

ART & DESIGN | ART IN REVIEW

Jean-Frédéric Schnyder

By ROBERTA SMITH DEC. 8, 2011

Swiss Institute Contemporary Art

18 Wooster Street, near Grand Street, SoHo

Through Feb. 26

Born in 1945, the Swiss artist Jean-Frédéric Schnyder is a lapsed Conceptualist who enjoys working with his hands, usually on a diminutive scale, alternating layers of sincerity and irony. In 1993 he represented Switzerland at the Venice Biennale with 119 tiny, mostly sunny scenes of the nation's highway system, invariably painted from its overpasses, both updating and undermining his country's pastoral stereotype.

For what is, surprisingly, his solo debut in New York, Mr. Schnyder is showing "Landscape," a remarkably fresh-looking series of 35 small paintings from 1990-91. Bivouacked at the border of art and kitsch, they tackle themes of hearth and home, taste and cliché and might be seen as an implicitly Swiss response to the bigger, bolder sculptures based on stuffed animals, postcards and toys that Jeff Koons was making at the time.

All of Mr. Schnyder's paintings feature either a storybook-house silhouette or a domestic interior. They are rendered with a robust skill that would probably cloy on a larger scale, and their lighted-from-within perkiness has its dark side. It may be familiar, like the gangrenous yet oddly appealing witch who eyes Hansel and Gretel eyeing the gingerbread house, or merely atmospheric, like an oppressive wood-grain

interior where the Sunday funnies are spread beneath an incongruously modern light fixture. Swastikas appear from time to time, as do references to colonialism, and surfaces can turn thick and black, seeming either crisply burned or vaguely scatological.

In the downstairs gallery the sardonic craftsiness continues with “Corso Schnapsparade,” a beguiling 2009 three-screen video projection of an endlessly looped procession of toy horse-drawn wagons, all hand-carved in wood by the artist, with a brass-band soundtrack. Each carries a small bottle of a different brand of schnapps.

For people who have been in the art world longer than they care to admit, the piece can read as a sendup of the endless scenes of folksy Swiss rituals with which the Zurich-based Galerie Bruno Bischofberger has advertised on the back cover of Artforum magazine every month since 1988. But generally it shows Mr. Schnyder once more operating wryly and resourcefully in the gap between art and tourism.

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