DRILL HALL GALLERY

Plagne, Francis. “Elizabeth Newman,” *Un-titled*, Nov. 2021

Elizabeth Newman
“Untitled,” 2010
Found Object and Cement
15 3/4 x 9 1/8 x 7 7/8 inches

Language is a strange entity. Although it tends to fix and prescribe, to create order and meaning and establish laws and rules that represent knowledge and logic, it can also empty-out in the most bewildering fashion. Aside from its notorious tendency to mislead and obfuscate, language has its built-in slippages. The word ‘painting’, for instance, is what is known as a gerund. A gerund functions as a noun and a verb and, so, ‘painting’ refers both to the object that is a painting and to the action that brings it forth. Depending on its context, a gerund can point to a subject or an object. It may imply something concrete and fixed, yet contradict this through its fluid action as a verb, leading us to wonder: what does painting actually stand for? How do we understand what it represents? Is it the paint, or the -ing function that defines its reality? Or is it a conjunction of both?

The primary challenge offered by a painting, or any work of art, may well be an attribute of its intrinsic self. Claims for the self-sufficiency of artworks have always aggravated people who want to hold art at a distance or wrap it up in words. Do these interpreters believe that language can account for all experience, that it is adequate for every occasion?

Elizabeth Newman is especially sensitive to the irony of the situation—to the verbal / visual face-off. She tends to place her art under the aegis of subjectivity, while remaining aware that the conventional analysis and appreciation of art hinges on a multiplicity of discourses and historical mindsets: iconography, iconology, stylistic analysis, formalism, structuralism, Gestalt, seeing-as, seeing-in, two- foldness, resemblance theory, feminist theory, modernism/post-modernism, so on and so forth. The terms that inflate this paradox make it seem formidably complex and immense. So what is the rapport between art and language? Is there an equivalence? Do the two operate on the same symbolic plane? Is painting itself a language? Elizabeth Newman seizes on an ‘inherent but contradictory tie,’5 and if we turn to the writings of Roland Barthes, a theorist to whom Newman has referred, the question is directly raised:

Is painting a language? Yet til now, no answer: we have not been able to establish either painting’s lexicon or its general grammar—to put the picture’s signifiers on one side and its signifieds on the other, and to systematize their rules of substitution and combination. Semiology, as a science of signs, has not managed to make inroads into art … artistic creation cannot be ‘reduced’ to a system. System, as we know, is the declared enemy of man and of art.

Art theorists have long mused on the problematic relationship between language and art. What have they had to say on the subject? John Dewey stated that ‘there are values and meanings that can be expressed only by immediately visible and audible qualities, and to ask what they mean in the sense of something that can be put into words is to deny their distinct existence. For Susanne K. Langer, the knowledge of art ‘is not expressible in ordinary language and the reason for this ineffability is that … the forms of feeling and the forms of discursive expression are logically incommensurate. Alfred North Whitehead noted a ‘deficiency’ in our language, such that ‘we cannot weave into a train of thought what we can apprehend in flashes.’9 While for Brian Massumi, approaches to art that are attempted by language ‘are incomplete if they operate only on the semantic or semiotic level … What they lose, precisely, is the event—in favour of the structure.

Elizabeth Newman’s art exalts in the fissures between language and experience. The double- sidedness of painting as a noun and a verb agrees with her sensibility. Visitors to this exhibition will no doubt be struck by the humour of its title: Un-titled. The difference implied between the stereotypically untitled modernist artwork, which unequivocally embraces abstraction and enigma, and Newman’s ironic spin on it, hinges on the introduction of the hyphen. The hyphen implies a difference of epoch, of mentality and rationale, yet it also indicates important continuities that Newman readily acknowledges. ‘Most of the artworks I make are Untitled,’ she explains. ‘That is, you could say that their nomination entails an intimate relation to un-ness. Un-titled emphasises the propensity of art to undermine or evade language, underscoring its limitations and inadequacies. ‘For me,’ writes Newman, ‘it is … a conscious choice to refuse to name something … a deliberate attempt to foreground silence and lack of knowledge, and to make a space for the presence of absence.

