

Anton van Dalen

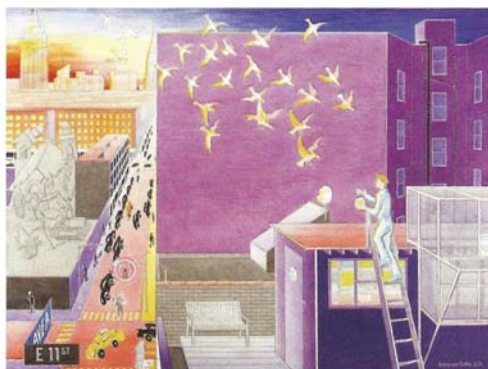
P.P.O.W

A local artist and proud of it, Anton van Dalen has lived in the East Village since 1972, and his years there have generated his subject matter. This show largely focused on the neighborhood, and included not only recent and a few older paintings but also a one-evening enactment of *Avenue A Cut-Out Theatre*, a performance he first aired in 1995 and has developed steadily in the years since. In the past, Van Dalen has enjoyed flights of fancy—scenes of interplanetary travel, and spatial fantasies recalling M. C. Escher, and the like—and this show too had its Magrittean moments of rabbits jumping through computer screens and hens bigger than cars. But it concentrated on the East Village, properly emphasizing that community's importance to Van Dalen. In doing so, the exhibition brought to mind recent presentations of artists such as Greer Lankton and Arch Connelly, or of Martin Wong at the 2014 Whitney Biennial—shows that memorialized the same neighborhood, and a departed moment in its artmaking history, while working to relay the values of that time and place to audiences today. Unlike those artists, all no longer living, Van Dalen is around to do that himself.

Avenue A Cut-Out Theatre takes the form of a series of miniature cutouts of images of Van Dalen's, along with a handful of photographs, all mounted on board and freestanding. The images constitute a kind of history of the East Village during the artist's time there: its immigrant populations, its tenements, its drugs and violence and art scene and homeless settlements and riot police, and later its condos and investment bankers. Van Dalen began the performance by walking into the room with a large cardboard box strapped to his back like a rucksack. Unpacking this box, laying out its contents one by one on a table, and talking about them as he went along gave him his structure and story. The box also gave him something of the quality of the old-time itinerant musician or carny with a hurdy-gurdy or box of puppets on his back—in other words, someone unfixed and mobile, making a self-contained kind of art that he can produce easily wherever he goes. Given Van Dalen's roots in a locale, this move seemed mostly symbolic, connecting with enduring images of the artist as vagrant—Picasso's harlequin, say, or for that matter Watteau's. But it also related to the ethos of the old East Village. When Van Dalen set out to make a theater, he said during the performance, "Instead of writing a grant proposal, I made it out of nothing. No insurance, no electricity . . ." just what he could carry on his back. The idea is typical of artists such as Lankton and Connelly, who invested cheap and found materials with enormous weight.

As for the images themselves, Van Dalen is adept at containing punchy vectors within tight shapes that communicate quickly and powerfully. A cutout of a condo facade has the sinuous lines of a dollar sign built into its architecture; *Riot Police on Horseback with Homeless*, 1993, shown as both a drawing and a cutout, looks back to the armed knights of Uccello, I'd guess, but the rider's face is a skull and the orthogonal geometries of his pose may echo a swastika. (Born in Holland in 1938, Van Dalen was a child there during the Nazi occupation, and called some of what he saw in the East Village during its tough years "a replaying of my own war.") The recent paintings, though, are rather different, having a palette said to be based on the color and light of the digital screen. I'm not sure that's self-evident, but the colors are certainly both unnatural and brighter than in the past. In works such as *Stromboli Pizzaman*, 2011–12, which sets grotesque overconsumption beside street scavenging for soda-can returns, Van Dalen's satirical bite remains sharp, but the tone of the new works, in part because of their color, is surprisingly cheerful. Indeed, despite their inclusion of the demolition of a church, no doubt to make way for gentrification, a series of streetscapes showcasing the artist's rooftop homing-pigeon coop conveys an almost Edenic sense of the possibilities of urban life.

—David Frankel



Anton van Dalen, *Self-Portrait with Pigeon Coop Looking North*, 2014, oil on canvas, 48 x 64".