Peter Schuyff: Between the Grid and the Hand

From New York's Neo-Geo moment to the Mediterranean light of Bari, Peter Schuyff has spent a lifetime making geometry misbehave.

WORDS: **MATTHEW WATKINS**

"You become a New Yorker if you spend at least a decade wanting to leave."



Peter Schuyff in his Amsterdam studio.

I first met Peter Schuyff in Bari during lockdown, in the conspiratorial atmosphere of a city learning how to whisper in public again. Our meeting was arranged by a mutual friend in Piazza Mercantile, the old square at the heart of Barivecchia, where history sits in the open air and minds its own business. Peter told me he was from New York – true in the way that certain artists are from the city that invented them, even when the passport tells a more complicated story. The passport begins in Baarn, in the Netherlands, in 1958. He grew up in Vancouver, studied art there, and passed briefly through Toronto. In a twist of cosmic symmetry, our paths nearly crossed in Toronto's restaurant trenches: he bussed tables at the Fiesta,

I washed dishes at the Select Bistro across the street. Peter's route soon led him to early-1980s New York, just as the city was becoming a great laboratory of late twentieth-century art. He lived at the Chelsea Hotel next to Dee Dee Ramone, worked at Studio 54, sat for Andy Warhol, and showed with Pat Hearn, Gagosian and Leo Castelli. Around him, the East Village was turning into mythology – almost as quickly as it was turning into rent.

Schuyff is often placed within Neo-Geo, the loose movement that gathered around geometry, systems and a cool refusal of expressionist drama. The label is useful until Schuyff slips away from it. His paintings have grids, optical effects, and a dizzying command of repetition, but they are never merely rational. They shimmer, warp, and misbehave, making geometry look less like a mathematical certainty than a nervous condition with excellent manners.

His work is held in major collections including MoMA, MOCA Los Angeles and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Recent exhibitions with White Cube, MASSIMODECARLO and at Fondazione Pino Pascali have placed new work beside the historical force of his 1980s paintings.

What matters is not only the structure, but the hand. His paintings are built through rules, labour, rhythm and duration. He has described himself as "more athlete than poet", a description that fits once you see the work closely. The surfaces depend on consistency, stamina and touch; on the repeated act carried out long enough for control to become something stranger. It is a strict practice shaped by someone who outlasted the chaos of his youth and emerged entirely devoted to making.

Since 2020, Bari has become one of his bases alongside Amsterdam. On his terrace overlooking the Adriatic, I have come to know the dualities that define him. There is the adventurous history – Borneo, Studio 54, and the fallout of the 1980s art world – but there is also



1984, Exhibition view Pat Hearn Gallery. Photo: Schuyff Studio.

Below: 1987 Polaroid (L-R) Peter Schuyff, Sylvester Stallone, Brigitte Nielsen, at Hoffman Borman Gallery, LA.



the musician who formed The Woodwards with Stevie Guy. He speaks of early success with disarming honesty, fully aware of the absurd theatre that surrounded it.

Past the music and the mischief remains a relentless visual engine. Shortly after we met, still in lockdown, he was offered a commission for a 33-metre mural in Bologna. He was hesitant, but eventually agreed, and I saw at close range as the project moved, in less than two weeks, from a Morandi-inflected digital study to architectural scale.

The linear biography is remarkable enough. But Schuyff's real subject is the space between discipline and accident: the rule followed until it begins to breathe, the grid that refuses to behave, the painting that politely declines to mean and chooses instead to function.

When I caught up with him, Schuyff was in his Amsterdam studio, in the middle of a practical problem involving graphite and black paint, a line that was almost right, and the fear of having to do the whole thing again.

MATTHEW WATKINS: You once told me you thought of yourself as a New Yorker. But you were born in the Netherlands, raised in Vancouver, passed through Toronto – where we were apparently washing dishes and bussing tables across the street from one another – and now live between Amsterdam and Bari. What makes someone a New Yorker?

PETER SCHUYFF: *I think you become a New Yorker if you spend at least a decade wanting to leave. Maybe more. That's where I learned everything.*

MW: The 1980s New York art world has become almost mythological. What does that mythology miss?

PS: *It was smaller. It was all of those things, but the fact is it was so much smaller that everybody knew everybody. And I really mean everybody. It was a much broader community because everybody was involved. Now there are so many more people, and it has become more specialised.*

MW: Is Neo-Geo still a useful label for you, or has it become more of a historical convenience?

PS: *I mean, it's handy. I don't poo-poo it or anything. But I sometimes wonder why that particular group of us became the Neo-Geo painters, because I think you can have Neo-Geo at any time, not just then. So yes, it's handy, but it doesn't have a lot of meaning..*

MW: The grid is supposed to be rational, but in your hands it often shimmers, bends or misbehaves. Do you see it as a structure, a game, a trap?

PS: *It's never a liar. But it is an anchor, I guess. It's known territory, familiar*



Peter Schuyff sculptures. Consortium Retrospective 2017. Photo: André Morin.

