

Philip Martin Gallery

## The Saturday Paper

# Bodies of thought



An installation view of Elizabeth Newman's exhibition at Neon Parc, Made Spencer-Castle

### Lisa Radford

is an artist who writes and teaches. She currently lectures in painting at the VCA, University of Melbourne.

A long, narrow corridor acts as a threshold between the outside world and Elizabeth Newman's 40<sup>th</sup> solo exhibition, the seventh at this gallery. Opening up into Neon Parc's large Brunswick space, this corridor also acts as a frame to an exhibition that, like much of Newman's work, is concerned with the idea of the frame as a geometric and symbolic device.

A painting hanging on the rear wall beckons me into the space. Its yellow pigment seems to summon negative spaces or voids – rectangular and ovate, mostly white, this painting hums. It's untitled, like most of the paintings I will encounter.

Fellow artist Damiano Bertoli, who contributed a text to Newman's 2012 monograph, questions me in passing – what more can be said about Newman's work? Repetitions and rearticulations are to be expected. It is well known that in the late 1980s Newman took time-in-lieu to study psychoanalysis before returning to art in the early 2000s. As she acknowledges in a collection of writings called "Texts," published by Discipline in 2019, art and psychoanalysis share a relationship to knowledge that is produced through practice rather than learnt through a book: "It's a knowledge that implicates a subject – not anonymous knowledge." The surprises in this exhibition are subtle. Material and ongoing, Newman's concerns speak through histories both evident and obtuse.

As I move from the threshold to the brightly lit grand hall, the yellow humming painting on the rear wall becomes part of a collective, with painted peers of varying scales. It's a salon of sorts, featuring abstracted painted icons spaciouly hung.

The 28 medium and small-scale works are mostly from 2021. A drip-scripted, unprofessionally sign-written text on a scumbled pink ground humbly asks me to consider this collection as "bodies of thought."

Looking ahead, a totemesque figure, titled "One," greets visitors. An aged wooden post is attached to an industrially threaded piece of metal, both supported by a bluestone paver sitting on a plywood plinth. Enigmatic in form, the sculpture acts as a marker. Centrally located, "One" denies a definable objectivity: logic tells us that the found materials belong to specific sites, but we do not know where. I can't help but think of the bluestone gutters, churches, halls and cottages of Brunswick, mined from quarries that would become tips. The sculpture evokes a kind of mysticism for place, a refigured absence.

Some of the works in the exhibition could be described as painted monochromes or voids: grey, white, pale blue and yellow planes, contained by painted framed. These works remind me of mediaeval icon paintings with the deity removed. I recall Newman's suggestion that painting is "a protest on the part of a subject, a refusal of the omnipresent relation that we now have with bureaucracy and objects." The immediacy of her seemingly ready-made palette reminds us of what can be revealed by the formal truths found in materials. These paintings form part of a lineage of Newman's that examines the absence of figure and the presence of painted space. They recall the work of peers such as John Nixon or younger

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artists such as Lucina Lane, whose use of everyday and found materials simultaneously denies and affirms an affinity with formalism and the language of modernism.

It seems a strange day to walk into an exhibition. In the midst of a pandemic, ideas about freedom, power, governance and surveillance are continually negotiated amid health orders, public protest and science denial. Lockdown protests Twitter trolls and talkback callers reveal both the precarious conditions of labour and the slippery slope of moralizing. When citizens become bioweapons, what of the conditions for art and, in particular, painting?

Newman's relationship to painting is rich in critical analysis and, like the 1960s French group Supports/Surfaces, her practice shares an ongoing concern with the relationship between representation and language. Two small text works – also untitled – contain painted and stacked works: “ALL against ALL” and “Radix malorum.” Mars black or Van Dyke brown, the sticky-looking oil paint that forms the letters is applied to the linen over or under a scumbled and scribbled surface that almost obscures the text. The lockdown protests and talkback callers enter the gallery in spectral and textual form.

“All Against All” is the title of Paul Jankowski's recent book documenting the complex and global origins of World War II. “Radix malorum” is a Latin phrase that translates to radical evil. Kant posits that we are naturally evil and learn to be otherwise. In contract – or rather in juxtaposition – “All against all” is a concept explored by Thomas Hobbes, a descriptor for human behaviour under the failure of the social contract.

As I move through the gallery, the formalities of the works take on the structure of language. The paintings are arranged akin to poetry and prose – varying spacings make pauses and different hanging heights create intonation and enunciation. Several watercolour works from 1988 disrupt the contemporaneity and remind me that this is a long conversation. Two other works swap stretched linen for brown cardboard and peach paper. Attached to timber stretcher bars, these works create a subtle rupture that reminds us this exhibition is a dialogue with art, at once beguiling, numbing, romantic and sublime. A small grey painting with the title “Rilke” footnotes this sense, its dead grey acting neither as mirror nor window. Put back on the viewer, it expresses absence and the limits of longing – unarticulated spaces of negation that remain productive and generative. Newman's authorship is evident. It's in the beauty where one layer of paint brushes against something else, a flickering banality, or in her handwriting and the marks of her brush.

I leave thinking about another small scripted painting, “Las Pinutras Negras,” that sits centrally on the west wall, in conversation with the other sticky brown-black text works. Goya's “Black Paintings,” also called “Las Pinutras Negras,” were painted some 200 years ago on the walls of his farmhouse just outside Madrid. These absurd and bleak works were never titled, dated or signed; Goya never wrote about them and it is suspected they were never intended to be seen. Many are painted in variations of the same warm Mars blacks or Van Dyke browns as Newman's text works. Often grouped with Goya's “Los Caprichos (The Caprices)” etchings, they are part of a series of works referred to as “social speech” – paintings and drawings as means for observing some of our less favourable behaviours. Like Goya's works, which were painted in the home, there is a domestic quality to Newman's paintings, both in scale and their tendency towards a private form of communication.

Our current moment inundates us with imagery, so perhaps it is okay to ask what forms might come to represent a similar discontent with humanity. To create more images risks re-creating the methods of empires. As a means for walking in the present, Newman's approach is to reinstate desire through emphasizing a lack. As Newman has noted in the past, painting is still a field in which one can encounter the contingent and the real. In this lack, she is always asking what more should be said.