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Elizabeth Newman studied painting at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne in the early 1980s and would inevitably have been affected by the generational shift then taking place—from an old regime of ponderous masculine authority and meticulous formalism to an emerging generation inured to audio-visual media and popular culture, with a shorter attention span and intent on lightening up. Some of her teachers were committed to the muteness of their work, to its opaque material specificity and were noticeably hostile or indifferent to attempts to verbalise or theorise art. If the 1980s saw a burgeoning of essentialism, gendered thinking and resistance to language, it also saw a humbling of pride and tumbling of the mighty. A shift to more modest, casual artistic practices and the adoption of unexpected and multifarious means were then forthcoming. The new generation of artists embraced happenstance, saw possibilities in the un-skilled and open-ended, and sought to erode the old-world pieties of medium-specificity. While the emerging generation pursued their own directions, their work remained grounded in materiality and was clearly marked by the ways they had learnt to see, feel and cherish art.

Emerging out of this milieu, Newman's art is characterised by broad variety on the one hand and genuine consistency on the other. Paintings, collages, landscapes, found objects, drawings, monochromes, text-works, installations, ready-mades, clothing and sculptures make up her material practice. But how do we account for the range of her work? Why are some of its modes more challenging to place than others? How does her practice sit within the discourses of modernism and post-modernism, abstraction and representation, and the diverse epistemologies of
the image?

Many of Newman's earliest works are in fact re-presentations—drawings of the interior of a museum displaying works by 20th century artists (p. 12); a painting depicting an unidentifiable abstract canvas hanging on a wall (p. 18); a set of sketches that might relate to the work of Cy Twombly or the scrawling of a child, or to the artist's own paintings (p. 13). In each instance, the image hinges on being perceived as 'itself' and as a hypothetical context which is beyond itself. The Twomblyesque images seem full of uninhibited expression, whereas others appear to be depopulated fields whose latency is represented by a lack of information. Does the subject matter inhere in the image or in the artist's subjective choice?

Newman has characterised her paradoxical strategy as the 're-presentation of representation': 'I think this self-consciousness is a consistent aspect of my work. Paintings, drawings, objects, etc, all emphasise the nature of representation as a second- degree thing, based on a first-degree experience.'13 Many of Newman's paintings re-present or recreate paintings by other artists. There are allusions to Matisse, Goya, Motherwell and Picasso, as well as straight quotations of Imi Knobel and Ellsworth Kelly. Yet the impulse of re-presentation is not restricted to artists Newman admires—it is fundamental to her own practice. In works such as Painting 2009 (p.15), Untitled 2 2018 (p. 5), Untitled 2019 (p. 55), and Untitled 2020 (p. 53), Newman depicts artworks and other objects in her studio. Paintings, monochromes, found objects and pieces of fabric lend their shapes to new compositions and their elements shift in and out of focus. Some remain steadfast presences while others are more tentative and seemingly ephemeral. Newman portrays these artworks in their concreteness and also in the searching quality of their actualisation—or is it their evanescence and their dematerialisation? Newman's compositions stake out a site in which unnamed, unreconciled subjective experiences occur.

Should we assume that the ambivalence and tenuousness we perceive in these works are symptoms to the imminent dematerialisation and self- cancellation of painting? Conversely, another question arises: what if a robust aesthetic experience could be provided by some other object never intended to be a painting, something altogether bypassing the quandaries of manufacture and imagination?

Newman has a history of invoking painting and its discourses via objects and places which have no prior relation to the history of art. In offcuts of material, cardboard boxes, discarded packaging, abandoned office furniture or timber ready for the scrap heap, Newman proposes painting without painting. Take Untitled 2021 (p. 27), an object that Newman found on the side of the road, advertising a clothing sale.

