

# Petzel

**PIETER SCHOOLWERTH**

***Shifted Sims***

September 3 – October 31, 2020  
456 West 18th Street

The hidden cost of 21st-century convenience is that you are stalked by a muzzy dread, a feeling that everything you do inflicts some distant unseen harm. The extraordinary events of 2020 sharpen focus on the disastrous and racialized consequences of this estrangement. In *Shifted Sims*, his first solo exhibition at Petzel Gallery in New York, Schoolwerth gives form to the condition of being “remote” and retreating into masks—from the N95 to the quarantine selfie. What’s more, he pressures painting to catch up to the surge of online profiles, identities without bodies, that teem at the surface of this “once-removed” existence.

Schoolwerth’s psychoactive tableaux depict CGI avatars let loose in the digital froth: a Baywatch-y beach, a fashion-brand showroom, a furry orgy. He pulls these scenes from screenshots of *The Sims 4*, the strategic life-simulation computer game where anything goes—or does it? Trailing every avatar is an estranged silhouetted double, snapped into existence by the “shift” of *Shifted Sims*. Each composition has been superimposed, askew, over the photograph of a handmade 3D relief sculpture of the image. What appears is a shadow realm of vestigial matter, yanked into view on inkjet-printed canvases and parceled in paint.

It is a taut braid of formal practice and allegory, one that questions painting’s viability in the age of the internet. In the 2019 monograph *Model as Painting*, he delineates how these “forces of abstraction” conceal labor and infrastructure under a late-capitalist mirage of frictionless, disembodied connectivity. This schism plunges down to the scale of the individual, pitting avatar protagonist against human penumbra. Western painting tradition, with its claims to authenticity and representation, is pulled into this Thunderdome of online subject-formation.

The works in *Shifted Sims* question expressionism’s historical claims to transcendent interiority. Schoolwerth renders the Sims’ faces with striking impasto marks that “expressionize the avatar,” humanizing these subjects through visibly manual, painterly gestures. But these subjective punctures of the digital network may be fleeting. Appearing on the canvas next to perfectly raked furrows of paint—Schoolwerth’s proxy for repressed physical infrastructure—expressionism becomes one style among many, attenuating its status as exalted painterly communiqué. You’re left with the dark thought that De Kooning’s *Woman* would make a pretty good Snapchat filter.

Scrambling to address the malaise of social distance, a startup recently launched voice-controlled avatars for video meetings, a real-time Sim who wears pants so you don’t have to. Schoolwerth’s paintings of (often pants-less) avatars counter these riptides of isolation, approximating a shared affective experience of the present moment: the monumental, and the berserk.

—Lucy Hunter

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## About Pieter Schoolwerth

Pieter Schoolwerth was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1970. He lives and works in New York. Since graduating from the California Institute of the Arts in 1994, he has exhibited internationally with notable solo shows at Thread Waxing Space, Greene Naftali, American Fine Arts Co., and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; Gallery SKE, New Delhi, What Pipeline, Detroit, and Captain Petzel, and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin. His work has been included in group exhibitions at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Centre Pompidou, Paris, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Sadie Coles, London, and 303 Gallery, Gavin Brown's enterprise, and Petzel, New York. His work is in the permanent collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, The Pinault Collection, the Aïshti Foundation, Beirut, Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig, Denver Art Museum, and the Phoenix Art Museum. Curated by Kathleen Rahn, Schoolwerth's first survey exhibition will open at the Kunstverein Hannover in November 2020.

*Model as Painting*, a major monograph on his work, with essays by Molly Warnock and David Geers, was published in 2019 (New York: Sequence Press).

From 2003 to 2013, Schoolwerth ran Wierd Records and the Wierd Party at Home Sweet Home on the LES of NYC. Wierd released music by 42 bands working in the genres of minimal electronics, coldwave, and noise, and produced over 500 live music, DJ, and performance art events internationally ([www.wierdrecords.com](http://www.wierdrecords.com)).

Petzel Gallery is located at 456 West 18th Street New York, NY 10011. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10:00 AM–6:00 PM. For press inquires, please contact Ricky Lee at [ricky@petzel.com](mailto:ricky@petzel.com), or call (212) 680-9467.