

Based Less on Profit than on Substance
By Amanda Sarroff

Make no mistake. “I am not a painter,” Kurt Ryslavy told me plainly our very first meeting. A conceptual artist, his works are better understood as an unfolding dialogue housed in object vessels and defined by the mediums through which they pass. Frequently born of serendipity and comprised of found materials, Ryslavy weaves between the interstices of defined artistic categories, confronting imperceptible shifts, dislocations, suspensions, and reflections along the way.

TU M'AIDES À PEINDRE? / HELP JE ME SCHILDEREN? arose, like so many of Ryslavy's works, from an opportunity seized. It began as a chance encounter with the Antwerp gallerist Annie Gentils about a painter Ryslavy had never met and whose works he had hardly seen. When Ryslavy learned that the artist Kati Heck had abruptly left Annie Gentils following a conflict with a larger commercial gallery in New York, he proposed to fill the vacuum in Gentils' program with a like painting exhibition narrating the circumstances of her departure. Perhaps fearing the repercussions, Gentils withdrew her exhibition offer but Ryslavy persevered, creating twenty-four towering painted diptychs that expose intricacies, if not outright hypocrisies, of the commercial art market.

These canvases are filled with hieroglyphs of fiery pigment and gaping white spaces with phrases scrawled boldly and badly across their surfaces. Ryslavy brazenly approximates (if deliberately poorly) Heck's painting style, best known for fantastical renderings of friends and acquaintances engaged in bizarre, recurring motifs against spare backgrounds. In homage to her, Ryslavy adheres at least a single painted figural element, a face or a bust in most instances, to each of the two dozen diptychs. They float on the surface, encased in solitary orbs.

These peering orbs comprise discarded scraps, or “out-cuts” as Ryslavy describes them, of paintings by the Swiss artist Daniela Belinga. To paste them onto the canvases he used oil paint as an adhesive, a practice that draws from his earlier invention of *Klebedarstellung*, or drawing with paint as glue. In the 1980s and 1990s Ryslavy used paint as glue to apply found paper fragments to paper. Traces of earlier pressings of these fragments on the paper often appeared elsewhere in the work. In each of these diptychs, too, one finds a negative tracing cast across its surface.

Shadow play flickers throughout the group of works. The title of the series, which translates loosely as You'll Help Me Paint?, bears the cheeky subtitle (*assistance Walter Swennen*) / (*assistentie Walter Swennen*). Ryslavy jabs at the propensity of established contemporary artists to employ studio assistants and vast labor ensembles to meet the demand for their works. As the subtitle implies, Ryslavy too—so much in demand—has required a helping hand. The joke's second register lies in the selection of Swennen, an acclaimed artist in his own right several years Ryslavy's senior. Unlike Belinga, Swennen played no role in the exhibition or in the creation of works, yet one must look to the diptychs' versos to see that she has been credited. That Belinga's contributions are obscured by the name of not one but two men speaks poignantly to the invisible labor behind the production of many an artwork.

Ryslavy's aping of Heck's provocative titles renders yet more acute his critique of art world vanity and greed. Several allude to the intrigue that motivated the series, such as *Mary Bone* (a reference to Mary Boone, the powerful New York art dealer at the center of the dispute) and *Ausschuss Gute Galerieberatung* (Committee of Good Gallery Counsel). Still others forge a link with scandal and scamming, such as *Immobilienblase* (Real Estate Bubble) and *Ich habe ein grosses Geschäft, bitte antworten* (I Have a Big Business, Please Reply), the latter of which was an opening line to a spam email the artist received proposing a get rich quick scheme.

Artists are compelled to find other means to sustain their artistic ends, and Ryslavy makes clear he is no exception. Pressed by financial necessity, he conducted his own get rich quick (or, in his case, get bourgeois quick) scheme in 1990 with the purchase of an old mansion in Brussels that he converted into home, studio, exhibition space, and seat of business for a successful wine distribution company. In a series of works he called *Monos (le monochrome avec son arrière-plan économique)*, the artist transformed his customer receipts into painted artworks. Two *Monos* are repurposed here as canvas for his diptychs. From them we learn, for example, that Louis Vuitton purchased over 1,800 euros worth of wine from him in 2013. Ryslavy's desire to continually displace the notion of value placed on an object or on an artist's signature rings faintly of Duchamp. So too his wry sense of humor. Yet Ryslavy's works are concerned less with physical re-placement or re-contextualization than with delayed gratification.

Ryslavy continually effaces his own signature. Authorship in *TU M'AIDES À PEINDRE?* is dispersed through an interlocking chain of relationships. He succeeds in employing one artist's name and another artist's hand to appropriate yet a third artist's style. In order to receive Belinga's out-cuts, Ryslavy bartered four of his original paintings. If any authentic kernel to Ryslavy's artwork exists, it is these four paintings made entirely of his own hand. Yet they now belong solely to Belinga. In removing them from circulation Ryslavy has made them unattainable to the art market. What remains is twenty-four works that are purposefully and continuously undermined and interfered with. They will likely be less profitable too.

In the end, *TU M'AIDES À PEINDRE?* does not so much deconstruct the art world as probe the generous contours of ego and avarice. Meaning and substance become lodged in a perpetual deferral, wherein each object is but a single relay in an infinite regress. With each advancing step we take toward the center of Ryslavy's work clarity recedes, and with it facile spectatorship and consumption. Tread thoughtfully, or be damned.