En-titled by Newman, the object's form, dimensions and materiality approximate the physical conditions of a modernist monochrome. Scaled in relation to the body, evidently tied to an abstract conception of the image through its altered radiance, clarity, vitality and cohesion, the work (literally a sign) functions as a 'stand-in' for painting.

By appropriating objects from the 'real' world, by inserting text and utilising collage Newman seeks to 'interrupt the seamless surface' of painting and blur the line between material literalness and the impalpable image.14 As she explains: 'Collage, by taking something from the world of signification, by using something already-signifying, inevitably and implicitly refers and invokes the world of language, with its various discourses, histories, modes and relations of production, and types of knowledge.'15 Exploiting the tensions between the structured realm of language and that which exists beyond it—'something real and unrepresentable'16—Newman simultaneously undercuts the authority of the image and the pragmatic experience of the 'real' world-order, proposing their equivalence or their inter- dependency as states in play.

Newman's Untitled 2021 evokes the austerity, polish and absoluteness of a minimalist monochrome, yet it also reveals a damaged, worn and uneven lopsidedness—which seems to correspond with Barthes' observation that 'the truth of things is best read in the cast-off.'17 All of Newman's repurposed objects—from cardboard boxes (p. 63 & 65), a garden gate (p. 9), discarded paintings (p. 23 & 48) to bonded fabric scraps (p. 43 & 51)—evoke paint, canvas, a frame and the idea of a pictorial threshold, while allowing the flawed, weathered and lived qualities of the object to shine through. Newman's remarkable success as a finder of these stand-ins may be attributed to her judicious choice, empathetic recognition and astute connoisseurship. These are the expressions of a highly civilized, historically aware, sophisticated discernment, steeped in the culture of the visual arts but equally charged with instinct and the artist's own sensibility and subjectivity. The effectiveness of her strategies of re-presentation is a testament to the respect she holds for her chosen materials. 'I really appreciate what is there already,' she writes, 'often I don't need to do more than just show it: I wanted to reduce further and further what I would now call imaginary phenomena—the image—and leave only the most fundamental symbolic structures, the fundamental enunciative conditions of art that make art what it is and not something else.

The paradox of this statement is vitally alive for Newman. She clearly relishes the fact that her objects sit at the very edge of what might be considered an artwork. Their position, between art and the quotidian world, reveals something essential that she seeks— something fundamental to a work of art—its potential to translate into an embodied experience.

What occasions these object, then, is not so much emulation or representation, but the aura of subjectivity—the connotation of the sensible. The work itself is proof of its communication but how do we account for its effectiveness? What is the transformational pivot that enables our subjectivities to intersect and overlap?

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'The subjective transformation of some Thing into an object that affects others is mysterious,'20 writes Newman. The discarded objects that she en-titles as artworks are chosen for their potential aesthetic affect. Her selection—or her election—of an object acknowledges its gravitas or allure. As Brian Massumi has pointed out, affects may be inexpressible in language: there is no 'vocabulary specific to affects.'21 Yet Massumi and others urge us to acknowledge that affects constitute a vital element of our lived experience.22 Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, likewise, emphasise how affects are a preponderant in our consciousness, characterising a work of art as a 'bloc of sensations: a compound of percepts and affects.'23 Works of art, they write, are capable of 'making the invisible forces visible in themselves … the forces of gravity, heaviness, rotation, the vortex, explosion, expansion, germination, and time … making perceptible the imperceptible forces that populate the world, affect us, and make us become.'

From this vantage point, art might be understood to function at the very seat of existence, opening onto a participatory, empathetic realm of creativity in which matter serves to gather, bind and convey. As it gathers, we gather with it, becoming conscious of the forces establishing a new existence— establishing, as Newman has put it, 'new knowledge or new signifiers.'

'When I make an artwork' writes Newman, 'I experience the same moment: a condensed paradoxical moment that is both new and surprising, and old and familiar at the same time. I would describe it as a 'beginning moment', a sort of mythical moment that presents what could be 'the beginning of subjectivity': the bifurcation of experience into something represented, and something that cannot be represented, but nevertheless exists. Probably, all my work is about this moment of conjunction in which language divides being.'

