

ARTFORUM

BRISBANE

Elizabeth Newman

GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

—Wes Hill



“No, no, no,” Elizabeth Newman is constantly stating in her work, while hinting at an ebullient “Yes!” The Melbourne-based artist asks us to look at the portals hidden in formalist tropes—at negatives that express positives and at barriers that surreptitiously let us in. In her recent exhibition “Is that a ‘No’?” a repertoire of paintings, textiles, collages, and sculptures alluded to the productive potential of gaps, holes, accidents, and absences. Comprising works dating from 1989 to 2019, the show, smartly curated by Naomi Evans, was less than a full- dress retrospective, but it did concisely frame Newman’s intriguing career, which, fittingly for an artist obsessed with lacunae, has an almost decade-long hiatus from art at its center.

After achieving some success as an abstract painter in the mid- to late 1980s, Newman gave up making art in 1992 to study psycho- analysis, which she continues to practice professionally. In the early 2000s she returned to art refreshed, more consumed than ever by its psychological registers, even if shifting surprisingly little in terms of actual style. Like much of her output, Newman’s works in this exhibition looked as if they were silently reveling in their own succinct- ness: a ready-made metal clothes rack in *To love is to . . .*, 2012; a beige felt blanket with excised geometric shapes in *Untitled*, 2006; a hanging synthetic rug with an excised middle in *Untitled*, 2004. Everything she produces is as delicate as it is overthought, every decision a performative component. She shares with late Australian artist John Nixon an interest in incremental formal experimentation and a skepticism of proficiency, but instead of

his theories of materialism inspired by Soviet art Newman's materialism depends upon what we might call "elsewhereness." The paradoxical takeaway of her work is that there is power in withholding—not everything can or should be exchanged.

The artist made a breakthrough series of text paintings not long before her temporary abstention from the art world, two of which, both Untitled, were high points of this show. One, from 1990, is a stiffly painted black no on an opaque-red background, while the other, dated 1989, renders the phrase an extreme openness (taken from a Rosalind Krauss essay) in curvy red typography against a field of Matissean orange. Both foreground their hand-painted qualities, conveying a confident amateurism that contrasts with the clean professional lines of the text-art canon. The approach is redolent, perhaps, of the end of the '80s, when a more casual, post-historical swagger seemed necessary to some after a decade in which art was routinely couched in issues of institutionalized quotation. Newman's spontaneity and intuition—hidden behind a vacant demeanor—invite us to reflect rhetorically on the minutiae of her choices even if we suspect them to be happy accidents. Why, I wonder, does she capitalize the n in no? And is "extreme openness" what the artist would call a void?

In her writings, Newman frequently refers to the great French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to explain her attempt to make work that elevates the trivial into something primordially meaningful. Crucial to her practice is the subjectivity-sustaining capacity of the other. What is less clear is whether she is wary of inadvertently making the other her predictable theme, equating it with formal signifiers of lack. Pushes and pulls—between the genuinely poetic and its clichés—played out repeatedly in the exhibition. Obstructions became pathways, but also the reverse, the real serving as a trope rather than a break within the flow of language. Tellingly, when seen from behind, the exhibition's huge eponymous plywood sculpture of a no changed into an on: a decoy abrogation switching suddenly to a solicitation.