





# Tangled connections a review of Anne Speier at What Pipeline

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Anne Speier  
Lurk-Hive Balance, July 25 - August 23, 2014  
What Pipeline  
3525 West Vernor Highway  
Detroit, Michigan 48216  
<http://whatpipeline.com/shows/11annespeier/1.html>

**W**hat Pipeline's exhibition schedule typically focuses on artists based and/or working outside of Detroit. The solo exhibition of work by Anne Speier (pronounced Anna) titled Lurk-Hive Balance on view this summer was no different. Speier was born in 1977 in Frankfurt, Germany and is currently based in Vienna, Austria where she teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts.

Lurk-Hive Balance was a minimal exhibition with six new works on view (all 2014), all lining the gallery walls. Two painted wooden sculptures; Spice Shrine Giotto Green and Spice Shrine Giotto Blue (figure 1) interspersed among a collaged roller blind; How we are being arranged: Selected group on unintended group (figure 2) and three large inkjet prints. Of the three meticulously framed and beautifully floated inkjet prints, two are collaged with watercolor paintings, pencil, ink and crayon on paper.

Both the small, shelf-like 'spice shrines' hold different-colored, folded linens, with spices, bottled sauce and dried herbs gently nestled between the folds. The shape of the



*Figure 1: Anne Speier, Spice Shrine Giotto Blue, 2014, wood, paint, fabric, spices, 18 x 20 x 6 in. Photo courtesy What Pipeline*

shrines, Speier explains in the onset of her artist statement, are modeled after houses depicted in the backgrounds of Giotto di Bondione frescoes from inside the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Veneto, Italy (figure 3).

The 'spice shrines' also bring to mind an aumbry (a cabinet built in the Middle Ages to store chalices or sacraments) or tabernacle (more ornate version of the aumbry) found in

Christian churches. Used here the structures turn our gaze toward the domestic as a sacred space.

Speier's artist statement goes on to reference the story of the Scrovegni Chapel and its creation. Commissioned by a wealthy banker, Enrico Scrovegni, Giotto (the first Italian Renaissance painter) painted an entire cycle of frescoes



Figure 3 View of Giotto di Bondone's Frescoes from the Scrovegni Chapel In Pauda, Veneto, Italy completed in 1305 from: <http://galleryhip.com/giotto-scrovegni-chapel.html>

inside the chapel depicting a range of stories from The Last Judgement to the Kiss of Judas. Enrico commissioned the building of the chapel and floor-to-ceiling frescoes to pay penitence for him and his family's sins of usury and "earn" his way back into heaven and God's good graces. As an ironic tribute to the commissioning patron, in one fresco Giotto depicted Enrico Scrovegni as himself gifting a miniature version of the Scrovegni Chapel to the Virgin Mary<sup>1</sup>.

The 'spice shrines' link the banker's gesture in commissioning the Scrovegni Chapel, and his scandalous and unabashed portrayal therein, to the surrounding works. They tie images of contemporary public crowds waiting in line to see Notre Dame to images of celebrities to images of domestic, intimate gathering spaces for socialization. Speier creates a web of socialization linking celebrity to religion to scandal to worship to history and the future; where public spaces feel private and vice versa.

The background image of *How we are being arranged: Selected group on unintended group* is of the queue (the unintended group) at Notre Dame and is superimposed onto a tarpauline roller blind. Collaged on top are pictures of celebrities (selected group), whom Speier calls "Enfant terribles," a French term synonymous for someone who snubs the norm, balks at the establishment, is offensive and rebellious. What does it mean to juxtapose these "Enfant terribles" with the average Joe waiting in line to



Figure 2: Detail of "How are we being arranged: Selected group on unintended group" 2014, tarpauline, metal roller blind, hardware, laser prints, 98 x 55 in. Photo courtesy What Pipeline

get into Notre Dame? Is the artist alluding to value in these celebrities behavior? The use of the roller blind references a window, a framework of viewing. Our view looking at the crowd is bird's-eye, possibly from a high apartment window, providing an uncommon angle seen only when one is not



Figure 4: Install view of *Lurk-Hive Balance* (left to right) *How we arrange ourselves, background to fore*, 2014 collage: inkjet print, watercolor, pencil, crayon, ink, watercolor paper, laser prints, fixative, uv protect varnish, frame: polar, foamboard 59 x 120 in. & *Empty living room*, 2014 inkjet print, frame: poplar, foamboard 59 x 120 in. Photo courtesy What Pipeline

part of the crowd.

A feeling of motion underlies the exhibition. All six works hang in a way that visually correspond with each other and reflect, perhaps, a transpiring narrative, a story unfolding but in a nonsensical way. Resembling a comic strip, the three large inkjets seemingly move you around the room with one painting depicting one scenario leading you to the next and the next, but with no indication of order, creating a loop. All the inkjets have the same background. The first could be last,

the last could be the first; their impending narrative is not linear like that of a comic strip but cyclical like that of the frescoes.