The dynamics of this creative transformation is profoundly mysterious, yet Newman's tender consideration of the object's ground, thickness, texture and physical integrity ensure its meaningfulness. Roland Barthes famously commented on the disparity between meaning and materiality in works of art by making reference to alchemy:

The materials [of art] are what the Alchemists call materia prima—what exists prior to the division of meaning: a tremendous paradox, since in the human order nothing comes to man that is not immediately accompanied by a meaning, the meaning which other men have given it, and so on, back to infinity. The painter's demiurgic power is that he makes the materials exist as substance.

This passage in Barthes' essay on Cy Twombly has exerted a particular fascination for many readers and especially for visual artists. Barthes conception of substance chimes in with Newman's evocation of a 'monumental moment; an encounter with something singular that is One.'28 The etymology of the word 'substance' is rooted in the Latin substant, meaning to stand firm or to exist. Thus, the words 'substantive' and 'substantiation' imply the possibility of an under- standing. Alchemy has often been defined as an 'art of transformation', as it involves the liberation and harnessing of latent forces and their translation into higher powers. Its aim is 'sublimation', refining, elevating, distinguishing or abstracting of an element from base materials. Sublimation is the dynamic of alchemy and of art—it recognises the porosity of all material substances, making them permeable to both meaning and subjectivity.

Through her engagement with the writings of Jacques Lacan, Newman is very familiar with the concept of sublimation:

Lacan's ideas about sublimation are really useful. In summary, he says that sublimation is the process of elevating nothing (a little object) into something (into the Thing: something primordial and monumental for the subject). To elevate nothing into something and to enjoy doing that: that's his definition of sublimation. Picasso is a perfect example of that. He takes a little something (a found object, a colour, a painted rectangle, a black line) and turns it into something profoundly moving that transmits something that is more than we can see.

Lacan puts forward a definition of sublimation in his Seminar Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, where he says sublimation involves raising 'the object … to the dignity of the Thing.'30 What exactly is meant by 'the Thing'? According to Lacan, there are three registers constructing experience. There is the symbolic (language and discourse), the imaginary (the image/appearance) and the real (also known as the Thing). In his scheme, sublimation enables the realm of the symbolic to move closer to the realm of the real. The agency bringing them together is the imaginary, which allows us to develop an intimation and awareness of the Thing (i.e. that reality which is otherwise 'impossible for us to imagine').31 The Thing itself is un-representable, always exceeding or unravelling any image we might attempt to formulate of it. It can only be represented by emptiness.

Newman's art evokes this emptiness. Yet, in making 'space for the presence of absence,' her handling of materia prima suggests the inspiration of the Eastern traditions. As with the yin and the yang, oppositional forces are dialectical partners which are generative. Presence emerges from absence and is permeated by absence: the process of transformation is ongoing. Emptiness is not nothingness. Within emptiness there lies great potential. Emptiness and fullness, positive and negative, inside and outside, beauty and the sublime, there is and there is not— Newman's work engages binary opposites while holding them in equilibrium. Where there is solidity, she perforates it. Where there is fragility, she makes it stand tall. Where others hold certainty, she slips in the shadow of doubt. Positioned between states, her art is opaque yet porous, establishing a sense of transitivity, exchange, dialogue and dialectic. Her treatment of signifying material is to suspend it, to allow it to linger and keep it open. It eludes specification and thwarts the logic of attachment as its understanding comes precisely from what is not made explicit.

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One thing that comes immediately to our attention in this generous exhibition drawn from the art Elizabeth Newman has produced since the mid-1980s is the proliferation of vertically oriented rectangles. This shape provides the format of countless monochrome, abstract, or text paintings on canvas and determines the reductive compositional structures of many of the pictures (often a simple internal 'frame' or, in more recent paintings, a set of nested rectangles). It is also frequently encountered in the found objects that Newman enlists into her work. We know from the artist's own commentary that, for her, this form contains a powerful suggestion of subjectivity. Discussing a recent work in grey on a black ground, in which loopy lines are confined to a roughly rendered inner rectangle, she proposes that 'the rectangle with the scribbles inside it is like a comic version of the human subject (me)', an image of the formlessness of the unconscious shaped by a socially acceptable identity.

