

Santiago de Paoli
Lieber Nebelkopf, die Blaue Brücke is open
Opening: Friday, 26 April 2024, 6–9 pm
27 April–15 June 2024
Meyer Riegger, Berlin
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Press Release

Words, it seems, are hardly the best intermediaries when it comes to capturing Santiago de Paoli's paintings. A critic went so far as to describe them as "beasts" some time ago, noting that they "escape any readymade classification or description".¹ Perhaps de Paoli's paintings are better grasped in terms of temperature and weight, states of aggregation and compositions of materials, than description in words – words evoking meanings that can only lead us away from the reality of the painting itself, as opposed to toward it. Towards a reality that wants to be felt.

It is, after all, a closeness that de Paoli's paintings demand. They arch, pulsate, rear up; they fever, stagger, bud and surge. They are erotic, intimate, warm – and yet they are never just one of these, but always already something else as well. They are metamorphoses. Unconventional formats and unusual materials (copper, felt, plaster, recycled textiles or wood) often lend them the look of sculptural objects in space.

Take copper, for instance: the metal has been used as a painting support since the 16th century and evokes Christian iconography. And yet its materials carry no symbolic significance for de Paoli; his use of it comes down to other, more down-to-earth characteristics. Firstly, copper is easy for him to obtain. The artist has been based in Upstate New York for the past few years and can find the material at the local hardware store. Copper exudes warmth, reflects light, is inherently dynamic and changes colours. "The material responds in a way that is both magical and unexpected", says de Paoli.

The shapes within his paintings encapsulate a myriad of potentials, occasionally actualizing, or materializing, as distinct forms. A recurring motif in de Paoli's paintings is the rounded buttock – so round, in fact, that it is inherently inclined to change into something else: it can morph into a vase, a genital, a halo, a hill or a muscle. Butterflies populate the picture plane, embodying the essence of natural metamorphosis. Their wings can take the guise of hip bones, lungs even. Meanwhile, the spiral, another element that appears again and again in de Paoli's pictures, becomes a snail, a phallus, a flower pistil. A phallic shape can be spotted in a butterfly, although it could just as easily function as a neck, a spine or part of a steering wheel; the roundness of a head transmogrifies into a breast, a testicle, a halo. Ribs ripple and gather like skin.

In 1933, Meret Oppenheim drew the ear of her friend, the painter Alberto Giacometti,

¹ Devon Van Houten Maldonado, "Suárez Londoño and de Paoli", *Flash Art*, November/December 2017, p. 98.

as a Gothic body-window – an ear as window to the inner self, an artwork as conduit between inner and outer worlds. Yet de Paoli's painting *Nebelkopf* (Fog Head) offers a contrasting perspective: one in which the cross of a window frame no longer marks the boundary between inside and outside but instead serves as a connection between the two: a gender-neutral body (gender is fluid in de Paoli's work, as his figures have both masculine and feminine connotations) stands in an interior space with their back to the viewer, framed by a window that opens onto a landscape. Despite the clearly articulated, unusually robust calves and symmetrically proportioned buttocks, which also evoke a female breast, the body begins to dissolve from the center of the rippling (or scarred, or ribbed) back. The incorporation of the body into the external scene begins at the cross between windowpanes. A yellow branch spirals upward from the back like a spine, while others entwine like arteries, suggesting a disintegration or breakdown of the body – or perhaps its genesis.

There is a painting by Oppenheim with the same title, *Nebelkopf*, from 1974. Out of delicate hatching, out of an almost nothingness of gray and white, emerges a form that simultaneously dissolves and takes shape: an enigmatic “something” – a fog head. It remains ambiguous whether this head is in the process of disappearing or manifesting, suspended as it is in a moment that could be read as either threat or revelation. Similarly, de Paoli's paintings, like membranes, allow for an endless ebb and flow between inner and outer realms, between zones, between waking and dream worlds, between the familiar, the alien and the utopian.

Hinges, as they appear in *Coum in Butterfly & Worm*, connecting the three felt panels, underscore the function of painting in de Paoli's oeuvre: painting is a link to what lies beyond the visible – which is not to say the invisible, but rather what we see with our eyes closed, what we feel as we vacillate between sleep and wakefulness, between unconsciousness and consciousness.

Alicja Schindler

Santiago de Paoli (b. 1978, Buenos Aires) lives and works in New York. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting from the Atlanta College of Art in 2004 and his MFA from the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2006. Before that, de Paoli studied biology. Recent projects and solo exhibitions include *Inside the Red Barn*, OSMOS Station (New York, 2022); *A leaf in the wind*, Galerie Jocelyn Wolff (Paris-Romainville, 2021); *Bebê Rasteja* at Mendes Wood (São Paulo, 2019/20); *Entre nosotros y el objeto*, Mòvil (Buenos Aires, 2016); *Pescado y Papas*, Wireless Ridge (Stanley, Falkland Islands, 2015); and *The New Society*, Swan Coach House Gallery (Atlanta, 2007). His work has been included in various group exhibitions, including those at X Museum (Beijing, China, 2021); Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (Argentina, 2019); Nouveau musée national de Monaco, Villa Paloma (Monaco, 2018); Musée d'art contemporain de la Haute-Vienne (Château de Rochechouart, 2018); and LuluGallery (Mexico City, 2017), among others.