

# MeMO

Elizabeth Newman

Neon Parc City

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By Francis Plagne

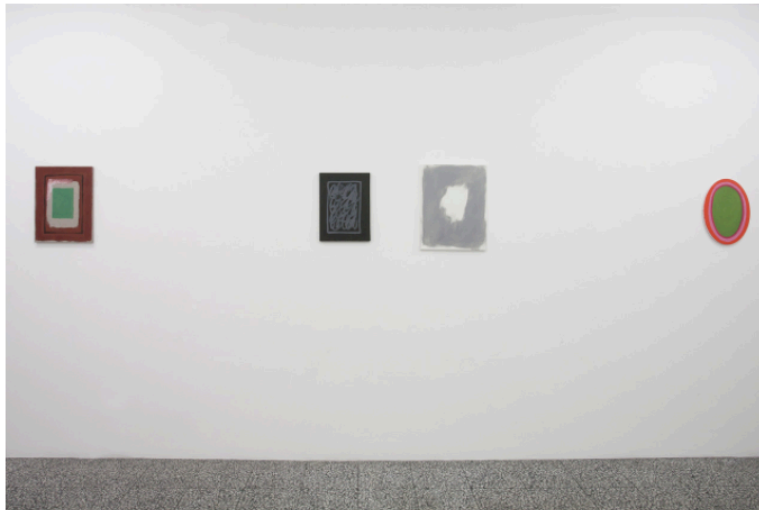
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In 2010, Elizabeth Newman exhibited a work called 1988, a brown envelope (propped up on a log), on the lower left hand corner of which 'Derrida' is written. The piece can be seen as emblematic of the concerns of much of her work of the last decade or so. Containing Newman's study notes from a course in continental philosophy she took many years before, the humble brown envelope is charged with a suggestion of meaning. Yet its presumably profound (or at least complex) contents are hidden from us; what we are actually presented with, teasingly, is nothing but a blank surface. The work seems almost didactic in its illustration of Newman's idea of art as concerning 'something not seen but nevertheless present.'

These words come from a beautiful, previously unpublished reflective piece contained in Texts, a selection of Newman's writings between 2005 and 2019, recently published by Discipline. In the same text, Newman explains her work as a process of reduction that attempts to 'leave only the most

fundamental symbolic structures, the fundamental enunciative conditions that make art what it is and not something else'. Newman's work as a whole can be understood as addressing these questions: what makes 'art what it is and not something else', what distinguishes artworks from other kinds of objects? The reduction of formal means in Newman's work is a strategy that illuminates this mysterious, fragile quality—we might call it a sense of internality or even 'aura'—that divides artworks from other objects, that allows a material thing to be no longer simply an object among other objects, but the occasion of a connection between subjects (artist and viewer).

Newman's work uses a variety of techniques to bring her objects over the threshold—but only barely—separating art from non-art, including the framing and display of found objects within the conventions of painting and sculpture. In other works, Newman makes minimal changes to found objects, with dramatic results. In a series of pieces from last decade, for example, Newman simply makes three cuts in the center of a wall-mounted piece of fabric or carpet, causing a square of the material to hang down and reveal its underside. With a severe formal economy, Newman's three cuts succeed in giving the object a sense of internal life, a subtle animation. Of course, the inside that these cuts reveal is just another outside, another surface, but the revelation of a fragment of what would otherwise be unseen has substantial effects on how we view the work. Something invisible (the majority of the back side of the material and the section of the front that has been covered) is now part of our experience of the work. This generates a kind of perceptual movement that, although sharply abbreviated and moving only between two sides of a thin piece of material, is nonetheless present, felt all the more keenly because there is nothing else in the work to distract us from it.



*Elizabeth Newman, Neon Parc City, installation image. Image credit: Neon Parc City.*

Newman's recent output has seen her return primarily to oil painting, the medium in which she worked in the late 1980s before she took an extended break from art in 1992. Her current exhibition at Neon Parc contains eleven paintings, ten of them hung in the main gallery space, with a single, much larger work displayed in the office. Other than a single work on an oval stretcher, the paintings are all in Newman's preferred vertical rectangle format. Their similarity in size and the repeating compositional device of smaller rectangles nested in larger rectangles (or in the case of the oval painting, smaller ovals nested in larger ovals) means that the ten works in the main gallery read as a kind of suite of variations on a theme.



Elizabeth Newman, *Untitled 2019*, Oil on linen, 40 x 30 cm. Image credit: Neon Parc City.