In the tradition of European painting, the vertical rectangle is, of course, the most common format of the portrait. Newman exploits this traditional association in Untitled (Picasso face) 1990 (p. 49), in which a reproduction of Picasso's neo-Cézannist Still Life with Pitcher and Apples 1919 is affixed upside down to a much larger piece of stretched linen. As the work's subtitle suggests, two apples resting on a table in the reproduced image, roughly centred in the top half of the surface, read goofily yet unmistakably as the eyes of a human face. In Small Sculpture 2009 (p. 59), similar connotations are produced in three- dimensional form, the found piece of painted wood (affixed to an amorphous blob of cement by two long nails) reading in unavoidably anthropomorphic terms.

What is most striking about many of Newman's rectangular emblems of subjectivity is their emptiness. They are blank areas of colour devoid of incident, cuts made into fabric, a hole in a found gate (Untitled 2008) (p. 9). In an untitled painting from 2019 that reads as a kind of ghostly inversion of one of Philip Guston's densely built-up mid-1960s 'head' paintings, a profile-like form emerges in negative as an area of untouched canvas left at the centre of a loosely brushed expanse of grey. The paintings insistently suggest a subjectivity, but one characterised by absence or negativity. Newman's wonderful 2016 painting that abbreviates Magritte's Ceci n'est pas une pipe ('This is not a pipe') to simply Ceci n'est pas ('This is not') might serve as our guide here; we might also think of her reminder that the literal translation of Freud's term for the unconscious (das Unbewusste) is 'the unknown'.

In an update on the Renaissance adage that 'every painter paint himself', Newman has written that 'all works made by an artist are self-portraits, because all works made by an artist involve, intimately, their subjectivity'.3 Looking at an artist's oeuvre would then be a privileged way into this subjectivity, because— to quote again from Newman's writing—'it's the links between signifiers that constitutes one's work, one's lifework'.4 But the self-portrait constituted by Newman's collected works and the relationships between them is almost as opaque as one of her monochrome painting. Other than a few pieces that refer, with varying degrees of intelligibility, to contemporary political issues—the imprisonment of Bradley/Chelsea Manning, Wikileaks, Australia's treatment of asylum seekers, the Anonymous movement—the subjectivity embodied in Newman's fields of colour, daubs of paint, and mysteriously imposing found objects is one from which specific traits have been withdrawn, from which the signifiers or representations that contribute to our everyday sense of personality or identity are absent.

Recently, this aspect of Newman's work has been elegantly articulated in Rex Butler's reading of it through the notion of the 'cut'.5 Newman's own commentary provides a striking formulation—at once plainspoken and fundamentally mysterious— when she describes the experience of artmaking as 'a sort of mythical moment that presents what could be "the beginning of subjectivity": the bifurcation of experience into something represented, and something that cannot be represented, but nevertheless exists'.6 However, we wouldn't want the depth of philosophical reflection occasioned by Newman's work to mislead us as to its tone, which is often gently comic. The zero-degree of subjectivity is the blankness of the monochrome, of course, but it is also the absurdity of the Picasso face, the fabric on linen torso propped up on the two log legs (At home with you 2010 (p. 41)), the plastic eyes staring out from the otherwise blank canvas (Vision 1991). As Newman put it to me in a recent conversation, her work is marked by a 'strange combination of lightness and depth'.

