

For Immediate Release

BENJAMIN DEGEN
We Can't Stop Living

February 23 - March 22, 2008
Opening Reception Saturday, February 23rd from 6-8pm

The tableaux vivant, literally translated as “living picture,” is an art that historically posed living actors within inert displays, recreating classical works of art, peculiar vignettes of daily life, and, most notably, scenes of an erotic nature. Before an audience, these actors remain motionless for the duration of the display as it tells a story without employing the trappings of a live performance, collapsing the conventions of theater with painting. A frozen scene of suspense is physically traversed by the viewer’s eye, meandering between the thriving living bodies that are, for one fleeting moment, all brought to a pictorial stasis.

For his second solo show at Guild & Greyshkul, *We Can't Stop Living*, Benjamin Degen presents a series of works that continue his own collapsing of pictorial conventions. What appear to be discrete objects from disparate pictures are assembled in a studied cacophony that journey across the picture plane. They become writhing optical sensations, like sentient beings responding in the flesh, as living pictures. The objects and figures of the images move as tangible elements through one another, just as the vocabulary of markings flow freely back and forth through the rendered figures. Bold color and frenetic pattern act as catalysts for pictures tenuously balanced between cohesion and shattering into countless pieces. Like the classic illusion of the *Rubin Vase*, the viewer can simultaneously see two opposing faces, or the interstice that shapes an ornamental vase. Each view is valid and compressed to the same plane, rendering two representational objects into an oscillating space of abstraction. Analogously, Degen compresses the pictorial conventions of still life, landscape and portraiture to a graphic totality in which the pictorial structure is allowed to change as it is viewed.

Within this compression, seams emerge that lead the viewer along new possibilities of vision. Visual passages and couplings are seemingly endless when wrought with the viewer’s personal perspective. Depending on how the eye meanders through the motionless figures, every viewer will construe a different narrative of what is viscerally occurring before them. The vastness of our imagination diagrams a fleeting whole. We find disparate objects and subjects who appear to have come together, if only for a moment, to compose each image. We hesitate to blink, for the composition may change or dissipate. Like the art of tableau vivant, the stand-in characters in Degen’s work – people, bottles, branches, and lumber – are all living beings, posing as inanimate if only for a moment, to bring the scene to fruition before dispersing from the stage and moving on with life.

-David Brooks

Benjamin Degen (Brooklyn, NY, 1976) lives and works in New York. He holds a BFA from Cooper Union School of Art and Science, NY. Selected exhibitions include Mario Diacono, Boston, MA (2007) (solo); dePury and Luxembourg, Zurich, CH (2007); Kantor/Feuer, Los Angeles, CA (2006) (solo); The Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, NJ (2005); Andrea Rosen, NY (2005); PS1 MoMA, Long Island City, NY (2005).

Guild & Greyshkul is located at 28 Wooster Street, New York, NY, 10013
Hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 11am-6pm
For more information, please contact the gallery at 212-625-9224 or visit www.guildgreyskul.com