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Interview

"I've always been a loner"

Painter Peter Schuyff experienced the bustling art scene in New York in the 1980s. Now there is again great interest in his geometric work.

Sandra Smallenburg
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The 1980s in New York City were a vibrant yet intense time for the art scene. Andy Warhol was still working in his Factory, while young heroes like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring were hard at work- and all three died before the decade was well over. The art market was experiencing golden times, with Jeff Koons as the biggest golden boy. In clubs like CBGB's and Studio 54 endless partying was possible, but the AIDS epidemic and excessive drug use also killed many.

Dutch-born artist Peter Schuyff (Baarn, 1958) found himself in the eye of the storm when he moved from Vancouver to New York in 1980. He quickly became a central figure in the East Village art scene. He worked for a while in Studio 54 and FOOD, the restaurant of artist Gordon Matta-Clark. He posed for Andy Warhol, who screen-printed his portrait, and lived for a long time at the legendary Chelsea Hotel, where artists such as Janis Joplin, Sid Vicious, Leonard Cohen and Madonna also stayed or had lived.

"I already knew in high school that New York was the place where I had to go," says Schuyff, who now lives in Amsterdam again. “I saw a book about The New York School at the time, with artists such as Larry Poons, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. They had lofts in Soho and looked so cool and sexy in their skinny jeans. I was about seventeen and knew: I want that too and I want it there. ”

The works that Schuyff made in the 1980s, geometric paintings that shimmer before your eyes, can now be seen in the London gallery White Cube. After years of silence, there is suddenly a lot of interest in Schuyff's New York period. In 2017, the paintings were already shown in the Kunsthalle of the Swiss Friborg and Le Consortium in Dijon. Schuyff understands this renewed interest: "These are still very good paintings," he says, without any self-mockery, and with a thick American accent. "And I'm still doing a good job. If you do this for a long time, you will not be forgotten. I have earned my spurs. ”

What makes those eighties paintings so good?

"I was young, tough and brash then. My works are better if I don't think about it too much. I want to make paintings that have no meaning. When I start thinking, things go wrong. You shouldn't get in your way while painting. Those works from the eighties did not present much difficulty, but there was a lot of effort. I worked very hard. I often say about my paintings: they are about the calories I burned while I made them. You can see how much effort it takes. "

You have only attended art school in Vancouver for one year. Why?

"I was already involved in an artists' initiative and a gallery. I made exhibitions in my own studio and already sold. I had colleagues. So I didn't feel the need to go to school. I had already trained myself in high school. There I devoured old editions of Artforum , and when I saw something cool, I went to copy it. Painters like Jasper Johns or Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, early David Hockney. Cy Twombly was one of my favorite artists, with his left-handed scribbles. Through him I understood that you could do that, place abstract lines, and that they had an intrinsic value, a weight. "

Peter Schuyff, **Untitled** , 1985

Was Dutch painting, by Mondriaan and De Stijl, for example, an influence?

"Hell yes. That abstract art is in my genes. It has been important to me from the very beginning. I remember De Stijl in primary school. The colors of the blocks, the design of the letters. That has always stayed with me. Later, an artist like Sol LeWitt became an example, because he made art that didn't require thinking. I like the idea that the work seems to make itself and at the same time convey a physical experience. "

Your paintings look like op art, they vibrate and move before your eyes. As if there is something behind the canvas that pushes it forward. Some works are trippy, as if they were made under the influence of drugs.

"I actually only made one painting that is directly related to drugs. There are many paintings that do not exist due to drugs I have taken. I could have painted more. "

Do you make drawings first, or do the compositions come from your head?

"I first make drawings on the computer. I used to have no computer. Then it was as if the ideas came from those paintings themselves. Not out of my head, but out of my hands. "

You came to large galleries early on, from Larry Gagosian, Tony Shafrazi and Leo Castelli. You experienced the 'boom' in the art world. And the crisis that followed. What do you think of the craziness of the art market and the high prices now paid for your early works?

"I'm just trying to keep out of it. Even then you had large galleries and small galleries. The difference is that the large galleries now have forty or fifty artists in their stable. Then you knew everyone, that is really not the case anymore. "

What was it like to work in New York in the 1980s? How was the 'vibe'?

“CBGBs were already on the decline. Max's Kansas City closed in 1981. The artists I knew mainly hung out in The Mudd Club. The music scene and the art scene didn't really mix. But those punk rockers were all in the East Village. Dee Dee Ramone was my neighbor. "

You posed for Andy Warhol. How was that?

"He made a portrait of me in 1986, just before he died. He took some pictures of me in The Factory and used them for a painting. My face now hangs in the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. And I exchanged a painting with him for my own portrait.

“What I remember most about The Factory was seeing a black and white painting of a crowd hanging out on Coney Island beach on my way in. I thought that was such a great job. Andy then said: wouldn't you rather exchange it? I thought: that will come. So I said no. I regretted that later. I did get a small Piss Painting , made with urine, and received a cloth from the Shadows series. And I have a dollar bill from 1964. "

Do you remember where you were when Warhol died, in 1987?

"The New York art world was small at the time, and when Andy showed up somewhere, it was always a fuss. When he died, I was in Los Angeles. Dennis Hopper called me at my hotel to tell. He was totally upset. It was a huge shock to all of us. ”

You have lived in the Chelsea Hotel for a long time. Did you work there too?

"Yes, my apartment was big enough to move my living room to my bedroom so I could use the living room as a studio. But the costs of living in Manhattan kept increasing. It became a lifestyle to be able to continue to pay the rent. I have always been able to make a living from work, but it took more and more energy to be there.”