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This 'strange combination' suggests a way in which we might understand the insistently second-order quality of Newman's work, the sense it gives us of existing at one remove from the traditions of modernist abstraction it resembles. This quality is most marked in the artist's earliest surviving works, which include a trio of muted representational images depicting a studio with paintings hung and leant against the wall, a gestural abstract painting, and, in the example included here, a Blank Canvas 1985 (p. 18). Viewed alongside these pieces, it can be tempting to read Newman's work as a whole in terms of the contemporaneous discourse of postmodern simulation painting, in which the recognition of distance from the heroic tradition of modernist abstraction meant accepting that painting had become the 'sign of itself'.8 Like many other artists working with abstraction in the 1980s, Newman's work seems to embody doubt about the possibility of an authentic continuation of the tradition to which it refers.

However, as Eve Sullivan has recognised, Newman's work is subtly yet profoundly different from textbook postmodernism.9 Nothing in her work or statements suggests the knowingly ironic stance of many postmodern artists, nor the background presence of a theoretical or critical paradigm for which these works would serve as mere illustration. Rather than irony, the second-order quality of Newman's work comes from her embrace of failure as a kind of working method. Look at how the dripping orange form of Untitled 1987 (p. 17) suggests the cleanly articulated geometry of a rectangle while pointedly falling short of it, this discrepancy magnifying the wavering of its lines, the dribbles of paint running down from its top edge.

In Untitled (after Picasso) 1988 (p. 47), a similar logic operates in a more complex way, as it also concerns the relationship between the work and its title. In this painting, the format of an internal rectangle placed slightly above the centre of the canvas (familiar from many other works by the artist) is constituted by broken parallel strokes of grey, set off against a lighter grey background. On one level, the work's title simply signals its connection to the repetitively applied daubs found in a similarly monochromatic palette in Picasso's analytic cubist works. But the gesture of tribute takes on another quality when we consider Picasso's role as the preeminent artist of the modernist canon, the enormity of whose pictorial achievements provided the impossible standard by which so many later modernists judged their efforts. (One thinks here particularly of Pollock's oedipal relationship to Picasso). Viewed in this light, the modesty of Newman's picture takes on a gently self-mocking quality, admitting, in a sense, its failure to live up to the tradition represented by the name of Picasso, while quite unironically drawing its visual inspiration from the master's work in a direct, technical manner that renders irrelevant the critique of Picasso and the modernist tradition unavoidable in the 1980s (as it continues to be today).

Much of the work Newman has produced since the late 1980s can be understood to build on this paradoxical insight: that her failure to produce objects in the heroic and sublime traditions of modernist painting she admires is precisely the way in which she can achieve the qualities of modernist painting in her work. Invested with this deep-seated equivocality (both serious and absurd, earnest and mocking), her objects possess an internality, a sense of subjective animation that distances them from the tendency evident in much postmodern art for the physical work to become an illustration of a theoretical proposition. Equally, it refuses the contemporary mode theorised by David Joselit in which paintings are conceived as nodes in a wider network.10 Rather, Newman's work develops an ever-evolving set of techniques to generate within her objects that fragile, mysterious quality that—taking up the artist's suggestion that she is 'a "product" of another era'11—we could go so far as to call 'aura'.

In the 1987 painting discussed above, this sense of internal animation, which separates artworks from everyday objects, is achieved through the tension between real and suggested shape. In the series of 2019 paintings (pp. 10–11) composed of nested rectangles, the same tension is played out on the level of composition, as the implied forms are so simple that we cannot help but look at the paintings as if their coloured areas were executed in a uniform and complete manner, while the frayed edges of the shapes and the exposed patches of raw linen simultaneously undo this perceived gestalt. However simple and serenely immobile these paintings appear, they are enlivened by contradictory forces, tending in two directions at once. We might find a related sense of internal division in the 2020 monochromes on found canvases included here (p. 23 & 48): painted over discarded works by unknown artists, the monochrome surface registers as an unresolved interaction between two subjects, the obscured image pressing forward as a shadowy modulation of the monochrome colour field.

