without resorting to swoons or slams. Schutz herself puts her finger on the problem: "I still don't know how to talk about abstraction without sounding cheesy. There seems to be no adequate starting point and certainly no dominant system of belief to contextualize abstract painting. Maybe that's why it seems so interesting right now."[5]

If the absence of an absolute beginning is confusing for artists and critics alike, the compensation is that there's no end in sight.

1. Dana Schutz, interviewed by Robert Enright, "Death Defier: The Art of Dana Schutz," *Border Crossings*, no. 92 (2004), 50.
2. Ibid.
3. Dana Schutz, interviewed by Nicole Hackert, "Teeth Dreams and OTHER Supposed Truths," in *Dana Schutz*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Contemporary Fine Arts, 2005), n.p.
4. Dana Schutz, interviewed by Max Maslansky, "To Be Frank," *Swingset*, no. 4 (2003), 37.
5. Ibid.