Did you therefore decide to return to the Netherlands in 2006?

"I wanted to get out of New York, so I moved to Vancouver, where I grew up. But I got bored of Vancouver after two years. I quickly become dissatisfied. It was very beautiful there, I had a beautiful studio overlooking the water. But it was a little too neat for me. I like to smoke and swear. Then I found out I could get a Dutch passport. So I came here.”

How do you like the Amsterdam art scene?

"I haven't really found it yet. I do have colleagues, but I don't spend much time with them. I'm quite a loner. The Netherlands has never been so keen on my work. They think of me as an American painter, I think. If I went more to openings it might be different. I think I've always been a misanthropist. It is better that I keep my distance.”

You are now making similar geometric paintings as you did back then. Is the circle now complete?

"Yes, I paint just like I did then. I was able to make those paintings at the time because I didn't care, because I was young and tough. Now I don't care because I'm older and wiser. But the result is the same. There have always been cycles. I have always worked with light and illusion, with depth and perspective. In between there was a time when I didn't make the best works. Then I got bad reviews, and I deserved it.”

Are you afraid of the reviews in the British press?

"No, this exhibition will be well discussed, I am convinced of that."

Peter Schuyff . Until May 16 in White Cube Mason's Yard, London. The exhibition can be viewed by appointment . Inl: whitecube.com

CV PETER SCHUYFF

1958 Born in Baarn

1966 Emigrates with his parents to Canada

1979 Follows a year at the Vancouver School of Art

1980 Moves to New York

1983 First solo exhibition in New York's Pat Hearn Gallery

1985 Solo at the Larry Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles

1987 Solo at the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

2004 Moves to Vancouver

2005 Exhibition in New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York

2006 Moves to Amsterdam

2009 Releases a CD called The Woodwards

2009 Solo Galerie Gabriel Rolt, Amsterdam

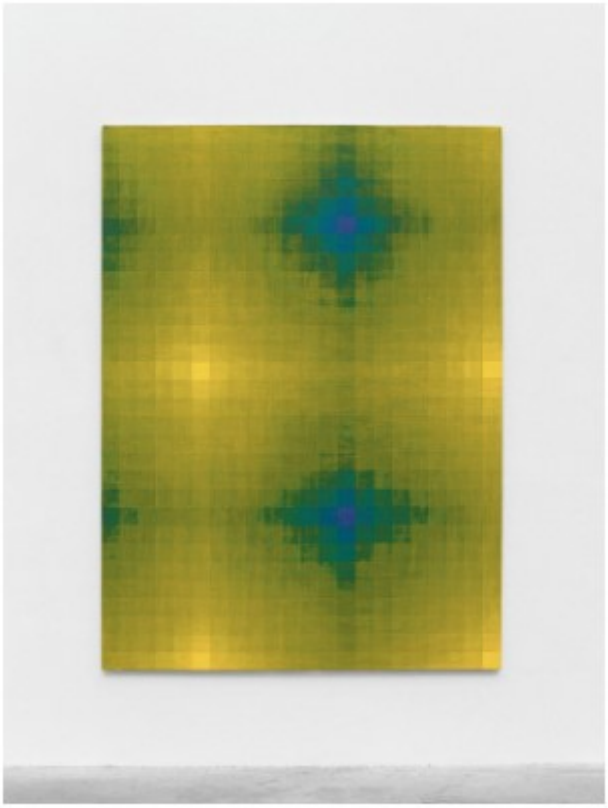
2010 Second CD by The Woodwards, together with the British singer Stevie Guy

2014 Participates in the Whitney Biennale in New York

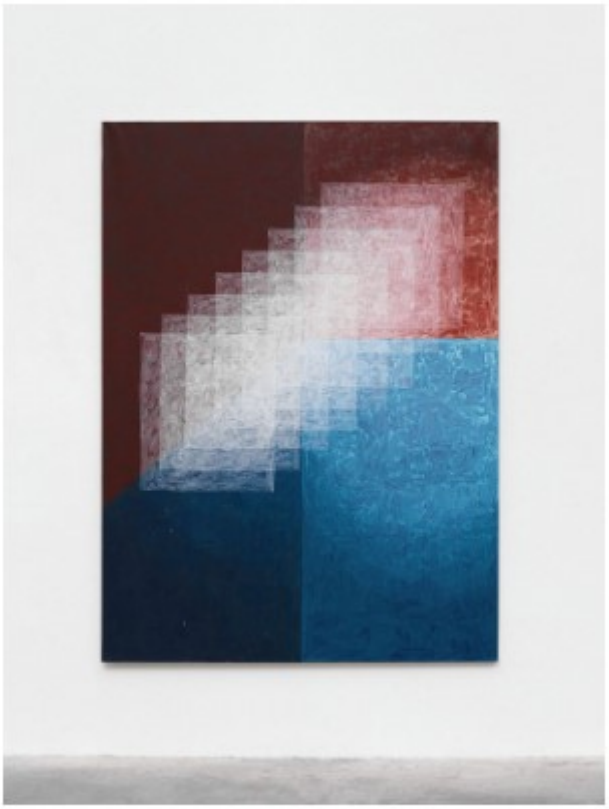
2017 Retrospective 'Has Been' in Kunsthalle Friborg and Le Consortium Dijon

2020 Solo in White Cube, London

Peter Schuyff's work is in the collections of the MoMA in New York, the MoCA in Los Angeles and the Metropolitan Museum in New York.



Peter Schuyff, **Untitled**, 1984



Peter Schuyff, **Mr America**, 1984