Newman's recent gestural paintings often create this sense of internal conflict though the inclusion of crudely concealed pentimenti, traces of decisions made and then abandoned in the moment of painterly improvisation but retained on the finished surface. In the beautiful large painting predominantly in yellow included here (p. 53), a similar effect is created
simply by leaving a substantial area of primed canvas visible along the bottom edge, generating a tension between the suggested all-over composition of hovering forms and the reality in which this scheme has been prematurely abandoned. This patch of exposed canvas pushes the different layers visible on the surface into a tussle in which the abstract forms that occupy much of the canvas are forced into the position of illusionistic image in contrast to the cruder materiality of the exposed ground.

Do these large lyrical abstract paintings, which have occupied much of Newman's attention in the last few years, also possess that 'second-order' quality present in so much of her work? In writing about some of these works in 2018, struck by their relative formal complexity and the lushness of their surfaces, I suggested that they did not, and should rather be seen as the 'real thing'.12 I'm now inclined to question my judgment that these works represent something of a transformation or departure in Newman's practice. Though these paintings, mainly made up of large amorphous patches of colour either loosely abutting or hovering separately over luminous grounds of feathery brushstrokes or areas of blank canvas, and sometimes including collage elements, are bigger and bolder than anything else Newman has produced, the distance that separates them from what appear to be their models (the 1948–49 'multiform' works of Mark Rothko, for instance) strikes me as a key to understanding the impression they make.

In his essay 'In Defence of Abstract Expressionism', T.J. Clark fixes on the quality of 'vulgarity' as the defining quality of New York Abstract Expressionist painting, naming with this term the 'empty intensity' of the painters' enacted belief that their surfaces could embody both the infinity of the sublime and 'individualism in pure form'.13 Modernism, Clark reminds us, often derived its power from a 'range of characteristics that had previously come under the worst kind of pejorative description': ugliness, base materiality, the formless. The specifically Abstract Expressionist form of this 'lowness' is vulgarity.

The strident, swaggering vulgarity is precisely what is missing from Newman's paintings in related forms, and what, when compared to Abstract Expressionist models, gives them their sense of second-order remove. But what, then, is the particular form of Newman's 'lowness'? Perhaps we might best call it the unresolved. Not the 'unfinished', as this too strongly calls up the energetic sketchiness that appalled critics of the 19th century avant-garde, but the look of something hesitant, undecided. Just as the vulgarity of Abstract Expressionism dangerously courts what Clark calls 'ludicrousness',15 so Newman's embrace of the unresolved courts the inconsequential. To call these paintings gestural or lyrical, as I have, is in a sense quite wrong. They make no bold, bodily gestures nor do they sing of private emotions. Their forms and their scale might derive from mid-century abstraction, but looking at them one sometimes has the feeling that Newman has reconnected with what Carter Ratcliff calls the 'acausal blanks' that dot the late works of Manet and Degas: moments of painterliness that do no representational work yet also 'make no strong argument for abstraction', refusing any didactic 'recognition of the painting's independence' or forceful demonstration of the expressive qualities of the medium. Rather, they simply open 'a blank space in the texture of institutionally recognised meaning'.

While some might perceive here a similarity between Newman and an artist like Michael Krebber, the differences between the two strike me as more profound. Krebber's elegantly flaccid, pointedly lazy paintings can be interpreted as part of a dandyish institutional critique: the near-disappearing quality of Krebber's work is a strategy, John Kelsey has argued, designed 'to go to work on the wider system that makes painting what it is today'. Newman is also concerned with what 'makes art what it is and not something else' but her answer is fundamentally different.19 Rather than being institutional, it is a quality of the individual object, of the painting that somehow managed to live, the found object that possesses 'soul'.20 If her work insists on remaining unresolved, on presenting us with almost nothing, it is precisely to propose a heightened experience of what divides artworks from other objects, of what allows a material thing to be no longer simply an object among other objects. Unlike many works of contemporary art, Newman's are meant to be looked at, puzzled over, lived with. They reward this engagement through the subtlety of their effects, the nearly imperceptible movements with which they cross the line separating lifeless object from auratic presence.

