

ArtReview

"Ellen de Meutter: Secrets and Lies"

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## ELLEN DE MEUTTER: SECRETS AND LIES

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The dozen or so acrylic, ink and oil paintings on canvas in Belgian artist Ellen De Meutter's first solo show in the United States furthers the burgeoning impact of Western and Central European practice in contemporary figurative art. Her shamelessly heavy drawing style and the optical vibrato of her dissonant colours combine with a compelling symbolic lexicon

to generate images that are throbbing with fraught psychological tension, yet balletic in their engineering of composite narratives. Like a cartoonish take on the Leipzig School, a feminine but muscular take on Kandinsky's Blue Rider mountain paintings, De Meutter channels the sure handed explosiveness of German Expressionism and even a bit of Fauvism as she coordinates shapes of different scales on different planes. In major works like *Wasserschutzgebiet* (all works 2007), her rendition of an imposing yellow mountain, with the pistachio and lavender highlights, relates the destruction of life's frantic tumult at the bottom in the form of black line-work describing the ruined, messy interior of her studio. This heft gives way as the viewer's eyes are slowly raised up the multicoloured slopes to the heavens. *Wasserschutzgebiet* in particular shows off her skill at simultaneously shifting, tearing down and building up compositions, so that while they eventually emerge coherent and lavishly, specifically detailed, one has the feeling of having witnessed something being born right in front of one's eyes. The visceral sketchiness of her palette and mark-making, every stroke embossed into the canvas, leaving streaks inside the pigment, might as well be finger-painting. The paintings resolve themselves like a butterfly breaking its cocoon; wet sticky awkward struggle, then a flight of sudden grace.

De Meutter's use of text as an element of both communication and composition (as with works in which words like 'lost', 'truth' and 'secrets' and 'lies' are flung up a tree, stomped to a pulp like grapes for wine and branded on a pair of gossips, respectively) break across the levels of the layered picture planes yet help tether the instances of more abstract symbols to the representational realm. She favours mountains, gardens and houses, but also black Xs, slides and ladders; and the use of text helps clue her viewers in to the metaphorical readings she intends. There's anger in her brushwork, but also a meditative quality, with the slathering, the remembering and the evoking in her work all conflated. Another major painting from the series, *Goodbye*, draws together a scene of a limp garden hose, ski goggles and boots, a squat building, a rickety slide and a sudden burst of bright pink over a curling snaky red line that both gives life to the scene and underlines its symbolic import by being completely nonreferential except to the artist's state of mind and poetic licence. De Meutter gets her story out without letting her audiences forget about the intervention of her hand. *Shana Nys Dambrot*

*Something to Look Forward To*, 2007, acrylic, ink and oil on canvas, 150 x 130 cm. Courtesy Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles, and Tim Van Laere Gallery, Antwerp

