

DAVID B SMITH
GALLERY

Dena Schuckit

The Garden is a Raging Sea

August 27 – September 25, 2010

Exhibition Essay by Leanne Haase Goebel

One might say that Dena Schuckit is obsessed with disaster imagery: plane crashes, car bombs, war, fire, weather, auto accidents. Headline photos that are equally frightening and compelling, awful and beautiful. These kinds of images bombard us daily from around the world. Yet many do not read as literal illustrations of the event they portray when removed from the context of the news article. "Taken out of context, they're just strange, unfamiliar, nearly abstract frames capturing a suspended moment of action in time and space," Schuckit says.

The artist collects and classifies these images based on their abstract elements. She reads all her news online, collects the images, then prints and organizes them by form, shape or color. The printed photos are spread around her studio – a grouping of images is used as a reference when she begins a new painting. She prefers acrylic paint on wood because she can push and pull the paint using an electric sander. With six to eight paintings at different stages of completion, Schuckit combines the images into an amalgamation of vivid color and abstracted detail. Not actual combines such as those Robert Rauschenberg created, nor multi-media collage hybrids, Schuckit visually assembles, with paint, multiple images, flattening them onto the two-dimensional surface of the board.

"The colors and combinations might occur on one painting, then when you start a new image, its new colors and combinations give that old pallet a new life," she says. "There aren't any rules."

It's that lawlessness, that chaos, that she captures in each painting, that raw allure of imagery. The news photos she uses as reference in the studio are thus further decontextualized from the event. New connections are made based upon the color of a sky, the shape of smoke. Combining the frozen moments of uncertainty when we look at an image and are at first unclear of what we are seeing, Schuckit maps the landscape in a complex rhizome, charting the ebb and flow of civilization versus nature.

Things happen in her skies that are tangible, impossible, defying the laws of physics and gravity. And there is a tension created by the contrast between something recognizable like a fireman, a skyscraper or an upside-down automobile, and the abstracted shapes, lines, colors and patterns of the disastrous events: a collapsed and twisted highway or bridge in *Rebar Madness*, an explosion or implosion in *Aerial Event 2*, a multi-car pile up in *Zagged*. However, the viewer is not repulsed by these images, but instead enthralled by them. The vibrant yellows, deep blues, intense oranges convey peacefulness amid the intensity. The painting transcends the specificity of any one event and becomes all of them and none of them.

Schuckit's work is reminiscent of early Malcolm Morley, a British-born American artist. In *The Day of the Locust* from 1977, Morley painted Los Angeles under attack, a vivid image taken from the apocalyptic Nathanael West novel of the same title. Morley is often classified as both a neo-expressionist and nouveau realist, but he is best known for developing a photorealist style, which entailed accurately transferring color photos as raster elements (or rows of pixels) to canvas. Though not a realist, Schuckit's categorizing of headline imagery is similar. She creates a raster of images and allows them to produce a rhizome of new impressions. The scale of these average-sized paintings is large, perhaps larger than life, as indicated by the tiny human figures in the bottom foreground of *Aerial Event 2*, which plays on our psychological distance from these dramatic events; these images play over and over, but somehow do not manage to connect us to the disasters, whether natural or man-made.

To illustrate this idea even more, Schuckit selected a line from a humorous poem by Ogden Nash as the title of this exhibit: 'The Garden is a Raging Sea.' It's the third stanza from the poem 'A Watched Example Never Boils.'

*The garden is a raging sea,
The hurricane is snarling;
Oh, happy you and happy me!
Isn't the lightning darling?*

The poem tells us not to fear the storm. Schuckit, through her system of organization, is imparting order to the mayhem. And her interest in abstract artists like Joan Mitchell and Cecily Brown remind her to loosen up. A master printmaker with Crown Point Press in San Francisco for twelve years before getting her M.F.A. in painting, Schuckit has also returned to printmaking using these paintings as reference material for the prints. A step that further isolates the urban and natural disasters from the veracity of the main image.

"These are not landscapes you've really seen. They are not literal compositions," Schuckit reminds the viewer.

Yet it is not the distancing, the decontextualizing or the perception that these are fictional disasters that make these works sublime. The philosopher Edmund Burke said that the sublime and the beautiful are mutually exclusive; but either one can produce pleasure. This is what Dena Schuckit understands and conveys in her artworks.