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When they first emerged in the late 1980s, Newman's text paintings appeared to disrupt the modernist dimension of her work, opposing discourse to the mute image. In the early text painting, statements ('I believe in other possible worlds', 'The authority of art rests upon an invisible platform of knowledge and power') seem to introduce a transparent, confessional relationship between artist and reader opposed to the opaque connection between Newman's paintings and the viewer. However, as this body of work has developed over the years, it has become clear that there is no basic contrast between this aspect of the artist's production and the other forms to which she continually returns (such as the monochrome, abstract painting, and the use of found objects). The texts show an increasing tendency toward brevity and ambiguity (as well as, we might note, an increased use of other languages—French, Spanish, Latin), that makes the experience of looking at them as immediate and confounding as her other works. The mode of engagement the text paintings now propose is, like the rest of Newman's work, ultimately contemplative. When discussing these works with me, the artist reached for a phrase from Lacan, explaining the ideal text painting as 'oracular and enigmatic'.

The 2020 work on which is painted 'Las Pinturas Negras' (p. 21), the Spanish title for Goya's black paintings, exemplified this tendency of the recent text paintings. At first, the phrase, merely naming a major moment from European art history, appears almost aggressively banal, as blank as a monochrome surface or the mischievous gouaches depicting the Coca-Cola logo the artist produced in 2019. But, presented in isolation on its raw linen surface, the possible meanings of the phrase multiply—referring back to the dark paintings the artist has produced over the years and in this naming constituting them as a distinctive subset of her oeuvre, or giving a general title to a series of related works produced around the same time that contain equally dark phrases ('radix malorum', 'all against all'). Or perhaps it simply names itself: it is, after all, painted in black.

The early text paintings are painted in a sans- serif print that 'approximates a studious neatness',22 giving the paintings a faint whiff of childish cuteness. The words of 'Las Pinturas Negras' look as if they are the product of a drunken sign-painter who has neglected proper planning, resulting in unevenly sized letters squeezed into the closely packed lines that fill almost the entire surface. In both the early and current text paintings, the presentation of the text is insistently handmade without being notably expressive. While the texts themselves can have an enigmatic, even solemn quality, their presentation introduces a comic levity.

A 1990 text painting and a large wooden sculpture designed in 2007 both spell out the two letters of 'No', alerting us to the role of negation in Newman's work: the negation of representation, of finish, of resolution, of spectacle, of clarity, of the saturation of contemporary life in superficial and overly literal discourse.23 However, described in these terms, her works sounds serious, even academic, and this misses another fundamental aspect of Newman's work: the negation of seriousness. Newman's work refuses the solemnity that reigns in mainstream contemporary 'Biennale' art, the value of which is so often understood as inseparable from its critical commentary (hopefully 'radical') on a host of pressing contemporary issues.

Newman has described the sumptuous colour palette used in her paintings—an extensive range of lilacs and mauves, pale greens, apricots, pastel pinks, blacks and greys barely tinted with blues and purples, among many others—as a challenge to 'various prejudices about what is allowed in serious painting'.24 While certainly conscious, this negation of 'serious' or rationalised approaches to colour is primarily intuitive and felt. As she wrote to me once about Barnett Newman: 'primary colours, yuk!'25 Newman's approach to colour affirms and embraces taste in the most everyday sense of likes and dislikes almost impossible to analyse. In a long series of works stretching back to 2009 inspired by the German late- modernist Imi Knoebel, a large monochrome rectangle (a wonderful buttery yellow in the example included here (p. 64)) is bordered on all four sides by stripes of different colour. The schemes used in these studies in colour combination are not derived from any pre- existing program. Rather, they are discovered in the visual materials that impress Newman in everyday life: in posters, clothes, Picasso paintings, pictures in magazines. Here, as always in Newman's work, this 'no' to an impersonal seriousness is also a 'yes': an affirmation of the fleeting, ungraspable reality of taste, a dimension of subjectivity inaccessible to rationalisation.