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The Alchemic Magic Of Ena Swansea's **F L O A T I N G I M A G E S**

Andrea Inselmann

The invention of photography was said to be the “death” of painting in the 1840s. But since then, painting has been declared dead or irrelevant so many times, and for so many reasons, that it is hard to take these declarations seriously anymore. Ena Swansea herself, in a 2008 *Brooklyn Rail* interview with art critic Irving Sandler, felt that the discussion of painting’s relevance “was silly.” I would suggest that a more productive way to think about the photography-painting relationship is to consider how, for nearly two centuries, some of the best paintings have, in some way, functioned in dialogue with the camera. Painters either rejected photographic realism, as in the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist movements, or embraced it, like with Andy Warhol’s silkscreened imagery or photorealist paintings that could be seen as “more photographic” than photographs. Still others, such as Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans, have employed more painterly effects that, nonetheless, parade their photographic sources.



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Inselmann, Andrea. “The Alchemic Magic of Ena Swansea’s Floating Images,” *Art Asia Pacific*, September/October 2016.

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(Previous page)
ENA SWANSEA, *Cardboard Legs*, 2016, oil,
 acrylic and graphite on linen, 241 x 280 cm.

(Previous page, background image)
ENA SWANSEA, *Shake Shack in Summer*
 (detail), oil and vinyl ink on metallic fabric,
 2015, 77 x 51 cm.

(This page)
ENA SWANSEA, *Snow on 16th Street*, 2014,
 oil on graphite on canvas, 228.6 x 391.2 cm.
 Courtesy Burger Collection, Hong Kong.

(Opposite page)
ENA SWANSEA, *Girl in a Club*, 2015, oil
 and acrylic on graphite, 122 x 91.5 cm.

Unless otherwise stated all photos by
 Christopher Burke Studio. Courtesy the
 artist and Albertz Benda, New York.

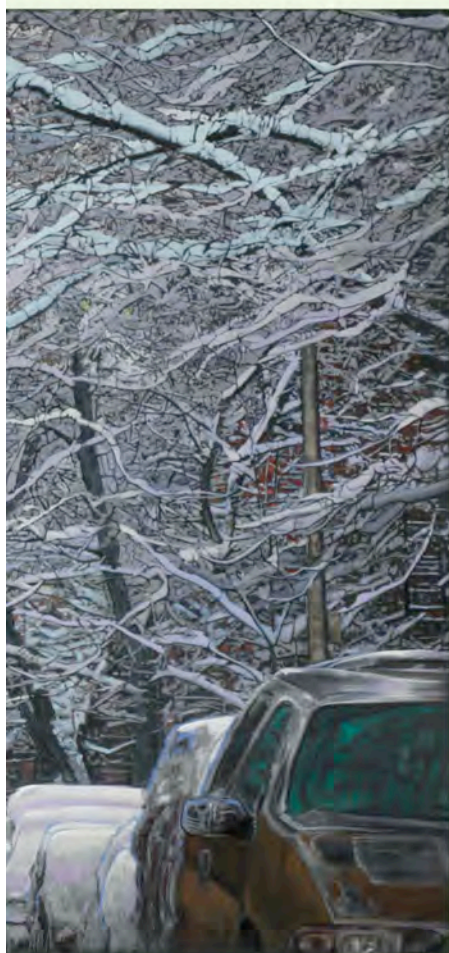
Swansea's position on photography as part of her painting practice is located somewhere closer to an embrace, guided by a deep understanding of the ubiquitous yet problematic nature of photographic images, especially in our digital age. In the aforementioned 2008 interview Swansea said that photography "is in all our eyes now, since we first saw a photo. So, I do start with photography and, like everybody now, my instincts are so intertwined with what cameras do that I can't get it out anyway, so I just go with it." Trained in both avant-garde and mainstream film techniques, Swansea knows how to use a camera not only to achieve dramatic lighting effects and extreme perspectives, but also considers the photographic apparatus "a tool for seeing" that has deeply shaped our perception of images. Though her paintings originate in the realm of dreams and the imagination, they often make use of rearranged motifs from photographs she has shot and manipulated digitally. During a recent studio visit, she described her images as "beginning in [her] head and passing through a digital treatment to then end up in the analogue format of an oil painting." German art historian Holger Birkholz compared Swansea's paintings to daguerreotypes—those one-of-a-kind photographs introduced in the early 19th century, dubiously credited for rendering painting irrelevant. Their subject appears either in negative or positive, on a silver-plated copper surface with a mirror-like finish, depending on the viewer's angle and light conditions. The image does not sit on the surface of the metal, but rather seems to be floating in space between the object and the beholder, which actually represents an intensely contemporary attitude toward perception and is, consequently, where its meaning lies.

