

MERLIN JAMES: PAINTING TO PAINTING

February 8 to March 23, 2007

Reception: Thursday, February 8, 6.30pm-8.30pm

Gallery open seven days, 10-6 pm, except major holidays

Merlin James, Demos 1983 (after Delacroix) Acrylic on canvas, 15 x 18 inches

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NEW YORK: The New York Studio School will present an exhibition by the internationally renowned British painter Merlin James. Merlin James: Painting to Painting focuses on his particular relationships with other art: his use of paintings by old masters he reveres; allusions to works by more obscure artists which arouse his curiosity; references to images such as historical photographs, objets d'art and sculptures; and echoes of modern and contemporary painters with whom he feels an affinity.

Rapport with other works of art has been a hallmark of James' career, which began as a student at London's Royal College of Art in the early 1980s, when the college's painting studios were quartered in the Victoria & Albert Museum. The New York Studio School exhibition, which includes loans from private collections, draws on a twenty-year period, including early pieces referencing works in the V&A.

Merlin James, Broken Viaduct 2005 (after Corot) Acrylic on canvas, 31-1/2 x 20-1/2 inches

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James's use of other art in his own paintings ties in with his parallel career as a writer on art. In reviews, books, and polemical lectures, he has expressed a strong belief in "medium specificity" (the idea that quality is linked to painting's historically compounded properties), and a conviction that art defines itself and draws energy from its relationship with precedents. Against mainstream Theory and academic concerns with social context, he has argued strenuously for close readings of paintings, stressing both their internal dynamics and relationships with other art. But, he has cautioned, "Being 'of now' and being 'steeped in tradition' can each be equally the making or the marring of a painter." [interview with William Staples, Blunt Art Text 1, Chicago, 2004.]

An acute awareness of the history and problematics of painting comes across as much in James's works themselves as in his criticism and polemics. Artists he invokes include

Delacroix, Daumier, Hobbema, Ruisdael, Poussin, Courbet, Corot, Bonnard, William Nicholson, Thomas Jones, Walter Sickert and Alex Katz.

Whether transcriptions from specific images or more generalized emulations of the style or mood of a given painter, all of Merlin James's paintings are shot through with his highly idiosyncratic, personal touch. He often incorporates collage materials like hair or dust, and will on occasion abrade or puncture the picture surface. Such strategies can result in an object that feels damaged or precarious, and an atmosphere of tense melancholy. Critics have frequently seen his work as expressing anxiety about its own status. Nevertheless his paintings vary greatly in mood and subject, often managing to exude *joie de vivre* and humor.

Merlin James, Casket (Poussin), Acrylic on canvas, 7 x 10 inches
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Merlin James: Painting to Painting is to be complemented by an extensive website documenting James's sources and his published pronouncements both on the artists who interest him and issues of contemporary painting practice in relationship to art history. In addition, there will be an essay on James by the exhibition's curator, David Cohen; a complete bibliography of James's writings on art; and a podcast tour of the exhibition. A printed brochure will also accompany the exhibition.

For images and further information, please contact David Cohen, Gallery Director, at 212 673 6466 or dcohen@nyss.org