

ELEGANCE IS RESISTANCE

Stephanie Lacava on Lukas Duwenhögger at Artists Space, New York.

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At the heart of Artists Space's "Books and Talks" Walker Street space this past May, stood Lukas Duwenhögger's *Blessings of Their Gentleness*, 2002, a work resurrected for the painter's first solo show stateside and first comprehensive survey to date. This piece, a conical structure covered in Ruscus leaves, confetti crepe paper strands at its base, could be taken as an allusion to a similar form used in the German Richtfest (or "topping out" ceremony) wherein the final beam of a structure is laid and construction is deemed complete. It is something of a public relations maneuver, an opportunity for glossy photos of bureaucrats by the tree. Not insignificantly, Duwenhögger's structure hung inside a building in TriBeCa (the area's name already a funny real estate portmanteau), where the organization will maintain an outpost even as it is priced out of its long-term Greene Street location (where the second half of this show was installed).

The choice of Duwenhögger for the Greene Street finale – the vision of curator Richard Birkett and executive director and curator Stefan Kalmar – was a calculated endeavor begun nearly five years ago. Based in Istanbul, the Berlin-born Duwenhögger has been, for years, producing homoerotic work, mostly oil on canvas paintings, but frequently presented as components of mixed-media installations as several were here, making heavy nods to public and private space, detailed interiors, and codes of construction (the artist's father was an architect). Perhaps an unintentional connection, but a nevertheless resonant one, were the surrounding zig-zagging fire escapes so characteristic of downtown NY, mirrored in the tiny angled Polystyrene and wood stairs that create the nearly seven feet-high base supporting Duwenhögger's *Celestial Teapot* (2007) – the artist's bid at giving fantastical form to the key object in Bertrand Russell's famous example, which places the burden of proof with the one laying claims, rather than with said claims' skeptics.

Perhaps, and even better if unwitting, this reference stood as an important monument in a painstakingly assembled selection of objects – 42 pieces in the Greene Street location alone. Throughout the work, were representations of assorted codes, evidence of established systems of ascribing value to the aesthetic. There were countless versions, for example, of a well-dressed man who often appeared engaged with other male figures in realist narrative scenes. Almost always, the figures appear dressed in highly specific layers of fine patterned or colored fabrics. It is said that Duwenhögger would sometimes create these garments as studies for the paintings, the pink polka-dotted gold pants in *Lost in Music* (1986), one example. One may wonder what makes these trousers worthy of his attention, and is led first to the institutional support of related commercial enterprise, i.e. magazines shouted out in Duwenhögger's other works. The same could be said for *Room for the Student with a Sense for Beautiful Things*, 2002, the installation of a daybed covered in patterned fabric, a standing wooden ashtray nearby with cigarette butts, arranged just so. [[Was this all a nod to its phantom owner's "good taste" or confirmation of his awareness of the complicated world of cultural currency – or both?]] There was a kind of abstracted poetry in the cumulative effect of the layered paintings and sculptures. As Kalmar tells it, "total illegibility and psychological leakage, merging between someone's story and everyone's story."

Duwenhögger refuses explanatory text. Not even a press release was available for the show – instead viewers were each offered an accompanying folder with a stapled thirteen-page fictional narrative titled *The Clay Hen* and a peach pamphlet outlining the works on view in the Greene Street space all dating from 1980 to 2014. It is of note that many paintings were hung on temporary walls created out of standard office-style room dividers, actual manifestations of looming bureaucratic codes. But where "fact" was absent, "fiction" (or at least references to the literary sphere) abounded: not only was there the short story in lieu of a standard introductory text, but the show's title *Undoolay*, for example, had been taken from Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*; and its subtitle, *Elective Affinities*, was a translation of the name of Goethe's third novel, which deals with a moneyed married couple's dueling expectations, contracts, and passions. Elsewhere, various small details – whether a photo of Colette (as in, author of *Gigi*) appearing in one of Duwenhögger's physical mise-en-scènes, or his painted portrait of Henry James watching over all – offered a constant literary refrain.

Or consider Duwenhögger's 1985 vignette, *Ostia*. Installed on the window-facing side of the second divider to the right of the entrance within the Green Street space. It comprised two

Napoleon chairs, their gold caning typical of mid-century couture show seating, each carrying a photocopied edition of the Ronald Firbank's *Caprice* and Willa Cather's *Collected Stories*, their craft store covers collaged with photography (the Countess de Castiglione!) and childish illustrations of strawberries and lily of the valley. Sometimes Duwenhögger recreates these actual scenes; other times, he fictionalizes them, sometime both in the same installation causing the viewer to consider that wily notion of the burden of proof.

Nearby was *Multiple Devotions* (2000), a rendering of similar chairs with pamphlets, a man seated in a pink collared shirt, a pack of cigarettes in his breast pocket, a Verdura-style gold link watch at his wrist. He is wearing belted khaki pants, contemplating a miniature of another nearby canvas reproduced there: two men, perhaps lovers, in fantasy lighting enjoying a float at sea. Separated by one screen within the same folding wall, there is a separate painting, *Waiting to Move* (1999), of another male who looks very much like the artist himself, legs crossed facing away from the aforementioned figure. This man's hand is at his chin in similar thoughtful pose. He is dressed in a pink suit, coral tie, periwinkle criss-cross sandals and holds a yellow floral sprig from a mimosa tree in opposite hand. Both men are engaged in considering something, perhaps the doubling of a scene already multiplied from flat to (real-life) scale.

In *Rezalet-Impertinence* (1998), visible upon entering the space at Greene Street, there sits a person of ambiguous gender modeled after a Horst photograph of Gertrude Stein at a Balmain fashion show in 1946: starry-eyed and pencil in hand, peeled orange beside, dressed in gold jewelry, a purple sweater and tartan pants. Just beyond, in this same work, but magnified to appear as if a giant in comparison, a male teacher stands in a squared-off dandy pose. His silhouette is separated by a screen-like structure from a woman seated on a bench reading Rezalet. She has a camel coat, black sensible pumps, a yellow flower in her hair.

It's clear that these images reference pre-existing visual tropes. Where do they come from and why do we believe or discount them? The use of the largely literary term "trope," is apt if one considers Duwenhögger has written on his interest in interpretative issues of political rhetoric, translation, and misunderstanding. The written word allows its creator to couch meaning in another sort of mark making without providing confirmation or denial of intention. The reader, as with the viewer here, cannot claim unchanging knowledge of the work, which may be why Duwenhögger offers us *The Clay Hen*.

To better understand these references one need visit the films in the basement of the Walker

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Street location, which include Francesco Rosi's *Hands Over the City*, 1963 an exploration of urban development and political corruption in post-War Italy, as well as *From Cotton via Velvet to Tragedy* (1991), which directed, composed, and performed by Duwenhögger himself, portrays the artist in one guise as a Huysmanian decadent, glass in hand. "I read everything and go back to sleep," he says admitting to a slumber of fourteen hours. "I'm not ambitious, I could have built an empire, but I didn't." The camera pans to old magazine clippings, evocative of effortlessness couched in darker consequences. It steadies on the eyes of a man, a male idol with a "fuck me" stare – vacant, posed, and universal – are a recurring motif throughout Duwenhögger's paintings.

As Duwenhögger calls it in the movie, his head lolling backwards into a beaded curtain, one can be endlessly "fascinating," and never produce anything. Just upstairs, the staging of *Richtfest*, Duwenhögger's work from 2002 appropriately redone for this 2016 show, repeats that which underlies these sentiments. The artist offers no confirmation – or denial – of intention, instead three floors of opportunities for glossy photos. Don't forget to get one by the tree.

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