

Nancy Dwyer, *Hot Mess*

8. September – 1. December

Nancy Dwyer knows TV. Especially TV commercials. Promises, directives, aphorisms, platitudes. The language of advertising is Dwyer's turf. But not only – her works derive from song lyrics, slang, courtroom jargon (or the televised version thereof), the names of network channels, colloquialisms, idioms. Words are the basis of everything Nancy Dwyer does – words rooted in what has become the mass media vernacular of how we understand American culture. In painting, sculpture, works on paper and animation, Dwyer makes words as images, coaxes meaning – or what poses as meaningful – out of them. In *Hot Mess* (2024), also the title of the show, the two words replace the 20th Century Fox logo, painted on a curved wooden board installed on a television mount. In the sculpture *Big Ego* (1990/2024), the letters E, G and O are blown-up larger than life. The painting *Kick It* (1991) spins the popular Tribe Called Quest song out of control – Can I Kick It? Yes You Can. Can I Think It? Yes You Can. Can I Smell It? Yes You Can. Etc., etc., etc.

“BE YOURSELF”. Nancy: “When I first heard this pep-talk adage, the first thing I thought was: You mean there’s a choice? I was so confused. I have since realized that

1. Choice is a concept born of privilege
2. It is an illusion.”

Dwyer's work is often associated with a group of artists named The Pictures Generation, a term coined by Douglas Crimp after the show *Pictures* he curated at Artists Space, New York, in 1977. Crimp outlined the common interests of this group as drawing from newspapers, advertisements, films and television to analyze these media as signifiers of reality. Subjectivity was defined and creative expression found through (and exclusively through) the lens of consumer mechanisms. No “I” without its image. Jean Baudrillard's theories were all the rage: authentic experience no longer existed due to the omnipresence of mass-media in all aspects of life. Artists pronounced a new order, an order of simulation, of the double, in which no original could be distinguished. The hijacking of the seductive mechanisms of advertising to turn us consumers inside out on ourselves was done and decided. Of course, consumerism lives on, our appetites

are not satisfied, and knowing (or thinking we know) about its mechanisms has only expanded the playing field. We now not only like to be duped into experiencing the satisfaction of buying something, we also like to be duped into seeing ourselves as critical consumers.

“Have you ever noticed how we all think that advertising works on everyone but me? Clue: that means it’s working. But it has also made us all experts in its language.”

But whilst others were rejecting popular culture and courting ironic detachment in their work, Dwyer celebrated it. Her stance is ambivalent: she loves pop and she loves to deconstruct it, taking an approach that is direct and witty rather than detached and ironic. In contrast to many of her peers, Dwyer's works often have no single source. They are rather mash-ups of familiar references that are firmly inscribed into our visual and textual imaginaries. Take *Hot Mess*, again: 20th Century Fox's iconic logo is mocked by the term occupying it. Or perhaps it's the other way around and the graphics are meant to give a confidence boost to an insulted hot mess. In Dwyer's work, the psychological mechanisms imitating the belly of the branding beast are at times overdone, at times belittled, but always humorous and with a – as she would put it – “truculent teenage energy”.

Hot Mess is the artist's first institutional solo show in Europe and the first exhibit of this scale after a hiatus of nearly a decade. The exhibition brings together works from the '80s to today and includes a new series of works as well as two public art works, a domain the artist worked in time and again. Included, among other works, are Dwyer's earliest word sculpture *LIE* (1986) – the three letters of the word clad in a marble-imitation formica – and *Twin Towers* (1985), painted in reverse onto plexiglass and showing two popes as the emblem and brand of a logic beyond the original to one of the double. Dwyer's new work – eight painted curved wooden panels attached to a television mount – furthers the artist's engagement with the universality of TV: from the absurd seal of a “preapproval” in order to feel one step ahead, to the eternal loop of *Picture This* (2024) – the word ‘THIS’ that is itself the picture – to the

ever tightening grip but oh so reassuring sentiment behind *Comfort Zone* (2024). Installed in the square behind Kunsthalle, the work *Shadow of a Doubt* (1991/2024) has been restaged and can be seen after nightfall. A short walk away, *Obsession Overruled* (1985/2024) is on view during the first three weeks of the exhibition. This public art work, epitomizing blocked desire, was originally installed on billboards across New York City.

In her technique, Dwyer is meticulous. Her method is labor-intensive, non-mechanical and hand-made; it flies in the face of what one might assume when working with popular media. Alongside her art education, Dwyer trained as a commercial sign maker. This becomes apparent in how she reverses representation, a technique she describes as 'inside out'. She does not shift image into language, a conceptual move that is firmly anchored in the art historical canon of the dematerialization of the art work and that opposed the (commodifiable) object. Instead, Dwyer materializes language as image. The retro gleam in some of the works, the different textures of surface and materials, from shimmering to muffled, the range from simple to in-your-face gaudy typefaces: this ceaseless play with scale, plane and movement unfolds a practice dedicated to the mechanisms behind making signs, making pictures, and the glitz that triumphs an illusion of choice, and as much so to the practice and history of painting.

A publication accompanying the exhibition will appear in 2025.

Nancy Dwyer (*1954, New York, lives in Santa Fe) was a co-founder of Hallwalls, a non-profit organization created as a cooperative for artists in Buffalo, NY in 1974. Dwyer has exhibited in major museums, among them notably: a solo retrospective at the Fisher Landau Center for Art in New York in 2013; 'The Pictures Generation' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2009; and 'Bad Girls' at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York in 1994. She has participated in exhibitions and biennials at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; MOCA, Los Angeles; the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston; The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; Kunstverein Frankfurt, Germany; and The National Museum of Art, Osaka, among others and has also carried out numerous public commissions, including a poster series for the New York subway. Dwyer was a professor at the University of Vermont from 2004 to 2019.

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