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LOS ANGELES

Robert Russell

ANNA HELWING GALLERY

On first impression, Robert Russell's second solo show of paintings at Anna Helwing Gallery, much like his debut, conformed to a familiarly Richteresque template. At issue, once more, was the relation between painting as a primary, hands-on means of producing images and all the medium's technically assisted derivatives. As we have seen in the work of Luc Tuymans, as well as that of his numerous followers, this issue is by no means resolved. On the contrary, it demands continual rethinking in the light of every new technological development. All of these painters are concerned with the question of what their medium essentially *is*, in the modernist sense, while also recognizing that its ontological core is subject to change.

Whereas Richter works to "expose" the technical base of the image, Tuymans increasingly places the emphasis on the image as such: No less emptied-out in stylistic terms, it becomes freighted with an excess of meaning. Russell operates somewhere in the middle. For starters, he avoids any reference to seriality, with which Richter remains strongly identified, by varying the scale of his paintings and hanging them in salon-style clusters one moment, in isolation the next. The installation plan of this show also suggested a recombinant formalism that was furthered by the heterogeneous inventory of *what* Russell paints: a fishbowl, a full-length portrait of a little girl in a ballerina costume, a still life of a can with paintbrushes, a bust of a young man in camouflage. These could have been pulled from one family's

photo album or, just as plausibly, from numerous, disparate sources. Russell's treatment of these images leavens sure-handed referential precision with gestural vagary in a way that recalls the blurring effect deployed by Richter, but here the painterly dissolution of information is never executed in quite such a consistently all-over manner. Rather, Russell varies his technique within each individual image as much as he does between them. Small-scale canvases are approached with oversize brushes, and vice versa. Paint is applied in fluid, determined strokes or with a nervous, darting stippling that raises the surface as though it were covered in welts. The artist avoids repetition, never pushing any of these moves to the level of a legible strategy, and yet, in the end, all are identifiably his.



Robert Russell, *Young Ballerina*, 2007
oil on canvas, 63 x 55 inches

This play between difference and sameness is carried over from the photographic source materials, which may likewise be characterized as both highly specific and utterly generic. The rift between these modes becomes acute when one learns that, for example, a smiling soldier is modeled on Timothy McVeigh. It is only slightly less distressing when the connections we make are accidental, as between the little ballerina and JonBenét Ramsey. As one of the most anodyne—and exquisitely rendered—works in the exhibition, even the fishbowl is gradually "infected" with suspicions aroused by the other canvases. The sense that every cute baby picture is in danger of morphing, over time, into a sordid mug shot or a scene from *Girls Gone Wild* is very much part of our informational moment—Russell only needs to nod in that direction. More surprising is the way he manages to conjure in paint the sense that the image is a vague, swirling substance that is, at the same time, always hardening into something more or less irrevocable.

—Jan Tumlr