



Norbert Schwontkowski:  
*The Inventor of the Tricolor*,  
 2009, oil on canvas,  
 71½ by 79¼ inches;  
 at Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

## NORBERT SCHWONTKOWSKI MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Like perfect pitch, a gift for painting affects different people in different ways. Norbert Schwontkowski mostly shrugs it off. Born in 1949 in Bremen, he is just a few years younger than Anselm Kiefer, and something of that scenery-chewing artist's polar opposite. The avoidance of grandeur sometimes leads Schwontkowski to goofiness; more often, he captures a subject so deftly that sublimity and whimsy seem compatible. Deploying complicated, precisely chosen colors (he grinds his own pigments) and a graceful, pseudo-naïve line, he creates compositions closer to Milton Avery than to the bravura painters so firmly identified with Germany, from the Neo-Expressionists of the 1980s to Neo Rauch and his Leipzig colleagues.

Schwontkowski's range of subjects and techniques is broad, but there are repeated motifs. A slightly flattened, stemmed orb appears as onion domes, thought bubbles and, in the ballooning black head of the hapless figure in *Elektriker* (all works 2009), one surpassingly blank face. Atmospheric effects, both those of weather and of emotional states, are captured with great delicacy. In *Alberta am Schwarzen See*, a sunlit woman standing astride her bicycle—its handlebars curve forward, eager to leave—turns back like Lot's wife to look at an expanse of black water already dappled with rain from a storm that threatens, murderously, on the horizon. Brushing past the reedy legs of a figure standing in the surf, in *Welle*, is a frothy little wave that rears up along the painting's right margin as if poised to sweep the whole canvas out to sea. Too cute by half is the face peeking woefully out of the sound hole

of a guitar in *Last Song*, but a portrait of the young Rodin, glowering with noble ferocity and slightly cross-eyed, is funny, psychologically complex and utterly believable.

That Schwontkowski is not shy of the transcendentalism of 19th-century Romantic landscape imagery is evident in *Polar*, a large painting of blue-tinged icebergs cast in majestic gloom. But he is equally comfortable with intramural subjects: the studio, the academy, the museum. In a few pictures, they are comically conflated; *Der Erfinder der Tricolore* (The Inventor of the Tricolor) finds a schematized artist, its body composed of collaged, eyeballish discs, dipping a brush into a big metal bucket; curving behind is a big windowless wall—observatory? museum? prison tower?—dotted with Albers-like exercises in color combination.

Along with the 18 conventionally-hung paintings in this exhibition, Schwontkowski presented roughly a dozen smallish canvases in a tight, congenial cluster of dreamers and jokers, wallflowers and grandstanders, along with a university or two. Clearly he likes his works to be considered in mutual relationship, and also in conversation with respected peers and predecessors: for his New York debut, at this gallery in 2006, he included paintings by Picasso, Forrest Bess, Alex Katz and Philip Guston. The choice, like Schwontkowski's paintings, is both modest and impertinent—and seems unreservedly, irresistibly candid.

—Nancy Princenthal