

## STIEG PERSSON *Old Europe*

Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney | 19 November - 20 December, 2008

We live in an era where there is no single, persuasive theory of painting. The pluralism of the postmodernist landscape has produced its own orthodoxies, but still there is no mainstream, no Lonely Planet guide. In some ways there could be seen to be an absence of purpose in contemporary painting.

Popular culture, once the inspiration of artists from Warhol to Koons, now exerts an increasingly tyrannical influence on art practice, and the 'art industry'. At the crux of this condition is the ascendancy of a contemporary art that subliminally mimics neoliberal economics to its very core.

The postwar corporate and industrial culture of the United States is central to the understanding of the art of Stella and Warhol; their clear desire to be at one with their times was manifest not only in their aesthetics, but also their work practices. It was, however, the Belgian, Marcel Broodthaers who saw the future. Duchamp's aversion to manual labour was the precedent, but Broodthaers understood the shift from blue to white-collar culture.

In 1968 Broodthaers created his Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, a conceptual museum. Antagonists to painting, such as Benjamin Buchloh have cited this work as the moment when the contemporary artist's role shifted from artisanal to managerial, the self-expressive to the conceptual. It is no coincidence that this moment mirrors the shift in the western economy from manufacturing to 'knowledge' industries in the late twentieth century.

The managerial is now seen to be a 'progressive' mode of artistic production. Underlying this is the belief that that all advanced art is conceptual. In Joseph Kosuth's words, 'a work of art is a kind of proposition presented within the context of art as a comment on art.' Painting now exists alongside installation, performance, film and interactive media.

The works in *Old Europe* evolved in full awareness of this proposition – of the broader context in which painting finds itself. In different ways, the works are provocations about their context, much as Kosuth might articulate it. But rather than assuming that the language of painting is redundant, Persson enjoys a freedom to choose from its rich heritage.

Flat expanses of hard-edged colour collide with soft translucent forms. Organic forms are subject to simple compositions, formal and heraldic. They are repeated, but never precisely. Some shapes have shadows but they are made with light reflective metallic paint. The gestures drip freely only to be entombed by the painted ground. Decorative scrolls, pink and blue, black and white, brand the paintings, perhaps forming letters or even words, perhaps not. Always there is a dance between the materiality of the work and the wit of its elusive subject matter, hinted at in the titles, but inevitably returning the viewer to the complexity of the physical painting itself.

The project bypasses the exhausted debates about painting's relevance. It restates the possibilities that painting continues to offer and is a dedicated exploration of its history, the hidden foundation of all contemporary art, its European origins, its European DNA.

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### List of Works

1.	<i>Land of Agapanthus</i> , 2007	oil and metallic paint on linen	183 x 168 cm
2.	<i>Clash Theory</i> , 2006-08	oil and alkyd resin on linen	183 x 168 cm
3.	<i>Ermine</i> , 2008	oil and metallic paint on linen	183 x 168 cm
4.	<i>Signor Giovanni</i> , 2008	oil and metallic paint on linen	229 x 167 cm
5.	<i>Third Republic</i> , 2008	oil and metallic paint on linen	229 x 167cm
6.	<i>Winckelmann in Trieste</i> , 2008	oil and metallic paint on linen	229 x 167 cm
7.	<i>Albertine</i> , 2008	acrylic paint, gesso and pencil on paper	86 x 56.5 cm
8.	<i>Gerhard Schroder</i> , 2008	oil and alkyd resin on linen	213 x 183 cm
9.	<i>Herculex</i> , 2008	oil and alkyd resin on linen	219 x 183 cm
10.	<i>Northern Bight</i> , 2008	oil and alkyd resin on linen	183 x 168 cm
11.	<i>Ruskin</i> , 2008	oil and metallic paint on linen	229 x 167cm
12.	<i>Old Europe</i> , 2007	oil and metallic paint on linen	229 x 168 cm
13.	<i>Das Alte Europa</i> , 2008	oil and metallic paint on linen	229 x 167cm
14.	<i>Downward Harmonisation</i> , 2008	oil on canvas	213 x 152 cm
15.	<i>Say Goodbye Agapanthus</i> , 2008	oil on canvas	183 x 168 cm
16.	<i>Vare</i> , 2007	oil on linen	183 x 168 cm