



*Kicking a Dead Horse*

**SIMON HUELSBECK**

**Southeast Minnesota Artists Exhibition Series**

October 12 – December 31, 2006



Progress, 2006, 20x24 in., Oil on panel

FRONT COVER: Identity Crisis, 2006, 10x13 in., Oil on panel

“One becomes a painter when existing painted objects do not wholly satisfy one’s subjective unity of feeling, the sense of one’s own identity. Any modern painter’s work is a criticism of the whole culture of painting from the standpoint of his own identity. As we become more and more individualized historically, as the community begins to disintegrate, every painter feels more and more the necessity to reinvent painting.” — Robert Motherwell

The understanding of painting as a discipline has undergone numerous cycles of inquiry and resolution that have initiated transformations, revisions, and progressions throughout the vast history of the medium. While these conditions have fostered original and innovative approaches to technical and conceptual concerns, the tradition of painting and its associated conventions can also perpetuate cycles of replication, regression, and stagnation. Some viewers of contemporary painting may gauge the success of a work based on aesthetic similarities to classical paintings of which they are familiar and that possess subject matter that is readily defined or understood. However, in contemporary art practice, artists determine the degree to which they embrace or reject the accepted fundamental foundations of painting. In the quote above, renowned artist Robert Motherwell (1915-1991) addresses the painter’s desire to reinvent the medium in order to more fully align it with one’s own identity. In the exhibition *Kicking a Dead Horse*, Simon Huelsbeck similarly addresses issues concerning personal identity and an ongoing process of simultaneously embracing and challenging the

traditions and conventions of painting. Perhaps the best example of the culmination of these concepts is in the work *Identity Crisis* (2006). In this painting, Huelsbeck recreates a famous image by Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self Portrait at an Early Age* (1628). Having been credited as one of the first artists to intensively study the self through drawing and painting, Rembrandt’s images exemplify expressions of emotion and human experience, as well as demonstrate a widely appreciated and often imitated technical style. That Huelsbeck selected this particular painting, perceivably created at a time when Rembrandt himself was beginning his own artistic explorations of personal identity, suggests an appreciation, engagement, and evaluation of a similar process of desired understanding. That this work presents his own image in the place of the famous artist challenges and critiques tradition, the notion of the self, and the continuum and influence of art history. In this work, Huelsbeck demonstrates not only his proficient technical abilities as a painter, but also the core conceptual underpinnings of his most recent body of work.



Rochester Pop, 2006, 28x19 in., Oil on panel

In his works *Progress* (2006) and *Rochester Pop* (2006), Huelsbeck redirects his attention from portraiture and contends with the traditions of landscape painting. The background of his oil painting *Progress* is a skillful recreation of an idyllic scene that features representations of tranquil waters reflecting a clouded sky and a powerful land mass, reminiscent of classic Hudson River School work. The viewer can readily see Huelsbeck's attention to light, layering, and perspective, again adopting the conventions and techniques of a recognized style. However attractive and subdued the representational landscape in the background, what is noticed, perhaps first, is the intrusion of a colorful mass, seemingly hovering on top of the landscape. Looking very much like the haphazard remnants of a painter's palette, this is a direct aesthetic and conceptual challenge to the painting's foundation. Thus the background and foreground appear quite at odds with one another. While the landscape appears peaceful and somewhat serious or sophisticated with many fine details, the superimposed abstract amalgam of bold colors appears at once threatening, arbitrary, and somewhat absurd. In this way, he combines seemingly clashing methodologies and concepts and allows for an atypical interaction, introducing questions of stylistic legitimacy and authority. Consider Huelsbeck's title

for this piece—*Progress*. He has taken a classical work and at once revered and attacked its conventions while alluding to aesthetic and conceptual evolution within the history of painting.

Whereas in *Progress* a component of the work is applied over a traditional landscape, in *Rochester Pop*, Huelsbeck allows his landscape to fully interact with and be transformed by a series of whimsical bubble-like structures. Although the muted colors and exacting details of the cityscape reference classic works, this landscape represents contemporary Rochester, Minnesota, the small city in which the artist lives and works. The bright colors and repeating forms included in this work reference design themes similar to those popular in the 1970s and in recent design, perhaps commenting on the current use of similar elements in contemporary drawing and painting. Unlike *Progress*, however, Huelsbeck allows these forms to combine and interact more fully with the landscape, becoming a more unified whole. In choosing to represent this city, Huelsbeck uses the notion of place and home to comment on identity. In doing so, he brings into question his role as teacher and community member, and his overall opinions about the city. Huelsbeck's aesthetic and conceptual concerns address a continued artistic effort to understand the self and the meaning of art making. KD



Kris Douglas is the curator for the Southeast Minnesota Artist Exhibition Series.

<sup>1</sup> Motherwell, Robert. *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, (first ed.) Edited by Stephanie Terenzio, 1992; pg 67. Oxford University Press, New York

Urban Reptile, 2006, 8x10 in., Oil on panel

**ABOUT THE ARTIST** Simon Huelsbeck received his BFA from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in 1997. He received his MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art in 2002. Since receiving his MFA, Huelsbeck has been featured in galleries and institutions in Philadelphia, Chicago, Rochester, Minneapolis, and New York. He is currently represented by Flanders Contemporary Art in Minneapolis and the LaPelle Galleries in Philadelphia. He lives with his wife in Rochester, Minnesota. He teaches at the Rochester Community and Technical College and is the Director of the University Center Rochester Gallery.

**ABOUT SOUTHEAST MINNESOTA ARTISTS EXHIBITION SERIES** The Rochester Art Center continually strives to engage community members of all ages in the creation, contemplation, and appreciation of the visual arts. As a non-collecting institution, the Art Center focuses its efforts on presenting temporary exhibitions throughout the year featuring established local, national and international artists, as well as emerging artists from diverse backgrounds working in a variety of media.

To fully serve our mission and support artists working within the region, RAC has dedicated an exhibition series to artists who are producing new work that currently reside in any of the eleven counties of Southeastern Minnesota. With many artists producing work of high quality and seeking exhibition opportunities, the RAC was compelled to directly serve this population. This series is designed to focus on emerging, mid-career, or established artists working in the SE Minnesota region, and provides audience members with consistent regional programming. To address the needs of our audience members and to provide information concerning the creative processes present in art production, each artist will also deliver an opening lecture to inform the public of their concepts and practices.



ROCHESTER **ART** CENTER

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