

Ornamental Agility

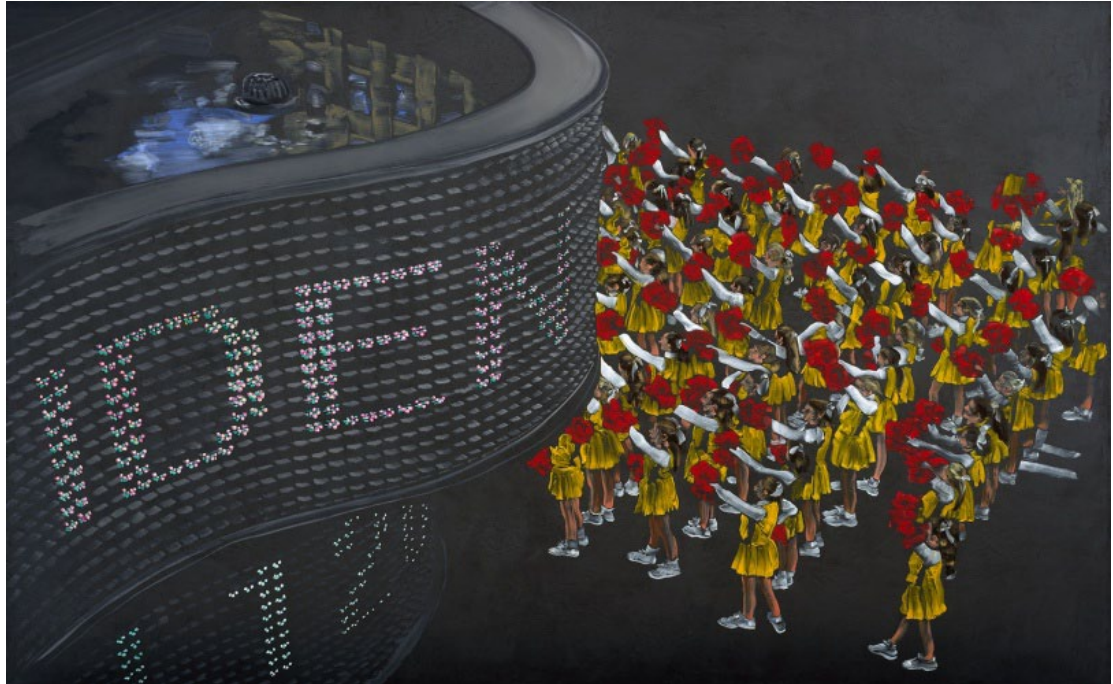
In Rainer Maria Rilke's sense, Ena Swansea is "resolved to be always beginning." (According to the poet, the angel of inspiration demands this, rather than tears, to deign to appear.) Like Mr. Taaffe, this accomplished painter also has roots in the 1980s East Village scene, though her career really got going in the 1990s. After she secured her reputation with paintings of plant forms in shadow that were sumptuously elusive, Ms. Swansea took a step back in terms of apparent mastery to tackle complex, in many ways more ambitious figure compositions. The nine paintings at André Schlechtriem Temporary, in her first exhibition with this gallery, show a remarkable artist back on top form.

The first painting to greet you is an equestrian portrait, "Princess Elisabeth" (2006). The sitter, an associate at the gallery, is a scion of the house of Thurn und Taxis, patrons of Rilke in his time. The face has the melancholy beauty familiar from the work of Elizabeth Peyton, who is similarly in awe of celebrity — by coincidence, Ms. Peyton once made a painting of a Princess Elisabeth, in her case the young Elizabeth Windsor. But Ms. Swansea eschews Ms. Peyton's deliberate use of illustration technique to express humbleness or alienation, investing the paint with lush presence. Not that weirdness and alienation are absent from these works — they are all painted on grounds of intense liquid graphite, and like her early shadow paintings, are basically grisaille with color the exception not the rule.

Ms. Swansea paints with deft economy. In "Identity" (2006) a regiment of cheerleaders marches past a stadium where only the letters "IDEN" are visible on the curved LED display. Against the prevailing gray, each girl is constructed from quick stabs of the brush, a stroke or two each for limbs, yellow torsos, red feathers, face. Yet, miraculously, each girl is an individual, some smiling, other intensely self-absorbed. "Picture Plane" (2006) offers a similar balance of detail and whole, of human presences within a crowd, of contrasting material substances — reflected light signage in glass, rusticated stonework — somehow all democratically sharing the picture plane of the title. In "Happy Valley," what seems like a



Princess Elisabeth, 2006



Identity, 2006

few tossed off casual brushstrokes capture with anatomical and expressive exactitude the voluptuous muscle of a stockings transvestite leg. Volumetric credibility plays against flatness in this image as surely as do masculine and feminine, artifice and reality. The painting is a “pride parade” in terms of its own facture as much as its subject.

Ms. Swansea’s paint is slick, succulent, and elastic, but her slippery brilliance rarely seems an end itself. Instead, she exudes that magic compact you get in Manet and other old masters of awkwardness and fluency.

Swansea until April 7 (524 W. 19th St., between 10th and 11th avenues, 212-929-6119).

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