



The great works of abstract art embody modernism's most profound desires: for a complete break with past ideologies and a reformulation of art on a rational basis (Russian constructivism); the pure embodiment of spiritual truth (Kandinsky, Malevich); a direct expression of an unconscious experience more real than everyday life (Pollock). After the 1970s, as many artists became suspicious of the narratives underlying such ideals, abstraction was often transformed into a vehicle through which to question and, even ironically, deride the very hopes that had previously provided its substance. For the artists of the neo-geo movement of the 1980s, the various forms of abstract art became mere episodes in the history of style, external forms alienated from the profound ideas they had once hoped to express. To continue to paint abstractly would now mean to accept, paradoxically, the impossibility of escaping representation; painting had become the 'sign of painting'.^[1]

The body of work Elizabeth Newman produced in Melbourne (where she continues to live and work) in the 1980s can, from one perspective, be seen as belonging to this moment of ironic self-distance within abstract painting. In 1985, the year Newman began exhibiting, she produced a representational painting that depicts an expressive abstract painting propped against a wall (Abstract 1985), a gesture that appears to illustrate the post-modernist doubt about the possibility of an authentic continuation of the tradition of abstraction.

Untitled 1987, is not in any straightforward sense, a painting of a painting. Yet it communicates a sense of modesty that interposes a distance between itself and the grand traditions of modernist painting. By doubling the shape of the canvas, the central yellow rectangle provides a textbook example of the 'deductive structure' so important for the formalist analysis of abstract painting. But the very simplicity and transparency of how this device is used makes it appear static; rather than an episode in the continuing modernist struggle to find new and dynamic means to acknowledge the canvas shape, Newman's formal doubling is used as a pre-existing trope that, almost by default, satisfies the desire for a minimal level of formal coherence. At the same time, however, the painting does provide us with a

taste of the refined optical pleasure characteristic of modernist abstraction. The patchiness of the blue field creates effects of immaterial depth, and the opacity of the yellow rectangle causes it to flicker gently between being perceived spatially on the same plane as the blue and as existing in front of it.

The geometric simplicity of the composition draws the viewer's eye towards imperfections and irregularities: the uneven application of the blue oil paint onto the canvas, the roughness of the yellow rectangle. In attending to these details, we are made aware of the work's facture, which is neither exact and mechanical in the manner of much geometric abstraction nor particularly expressive. Rather, this facture is merely human, like a line of handwriting or a map drawn quickly to show someone where to go. The painting is almost funny in its modesty; it suggests, but appears to deliberately fail to live up to, traditions of modernist painting bound up with some of twentieth-century art's most sublime ideals.

Newman's work of the 1980s is distinct from textbook post-modernism. While it appears to question the possibility of abstract painting continuing to embody profound ideals, it proposes neither a theoretical/critical agenda nor an ironic self-satisfaction in their place. In making failure and distance its primary elements, it becomes opaque, almost blank. In this, *Untitled* looks forward to Newman's more recent work. Since 2001, she has created a body of work that is quietly insistent in its presentation of 'almost nothing' as a form of resistance to a contemporary world she sees as characterised by an excess of representation, communication and fixed meaning. IAnd in this way, despite the distance from the tradition of high modernist abstraction I have described as internal to *Untitled*, Newman's work does in fact carry on part of the work of modernism: its dream of refusal, its 'embattled resistance to the century it lived in'.[2]

Francis Plagne is a writer and musician from Melbourne.

[1] Hal Foster, 'Signs taken for wonders' (1986), in Frances Colpitt (ed.), *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p.111.

[2] T.J. Clark, 'Jackson Pollock's abstraction', in Serge Guilbaut (ed.), *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal, 1945-1964*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1990, p.224.