Out of concern for issues related to process dominating the reception of her work and "turning it into plain novelty," Swansea preferred not to delve into it too much during our studio visit. Consistent with British curator

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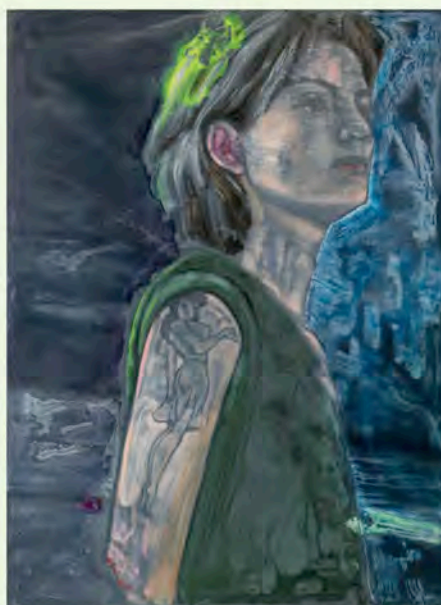
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Patricia Ellis's observation that "the subject of Swansea's paintings is found as much in her technique as in her depicted images," I was immediately reminded of James Elkins's remarkable book *What Painting Is* (1999), in which the painter-turned-art historian uses the language of alchemy to explore the magic that happens in a painter's studio. Stressing the special knowledge only artists have of their materials, Elkins notes that "a painting is made of paint—of fluids and stone—and paint has its own logic, and its own meanings . . . [A] picture is both the sum of ideas and a blurry memory of 'pushing paint,' breathing fumes, dripping oils and wiping brushes, smearing and diluting and mixing. Bleary preverbal thoughts are intermixed with the namable concepts, figures and forms that are being represented." Swansea's work is a great example of how the alchemical materiality of paint is inseparable from an artist's imagery. Ghostlike shapes—haystacks, waves, snow-laden branches on Manhattan's 16th Street, upright wooden piles in the Hudson River and androgynous figures in nightclubs—appear to float in a kind of alchemic tension created within the contrast and confluence of the top and base layers Swansea puts on her canvases.

The first series of coatings consists of graphite suspended in a urethane base, a mixture developed over the years by Swansea in collaboration with paint manufacturers. Only after grounding her stretched linen surfaces with 25 to 50 layers of this chemical solution does the artist begin to apply the actual image, by "drawing" with brushes of varying thickness on top of the graphite ground with thinned, translucent oil paint. Like a laboratory, Swansea's studio is outfitted with a range of different light sources, including daylight, strobe and spotlights, as well as black curtains, in order to explore the effects of light on her painted surfaces. As light is being alternately absorbed and reflected, depending on the viewer's position in front of the painting, Swansea's works never seem to come to a complete rest, caught, as they are, in a constant state of becoming. In a 2004 conversation commissioned by *Parkett* magazine, Swansea and longtime friend and artist Alex Katz discussed not only how an oil painting matures over time, but also some of the fundamental differences between photography and painting. "Photography is basically past-tense art," Katz



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declared, “and if it’s any good, painting is present-tense art.” Aided by large sizes that tend to envelop the viewer in the realm of the experiential and corporeal rather than the purely visual, Swansea’s paintings assume an active participant in the process of looking, in an almost performative act that occurs in the moment, as art critic Carter Ratcliff suggests. “Swansea,” he concludes, “presents her images as primary realities. Thus, a painting is not merely a representation of the real but an instance of it.”

Reaching well beyond photography’s inertia in this way, Swansea’s work is squarely rooted in the history of painting. Her wave paintings are clearly a nod to French realist Gustave Courbet. Her many haystack paintings are reminiscent of Claude Monet’s depictions of the same subject. Her different series of works all keep returning to their specific motifs, like Vincent van Gogh’s many variations of the same subjects, because the paintings are ultimately about capturing light and shadow. The numerous paintings of tree branches covered in snow on 16th Street near her Manhattan studio suggest Swansea’s affinities to Jackson Pollock’s allover compositions, and, like his, Swansea’s images cannot be contained within the frame. In a recent iteration on this theme—created in oil and acrylic on archival ink and silver fabric—energy seems to pulse beyond the edges of the painting into our viewing space, emphasized by a cut-off street lamp in the upper-right corner. The push/pull of the composition is further accentuated by the neon-orange dots that Swansea has scattered across it, as they at times seem to sit on the surface and then just as quickly recede into the background. Works like this one signal that the juxtaposition of abstraction versus figuration is no longer fruitful, especially in paintings like Swansea’s, where the act itself and its effects are so much a part of the message.



ENA SWANSEA, *Aggregate*, 2016, oil and acrylic on archival ink on silver fabric, 137.2 x 203.2 cm.

ENA SWANSEA lives and works in New York. Raised in North Carolina, Swansea studied film and painting at the University of South Florida. Swansea’s work has been exhibited extensively throughout the United States and abroad, including in the group exhibitions “Greater New York” at MoMA PS1 in 2005 and “The Triumph of Painting” at London’s Saatchi Gallery in 2006. In 2008, she had her first museum survey at the Musée d’Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg, and, in 2011, the Deichtorhallen Hamburg/Collection Falckenberg organized a two-person exhibition of Swansea and Robert Lucander, entitled “Psycho,” which featured 40 of the former’s paintings from collections in Europe. Swansea’s work is included in numerous public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Cornell University’s Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca; Boca Raton Museum of Art, Florida; Galerie Neue Meister/Albertinum Dresden; and Deichtorhallen, Sammlung Falckenberg, Hamburg. In 2001, Swansea was awarded the Hassam, Speicher, Betts, and Symons Purchase Fund from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

ANDREA INSELMANN has been curator of modern and contemporary art and photography at Cornell University’s Herbert F. Johnson Museum since 2002. In 2013, she was also appointed the head of the Museum’s photography collection. Inselmann, who holds an MA in cultural studies from the University of Texas at Austin and participated in the Whitney Museum Independent Studies Program, served as assistant curator of photography at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas for seven years, and was curator of exhibitions at Wisconsin’s Kohler Arts Center for six years. Inselmann has organized more than 120 solo and group exhibitions, across various media, of emerging and established artists from around the world.

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