Empty living room (figure 4) is a black and white inkjet print of an empty, “ordinary Altbau living room,”<sup>2</sup> a typical space for conversations, socializing and gathering in some German abodes. How we arrange ourselves is the same black and white inkjet of the empty living room filled with figures painted in a loose, cartoon-like style conversing. In How we arrange ourselves, background to fore (figure 4), the same cartoon-like figures, in the same room, stand behind their shadows while dark silhouettes of their fictitious counterparts push to the foreground. “There are several layers of fore- and backgrounds,” Speier writes, “and here those layers are standing in debate just like the figures do to each other.”<sup>3</sup>

The collage elements of the representation of the roller blind layered on top of the painted figure on top of the inkjet print creates a new (and dimensional) space to be contemplated. It visually forces an uncomfortable oscillation between the real and the unreal, the high and low, a constant state of back and forth. This is further iterated in the silhouetted figures moving from the background to foreground.

The figures engage in negotiations, with their proximity to each other and their distances between anterior and posterior semblances on the same surface. The artist seems to be in mediation with it all: the painted figures and photographed rooms, the masses and celebrities, the churches and the scandals, the physical and the spiritual, the real and non-real. Here in the gallery, as a feat of impossibility, they all inhabit the same space. So let the debating begin.



Figure 5: Stills from *The Congress* (2013)

The light but decisive gesture of the painted figures brings to mind the work of painters ranging as far back as the Brücke group, whose members (all architecture students) started the German Expressionist movement, specifically the angular stroke of Ernest Ludwig Kirchner<sup>4</sup> as well as the distinct and illustrative, more pop/graffiti inspired figuration (less an underlying vulgarity) of Carroll Dunham<sup>5</sup>. Likewise, the figures recall the quick staccato but heavy stroke of (Michigan born), Dana Schutz<sup>6</sup>, whose canvases rage with

the same type of energy as Kirchner and Dunham, but allow for a more heady narrative and representation<sup>7</sup>. The large mis-shaped heads and large melon feet of Speier's figures give just a whiff of Charles M. Schulz's Peanuts. These and other precedents make way for Speier to paint without fear of getting caught in sorting through definitions of smart illustrations versus smart contemporary painting.

The juxtaposition of the photos of crowds and celebrities with the cartoon-like figures make it feel as if the “real life” photographic images of people have morphed into cartoon versions of themselves interjected into “real life” photographic scenarios. The oscillation between mediums (and realities) also reminds me of the 2013 film, *The Congress* (figure 5), starring Robin Wright (as herself). In the film Wright is asked to sell the rights to “herself the actor” over to a major film studio where the actor Robin Wright will become a digitized, non-aging character with no human “problems” to be used by the studio whenever and however long it feels. The studio doesn't stop at inventing this technology and soon develops a way for everyone to become animated avatars. Eventually, everyone in the future lives in an animated world brought on by medication (heavy hallucinogens). But Wright grows tired of it all. She wants truth, the genuine, the sincere so pops a pill that “wakes” her up only to find her and the rest of the world living in squalor. Reality is not technicolor animation but faded browns, dirt and decay.

Speier's work is more subtle than *The Congress*, quieter than the Kirchner and the Dunham but playful like Schutz. In the end, I am left with the feeling I am wandering and wondering for connections. I am comforted by knowing I am at least amongst artists making work compelling and fresh enough to keep me looking for more spaces of negotiation and more places of debate. Speier, with a fresh take on painting, has created a new set of considerations for the juxtaposition of art and life, celebrity and quotidian, the domestic and the sacred, that is able to imbue relevancy and reframe an age old dilemma.

1 [http://www.artble.com/artists/giotto\\_di\\_bondone/paintings/scrovegni\\_chapel\\_frescoes](http://www.artble.com/artists/giotto_di_bondone/paintings/scrovegni_chapel_frescoes)

2 Anne Speier's artist statement from: <http://whatpipeline.com/shows/11annespeier/1.html>

3 Ibid.

4 Examples of work by Ernest Ludwig Kirchner: <http://lauratedeschiarte.blogspot.com/2011/02/ernst-ludwig-kirchner-through-shadow.html>

5 Examples of work by Carroll Dunham: <http://joshuaablow.blogspot.com/2012/12/carroll-dunham.html>

6 Examples of work by Dana Schutz: <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/reviews/davis/davis2-8-8.asp>

7 “Art review: Carroll Dunham at Blum & Poe” Los Angeles Times: Culture Monster Blog. 30 April 2010 <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2010/04/art-review-carroll-dunham-at-blum-poe.html>