

## Ena Swansea



Ena Swansea, *Tinyman* 1999-2003 lead, oil on linen, 76 x 76 inches  
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Ena Swansea achieved recognition in 1998-99 for a series of abstract paintings based on observations of light fall in the landscape. Key to this work was a subtly colorized grisaille palette and layers of transparent paint. The restless gray forms suggested moving shadows and were widely appreciated for their ingenious equation of style and content. Critical response noted that a subtle but recurring theme in the history of painting had resurfaced in a smart new way.

Swansea's debut exhibition at Klemens Gasser Tanja Grunert currently on view

through May 3, 2003 features paintings dating from 1999 – 2003. Introducing figuration and text, it reconfigures Swansea's repertoire of formal and stylistic elements. Surfaces vary from translucence to opacity or blinding shine on dark grounds; same goes for a few planes of lead-based white. Several of the most optically unconventional paintings start with graphite grounds that subvert color and squelch light altogether. They would seem to spring from unimaginable motives if not for Swansea's known interest in the painterly paradox shadows represent (as the relative absence of light and color). Formats vary, but at medium to large size (88" x 108" the largest) most canvases project an ambitious physicality in the gallery's sky lit space.

The new work experiments with varying degrees and types of illusion and depiction in its figuration process. Swansea compounds the issue with allusions to famous paintings hybridized with portraits of friends and famous painting styles. Models from Manet and Vermeer appear; form-rendering techniques of old masters are used; the flatness of silkscreen and Warholian inversions of value come up (Warhol's "Shadow Paintings" should perhaps be mentioned



in passing). The late Degas has a fleeting presence due to some unusual, theatrical lighting effects and pastel tinted highlights on lips, noses, ears. Swansea's graphite surfaces perhaps even recall Degas's metal plate photos of ballet dancers in lurid, chemical reaction-tinged colors. All of this challenges viewers to flex their optic taste buds into new poses.

If the first group was derived from the observed landscape, the focus of the present group shifts inward, toward a psychological landscape. In a recent interview with Barry Schwabsky, Swansea reveals that she has been interested in theories of multiple personality, and set herself the challenge of investigating her painterly concerns "from behind". She found a line in the Frank O'Hara poem *In Memory of My Feelings* that resonated with the kind of psycho-sexual introspection she was after: "My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent and he carries me quietly, like a gondola, through the streets." (The text is stenciled twice on one of the paintings, "Man In It".) Once one is aware of the O'Hara line, individual figures and pairs of figures on stylistically various paintings seem to interact with or separate from each other, as in a drama with endless episodes. Voices, thoughts, and feelings lie just beyond reach. Swansea is less attracted to multiple personality in the clinical sense than the garden variety neurosis most people experience, say, reading a novel or in dreams. O'Hara's dreamlike image has this effect, and the author himself is a totem of *Ab Ex*. The quoted line lends an open conceptual structure, albeit a cryptic one, to the whole show.

Swansea's interest in grisaille is still important and maintains its engagement with



Luncheon on the Grass 2003 graphite, oil on linen, 108 x 78

issues particular to abstract painting. But why graphite? Consider again that Swansea is interested in metaphor and working with the theme of multiple personality. As a black pigment, graphite is untrustworthy: dark for sure, but reflective also. Graphite, derived from carbon, is so slippery it's used in car lubricants. In pencils, it's ideal for both drawing and writing, activities as prone to erasure as productivity. Graphite facilitates movement of the hand on the page, which comes from thought in the mind. Swansea brings it to the surface, almost as subject matter in itself, an unreliable narrator to the oily brush strokes description above it. The figures' schematic mien seems to be an almost involuntary consequence. On the other hand, three paintings on oil-based white grounds show figurative elements fused with white

shadow space: losing hold of ego in a camouflaged environment. Swansea suggests that the twilight zone of opticality is analogous to states of mind, awake or asleep, where consciousness and certainty are momentary.

Thus gliding over the slippery surfaces of the grounds, the new paintings' blend of illustrational style, historical appropriation, petrochemicals, and text is the stylistic equivalent of an unstable psychological realm. Swansea's first interest is abstraction, so her push of the early grisaille into this new territory entails a certain amount of risk. From formal, stylistic, and conceptual angles, the new work projects a sense of contingency onto the positivist encounter with each canvas. It's a good concept, but the outcome looks more often transitional than insightful in this group.