These paintings are quite unlike the large works composed of hovering, amorphous patches of color that Newman exhibited at Darren Knight Gallery in Sydney last year and the year before at Neon Parc's Brunswick gallery. Rather, in their deliberately shaky and shoddy take on abstract forms, they are reminiscent of her work of the 1980s. Like this earlier work, they call up archetypes from the history of abstraction only to fail willfully to live up to them. One beautiful work in grey on a black ground, in which loopy, almost calligraphic lines are confined to a roughly-rendered inner rectangle, returns to a form that Newman was using in the mid-1980s in works that, tellingly, bore titles such as *Abstract and Picture*. Like those 1980s works, which stressed their status as second-order pictures of pictures, this untitled painting uses the language of gestural abstraction in a way that seems to deliberately rob it of its expressive power. Confined by their inner frame, the gestural marks are caught somewhere between a visual expression of energy and a half-finished coloring-in job. The resultant work possesses a curious and subtly funny sense of serenity, a kind of sublimely confident yet self-mocking matter-of-factness found throughout Newman's work.



*Elizabeth Newman, Neon Parc City, installation image. Image credit: Neon Parc City.*

The historical reference point that Newman's nested rectangles will suggest to many viewers is geometric abstraction pioneer Josef Albers' "Homage to the Square" series, and the comparison is instructive. In some of the paintings in the Neon Parc show, Newman essentially adopts Albers' format (a series of differently colored regular geometric forms that increase in size from the middle to the outer layer), substituting the rectangle for the square. Of course, Newman's forms are messy, insisting on the unsteadiness of the artist's hand, where Albers', though executed without masking tape, are relatively crisp and precise. More importantly, Newman does not follow Albers in his distinctive off-center composition, where the squares are placed closer to the bottom edge of the larger squares they are nested in; Newman's, by contrast, are roughly centered. Where Albers' off-center composition creates an ambiguous sense of space and dynamism at odds with the essentially balanced form of the square, as if the paintings were receding perspectively into space or rising up vertically from the smallest square, Newman's centered compositions are calmly immobile.

Yet Newman's paintings do not simply become inert decorative objects. Rather, like the fabric and carpet pieces discussed above, they use strikingly simple techniques to generate a sense of internal life. In many of these rectangle paintings, this derives from a tension between the implied clean geometric forms and the artist's failure or refusal to properly realize these forms. The implied forms are so simple that we cannot help but look at the paintings as if their colored areas were executed in a uniform and complete manner; at the same time, the frayed edges of the shapes and the patches of raw linen they expose compete for our attention.

In other works, this tension is heightened into a sense of internal conflict, as if Newman's painting is caught between two competing sets of intentions. The strongest example of this is a painting in burgundy, green, black and grey, in which one area of the rectangular 'Albers' composition has been roughly covered in scribbly, looping lines, creating the impression of the artist defacing her own work. Like the messy edges and incomplete forms found elsewhere, this playful self-sabotage acts as a powerful reminder of the artist's subjectivity.

In Newman's writing, she often makes the point that her ideas are closer to modernist approaches than to the discourse of contemporary art. She is, she says, 'a "product" of another era', opposing her idea of

painting as a form through which to 'foreground and nominate the human subject who makes these signifying marks' to a pessimistic picture of contemporary art as the 'foreclosure of subjectivity'. Newman is perfectly at home with such unfashionable concepts as subjectivity, individuality, authenticity—she even writes 'Art' with a capital A! She belongs, she writes, to a time 'when we believed that the artist's subjectivity was integral and essential to the artwork they created'.



Elizabeth Newman, *Untitled 2019*, Oil on panel, 40 x 30 cm. Image credit: Neon Parc City.

Against the backdrop of ideas formulated in Newman's writings, it is fascinating to consider the series of works she has made, stretching back to 2009, that directly adopt the form of the German late modernist Imi Knoebel's Grace Kelly series, in which large monochrome rectangles are bordered on all four sides by strips of different colors. There are two of these works in Newman's current exhibition, a small painting on wood and a much larger painting on linen, displayed in the gallery office. Anyone familiar with Knoebel's works will perceive the similarity, but also the differences: Newman has altered the structure of 'overlapping' in the bordering colors; she uses oil rather than Knoebel's acrylic; most characteristically, Knoebel's edges are hard and straight, where hers waver irregularly.

It would be wrong, I think, to read these paintings as some kind of commentary on Knoebel's work. Beginning with a 2009 fabric piece called *Untitled (For Imi)*, Newman's series is homage, rather than appropriation. Where appropriation often treats the art of the past as lifeless cultural material, solely as a finished product, Newman's homage is a way of inhabiting Knoebel's form while making it her own. Perhaps, considering Newman's attachment to a rather 'unfashionable' set of concepts through which to

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discuss her art, it is appropriate to close with the words of one of the least fashionable authorities on art imaginable, Ernst Gombrich, whose remarks on Albers' *Homage to the Square* also serve to elucidate both Newman's Knoebel homages and her work as a whole: these variations and permutations of the same set of elements are not performed as a means of exhausting them, Gombrich said, but rather 'in order to prove them inexhaustible'.