

The New York Times

Your Last Chance to See One of New York's Great Gallery Spaces
By Roberta Smith May 20, 2016



A view of "Lukas Duwenhögger: Undoolay," the last show being held at the Greene Street location of Artists Space. Credit Benjamin Norman for *The New York Times*

The 35-year survey of the work of Lukas Duwenhögger at Artists Space provides a full, mesmerizing view of a German artist, now 60 and based in Istanbul, who is barely known in this country. Mr. Duwenhögger is a sly, seductive stylist and storyteller, adept at figurative painting as well as film, sculpture and suavely domestic installations — all guided by a decorative sensibility that is both between-the-wars and among cultures. Alternately theatrical and intimate, with a palette of saturated pastels as complex as their narratives, his paintings especially depict a gay subculture at once conjured, allegorical and real. His larger subjects include human connection and vulnerability. The show's subtitle, "Undoolay," was invented by Edith Wharton in "The Custom of the Country" as "the French for crimping."



"Soft G — Interior" (2001). This is the last show at this location. Credit Benjamin Norman for *The New York Times*

The show is among the curatorial surprises regularly delivered by this venerable alternative space, which in its latest incarnation tends to thrill while causing pangs of I'm-so-out-of-it insecurity. It is also the final Artists Space exhibition at 38 Greene Street and an ever-lengthening goodbye. Until its end on June 5, Artists Space is open seven days a week instead of five, from noon to sunset (instead of 6 p.m.). Closing time on the last day is 8:24 p.m.

After that, Artists Space, led by its transformational director, Stefan Kalmar, will shrink to its TriBeCa annex, a storefront and basement at 55 Walker (where Mr. Duwenhögger's work is also on view through June 5), continuing to stage exhibitions while looking for a new home.

The closing of 38 Greene feels like the end of an era, partly because it reflects the threat posed by the gold-coasting of Manhattan to its alternative spaces — among them the excellent White Columns on West 13th Street. Now facing the ends of leases, profit-hungry landlords and the like, these spaces are seers. They have a nerve and flexibility absent from museums and commercial galleries. Their nurturing of non-mainstream artists and collectives is essential to a living art world.

The loss of 38 Greene's third floor also ends the run of one of the most beautiful, brilliantly used exhibition spaces in New York. It began in 2009 when Mr. Kalmar arrived, ripped out every wall and door — except a restroom and a closet — and exposed two exhilarating walls of windows. Colluding with artists and curators, he then initiated a string of revelatory exhibitions, whose varying designs and spatial effects were always part of the reveal.



"The Celestial Teapot" (detail, 2007). Credit Benjamin Norman for *The New York Times*

The Duwenhögger exhibition continues this tradition. It has been organized by Mr. Kalmar and Richard Birkett, the curator, and while the dominance of painting diverges somewhat from the usual emphasis on austere, conceptual art forms, the political undercurrent does not. To hang his canvases and collages, the artist designed broad folding screens, implying a modernized wainscoting that conjures nebulous period styles as well as a private, mazelike world of codes and relationships; the screens' contrasting mauve and blue recur throughout the paintings.

Mr. Duwenhögger's figuration shares aspects of John Singer Sargent, Balthus, Paul Cadmus, John Currin and Elizabeth Peyton. His top-hatted figures can bring to the mind the Post-Impressionism of Toulouse-Lautrec; some of his carefully groomed men can evoke olive-skinned versions of the Arrow Collar Man, invented by the great illustrator J. C. Leyendecker, but his surfaces also have a restrained tactility.

At 38 Greene, Napoleon chairs, redolent of tea-dances and socials, appear in both three dimensions and two. Mr. Duwenhögger, who also designs his own frames, provides a velvet-cushioned bench from which to view "One Rehearsal for Four Plays," a series of paintings of men doing more dancing than acting. The blue flip-flop kicked off by one figure sails into the adjacent canvas.

Nearby, "Rust at Rest," a polished dark-wood bricolage, fuses nautical, Victorian and Art Deco while offering visitors seemingly iron bolts made of dark chocolate. The painting "Da



An installation view. Credit Benjamin Norman for *The New York Times*

Rita,” stars Queen Victoria herself, an allusion to the choreographer Frederick Ashton, known for impersonating her.

At Walker Street, a large Christmassy cone of evergreen swags recreates the ritual garlands placed on topped-out buildings in Switzerland; it is surrounded by full-length portraits of men named for the Three Magi from the East. Downstairs awaits “From Cotton via Velvet to Tragedy,” a 1991 film concocted entirely by (and starring) Mr. Duwenhögger, which suggests the underground pioneer Jack Smith working solo, in slow motion. It can be viewed from “Room for a Student With a Sense for Beautiful Things,” a canopied daybed with an ashtray holding two snuffed-out cigarettes.

But don’t miss “Sunday Afternoon,” a small painting of a comfy interior inhabited by three men of contrasting ages, one showing us his needlework. Similarly, tiny gestures in other paintings — a finger touching a stack of white towels, a bottle cap in the hand of a portrait subject — are emblematic of the gentleness of Mr. Duwenhögger’s art.

Its overdue introduction to New York is an altogether amazing last ride into the sunset for 38 Greene Street and Artists Space as we know it. May the gods of real estate and culture favor its next incarnation.