

LUKAS DUWENHÖGGER

Review by Matthew Mclean
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Featuring 60-odd works spanning painting, collage and installation, Raven Row's survey of Lukas Duwenhögger follows *Undoolay*, his much-garlanded presentation at Artists Space in New York this year. Walking along 10th Avenue in May, I bumped awkwardly into a writer of passing acquaintance accompanied by a famous expat German painter, who stated with emphasis that the Artists Space show was the only one in town I had to see.

Back in London, the painting *Da Rita* (1997) depicts another improbable encounter: beneath a cherry tree in a seaside park, a man in an orange tunic, a rake in a pink suit and white-hatted burly sailor sit beside Queen Victoria in a buggy. Though preposterous, the scene feels oddly naturalized – the assembled personae nonchalant in their mutual disregard, as if waiting for another, more worthy audience. Are they cruisers, waiting for dusk and better trade? Or actors killing time before a rehearsal?

Birds of Istanbul (1999) – named for the city that is the Munich-born Duwenhögger's adopted home – engages the theatrical with a view backstage, where two men wear powder-blue tailcoats and top hats, one whispering from behind into another's ear, like a camped-up recreation of Edgar Degas's *Portraits à la Bourse* (1876). In the centre, upstage and unphased by the rows of empty seats, stands the diva: a giant cockatoo. This bird is classic Duwenhögger: simultaneously exotic, homely and a little kitsch. Flight, or the defiance of gravity too, seems close to the artist's heart – hence the acrobatic moves in 1994 *Choreographie für drei Männer, zwei Besen, und Signalband* ('Choreography for Three Men, Two Brooms, and Caution-tape'), which sees a Jerome Robbins-ish routine brought into a real street, or *We Must Believe in Spring* (2014), in which two men relax at tree-height on the edge of a scaffold platform, their midair suspension suggesting the magical ease of a flying carpet.

The Duwenhögger ‘look’ – rich in mustards, mauves, dusty pinks and chartreuse – is a union of Renoir and Rainer Werner Fassbinder: woozy, momentarily acidic, but fundamentally gentle. Paint goes on mostly light and gauzily, sometimes richly waxy. His figuration owes something to Paul Cadmus, his compositions to turn of the century Symbolists. The *fin-de-siècle* wafts through this show, with nods to *Henry James* (1995), Ronald Firbank (whose story ‘Caprice’ is reprinted for reading in the installation *Ostia*, 1985) and Colette, whose fictional Parisian paramour Cheri Duwenhögger reimagines in one 1999 painting as an African-American in a jonquil-yellow zoot suit. At times, such period stylings lapse into twee – the curling green standing lamp in the installation *Soft G – Interior* (2001), is Florine Stettheimer by way of Disneyland.

Said lamp illuminates the front page of a newspaper, reporting Jupiter’s mythical abduction of the boy Ganymede. It’s one of few moments in the survey in which eroticism is overt rather than hinted. Another is the lurid *Botanischer Garten* (Botanical Garden, 1992), in which a tall man looms over and pinches the neck of a young boy in a sports cap, positioned before a bush of pluckable pink flowers, or the equally pederastic collage *State of Affairs* (1982-3). In large part, however, sexuality here is a matter of glance, not grasp. *Probleema* (1995) pairs of Duwenhögger’s own dissolute reworking of Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s 1894 group-portrait-as-male-bonding of the same name, with four voyeuristic views of men from behind standing alone in urban settings – the group and the series installed intimately opposite each other in a white shed inside the gallery. In Duwenhögger’s world, desire is as much a condition as an activity, and consequently, produces a lot of sitting, lying and standing around. In *The Go Between* (1999), a man in white a tie rests dreamily beneath a giant gramophone horn that seemingly blooms like a tropical flower, while *Caspar* (2000) leans in the mint green doorway to an ice cream parlour, proffering a pink cone.

On the opposite side of the venue, he is joined by *Balthazar* (2002), spread out alluringly by a swimming pool, and *Melchior* (2002), leaning at dusk against a lamppost clouded by glowing moths. Together, these are the names of the biblical Magi who visited the Christ child. The three kings as confirmed bachelors in contemporary Turkey? As often here, the question ‘why?’ soon succumbs to ‘why not?’. Though its scope embraces more and less compelling moments, the resounding impression of Duwenhögger’s art is a series of wonders: moments all the stranger and more marvelous for partaking of the ordinary.

