

swiss institute

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Jean-Frédéric Schnyder
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Jean-Frédéric Schnyder
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ON A STROLL

through the Lower East Side one unusually sunny day this January, a friend and I happened upon a cat. Perched under the butt of a parked car, it had its head turned toward the winter sunshine and its paw playfully raised in the air. »Aw, look how cute!« said my friend. It was clearly dead. The experience of being torn from a pleasant moment and thrown into the darker corners of reality could be said to exist at the heart of Swiss artist Jean-Frédéric Schnyder's (*1945) work. Schnyder has focused on leitmotifs in a way that borders on obsession. The paintings on view at Swiss Institute's new Wooster St location, which are all dated circa 1990/91, depict simple houses and trees, billowing smoke and clouds, and other Swiss landscapes. However, these halcyon scenes are frequently shattered by the inclusion of symbols, such as a swastika, contradicting the pleasantries of Schnyder's depicted settings. All thirty-five works in the exhibition are deceptively modest in stature – diminutive 21 x 30 cm paintings, perfectly decorative and bedroom-sized. This connection to décor is heightened by Schnyder's handling of paint, which is variously virtuoso or outright strange, exhibiting effects ranging from caked-on impasto to a loosely rendered paint-by-numbers aesthetic.

More traditional in its rendering is a work that depicts a quaint lakeside environment replete with a cabin, a gaggle of geese, cattails, and an over-the-top tacky sun smiling out from the corner of the

composition. But a large cloud looming in the background of the painting violently disrupts this sweetness; the cloud's mushroom shape suggests a nuclear explosion in the not-so-far-off distance. Located in the Swiss Institute's downstairs space, the only video in the exhibition, *Corso Schnapsparade* (Liquor Parade, 2009), features a procession of painstakingly hand-crafted wooden horses that pull trailers carrying miniature Swiss liquor bottles. Other works are characterized by less full-on symbolism. *Landschaft XIX* presents a hedge maze in the shape of a house and a tree, its clay-colored foliage apparently made by transferring paint directly from the tube to the canvas. Another work, *Landschaft XXV*, depicts a darkened domestic interior where two cartoon dogs sit watching a television that is emblazoned with the image of the Walt Disney character Goofy and his small doghouse. The bizarre sight of dogs watching their own species on a television program – as if the program contained instructions on how to be a dog – highlights the absurd power we often ascribe to the media. While the aforementioned paintings maintain some level of clarity in terms of conveying the artist's intention, others in the series are guilty of muddy painting, unremarkable subject matter, or being downright over-the-top.

Although it may be difficult for some viewers to locate the gravity of this work – after all, it is nothing more than an exhibition largely consisting of diminutive paintings from the early 90s – there is something to be said for Schnyder's persistence in working through quotidian subjects with such rigor and sincerity. As curator Massimiliano Gioni stated in the



JEAN-FRÉDÉRIC SCHNYDER
Exhibition view / Ausstellungsansicht Swiss Institute, New York 2012
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JEAN-FRÉDÉRIC SCHNYDER
Landscape XV, 1991
Oil on canvas / Öl auf Leinwand
21 x 30 cm



Landscape X, 1991
Oil on canvas / Öl auf Leinwand
21 x 30 cm

lecture that he gave about the artist in coordination with the exhibition, »If Beuys proved that every man is at artist, Schnyder suggested that every artist is just a man.«