Right: Wall Painting for the city of Bologna, 2021. Untitled (homage to Morandi). Photo: Schuyff Studio. Below: Ninety-Six Nurses, 180 x 120cm, Oil on linen. Photo: Massimo de Carlo Gallery. Bottom: Rokot, 2021, 100 x 100cm, oil on linen.



territory. To some degree, it's like being sure. These paintings – all of my paintings – are very much about the calories I burn making them. They say a lot about my dexterity. They say a lot about my hand, and what I can and cannot do. They're not intellectual works. They're physical accomplishments.

MW: You once described yourself as "more athlete than poet", and you once joked that if you had to do it all over again, you might have taken up MMA. What does that physical idea of discipline mean in the studio?

PS: *The sport that I'm involved in at the studio is one where I'm, for the most part, always a beginner. I'm quite handy, but my work definitely allows for the idea of not being very handy. In real athletics, if your eyesight goes bad, you cannot really make an accommodation that's going to work for you. Whereas with painting, you can. It's relative.*

Discipline is important, I guess. But for me it is more like an addiction than an ethic. I'm serious. It's not always to the benefit of my work or of myself.

"They're not intellectual works. They're physical accomplishments."

MW: You've said that function is a much better word than meaning. What should a painting do, if it is not there to mean something?

PS: *It should engage you visually, in one way or another. There are lots of ways to do that, but paintings are pictures. I think a lot of work today asks you to empathise with the artist making it, or with the story they tell, or with the way they tell the story. But when you look at a painting, you also imagine yourself doing that. You imagine the hands, the eyes, the thoughts. Part of it is a gift to you. That's part of what it's doing for you. So that is how I want a painting to function.*

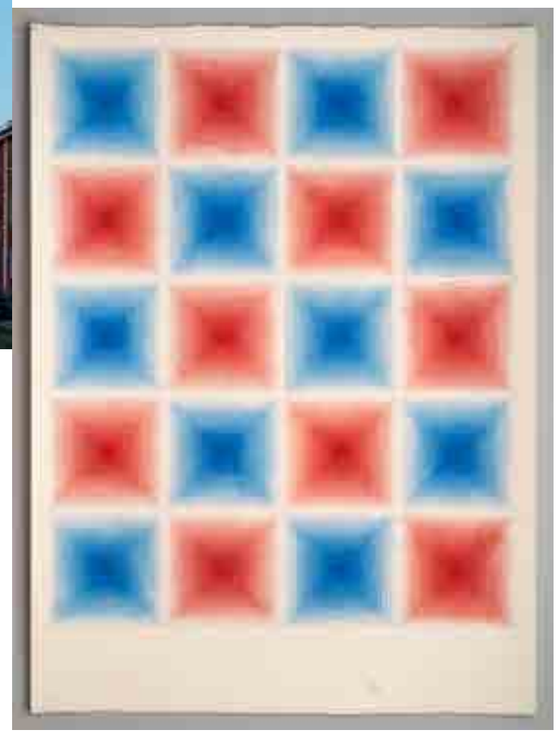
MW: In the Overpainted Paintings, you paint onto found images rather than into them. Is that collaboration, interruption, vandalism, rescue, or all of the above?

PS: *Oh, it's all of the above. Definitely. It's not good unless it's naughty. But it can be too naughty. I don't paint on anything that doesn't need painting on it.*

MW: Much has been made of your recent Bari works and their relationship to Mediterranean light. From your studio in Amsterdam, what did that southern landscape actually give the paintings?

PS: *It's not so much sharper colour. In fact, it's the opposite of sharper colour. It's clearer colour. It was also the space I had there, and the proximity to the sea. They were stupidly labour-intensive paintings, and in Bari I could just work for days. And still go outside. I'd go out to the deck. I'd be outside.*





Top: Hit parade, 2020, 76 x 56cm, watercolour on paper
Above: 20/20, 2020, 76 x 56, watercolour on paper.





Recent acylic works on paper.
Above: Valium, 2025, 150 x 150cm.
Right: Bozobloomen, 2026, 150 x 150cm
Far right: Hernando, 2026, 150 x 150cm.

The light is a lot sharper there, so the paintings kind of have to compete with it. I still needed to be able to see them. Here in Amsterdam, everything is kind of dusty. It's a different process to look at the paintings, even ambiently.

"It's not good unless it's naughty."

MW: Do you miss Bari?

PS: *Very much. Very much. And that story's not over.*

MW: Was early success useful, dangerous, or badly timed?

PS: *Definitely dangerous. But I think it was probably well timed, because in some ways we were there before the whole thing blew up. My success in the eighties was kind of quaint compared to the kinds of success people have these days, and the number of people having success.*

I don't want to sound like an old man, but the whole thing back then was kind of quaint. It was easy and affordable. I was young and healthy. So, I don't know. What are you going to do?

MW: What still surprises you about painting?

PS: *I've found another good excuse. And by good, I mean thoughtful, charming, funny, interesting, visually stimulating. There are a million reasons for it, but I have found an excuse to burn calories and organise layers of paint.*

I've found a way of organising those layers in a way where, at a certain point, I can tune out my head. I can just drive the car. And I end up with something beautiful.

For Schuyff, that may be enough: the work, the hand, the calories burned, and the moment when thought quietens enough for beauty to appear.



"I can just drive the car. And I end up with something beautiful."