

Elizabeth Newman
Is That a 'No'?

8 September - 21 November 2020

Exhibition
Labels

Elizabeth Newman: Is That a 'No'?

8 September - 21 November 2020

Melbourne-based Elizabeth Newman (b.1962) occupies a singular place in Australian contemporary art for her use of familiar materials presented in a minimalist way and inflected with an anti-authoritarian approach to art history.

This exhibition of nineteen works is drawn from three decades of practice, from 1989 to 2019, and includes early text paintings through to recent works of non-objective abstraction.

Newman's paintings, cut-fabric pieces, collages, sculptures and constructions engage with voids and frames, offering encounters between words and wordlessness.

Is that a 'No'? focuses on the way in which refusals, negations, disavowals and articulations of space function throughout Newman's art as a type of existential thinking.

A practicing Lacanian psychoanalyst since 1996, Newman's forms also convey a deep interest in linguistics, emotion, and mystery.

Elizabeth Newman: Is that a 'No'? is accompanied by a full colour exhibition catalogue including new scholarship by exhibition curator Naomi Evans.

Untitled (an extreme openness) 1989

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

In the essay accompanying the solo exhibition *Elizabeth Newman: work*, at City Gallery, Melbourne in 1990, which revealed Newman's 'text paintings' for the first time, Naomi Cass wrote:

What is alarming is their directness, friendliness and their joy. Newman is not a soothsayer in the manner of the avant garde. Therefore it is with suspicion and gossip that some address such unintimidating work.

Newman had been addressing the politics of abstraction in her easel paintings and drawings of gallery interiors since the mid 1980s, placing into perspective-conforming figurative works certain shapes and areas of almost no detail; some were rectangles filled with monochromatic black, others with tangled lines like non-communicative writing.

Untitled (an extreme openness) (1989) is one of two paintings in this exhibition from the 1990 exhibition. This painting quotes Rosalind Krauss writing about Joan Miró's use of text, as making a cut in the screen of the image. By referring to an opening, Newman inserts a space or a gap into a work largely preoccupied with surface.

Newman's texts often approximate a studious neatness, a schoolbook-type sans-serif, chosen to minimise personal calligraphic flair in contrast to the immediacy which characterises, for instance, Joseph Beuys's blackboard drawings inspired by Rudolf Steiner's pedagogical ideas.

Newman shares an interest in the social dimension of art where text-is-image, thought-is-form. Because the paintings are so carefully made, they are not direct, and perhaps this made-ness is the thing that inspires the intellect.

Untitled 1990 [No]

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Untitled (1990) [No], as with *Untitled* (1989) [an extreme openness], is one of the earliest works in this exhibition. Both were shown in the pivotal exhibition of 'text paintings' in Melbourne in 1990. Among the various declarations about authority, status, and labour, these two works become emblematic of the forming of negative space.

This painting represents the first instance in which Newman says 'No' explicitly in her art. It emerged from Newman's admiration for Yoko Ono's *Ceiling Painting* (1966), a small work reading 'YES' hung on the ceiling. It occurred to Newman that she too could paint a word — 'No'. By inserting this word into an abstract painting, Newman solidifies the refusals that were already part of her practice, and embraces the way in which text has an arbitrary relation to things in the world.

Untitled 2003

Jug, ceramic paint

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Untitled (2003) was first exhibited in 2005 at TCB, Melbourne in an exhibition titled *Lizzy Newman*. Purchased from the Australian chain store Freedom Furniture, the light blue earthenware jug is painted over with cloudy white ceramic paint. It recalls the austere metaphysical paintings of the Italian Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964), where each object is imbued with a sense of quiet contemplation.

Heidegger's meditations on a vase in his 1951 essay, 'Das Ding (The Thing)', extended Kant's ideas about humanity's apprehension of objects by proposing that a thing presences itself, that it 'things' as a kind of verb of being, where the void is inherent to its structure.

Heidegger explains that the essential 'thingness' of the vessel '...does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds.' Additionally, Lacan had taken up Heidegger's notion when it came to his notion of 'lack' as a fundamental experience not only of being and of subjectivity, but also of desire. From this point on, the void and negative space in Newman's practice are used deliberately, as a kind of short-hand to this complex idea; she creates languages or clusters of knowledge in the way that Colette Soler discovers 'lexical constellations' in the work of Lacan.

Untitled 2004

Synthetic rug underlay

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

In 2004 at CLUBSproject Inc. in Melbourne, Newman first presented an exhibition that featured an important development in her practice, extending her use of textiles from previous years, which had included wearables such as T-shirts and skirts, and colour block wall hangings made of blankets. While fabrics of various colours were still placed next to each other, and joined by sewing in some cases, Newman here brought together examples of fabrics that she had selected for their aesthetic attributes, or a kind of soulful quality.

Newman writes of these works:

My practice consisted in making a cut in the material. I think of this cutting as a writing or a drawing, and therefore as an articulation of a lack that doesn't exist until after it is articulated. This is like Heidegger's example of the vase that articulates a void only after the vase exists: the vase then becomes a signifier of inside and outside, of matter and nothingness.

Untitled (2004) is a piece of grey carpet underlay with four cuts that reveal a doorway or window shaped space. The material, which is usually an invisible substrate is hung up and allowed to behave according to gravity.

Untitled 2006 from 'You're still making history that no-one even knew how to'

Wool felt

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Untitled (2006) is made from felted wool laid directly on the floor, from which three rectangles are excised. It was included as part of an installation in the exhibition *Imagine . . . the creativity shaping our culture*, at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, curated by Zara Stanhope.

The title of the installation was drawn from a sentence in a letter written to Newman by her friend Geoff Lowe, which she imagined the viewer would find also encouraging. *Untitled* has the scale of a domestic 'rug', though it is an object that should be walked around, not on. Newman inscribes negative spaces within its interior, and the field of wool against the floor can then be read as a blank page or letter, from which text has been redacted.

Is that a 'No'? 2007/11, remade 2020

Pine ply, timber

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

The exhibition *Is that a 'No'?* draws its title from a large two-piece plywood sculpture, conceived in 2007 and first realised in 2011 for the exhibition *Catching Trucks*, curated by Amita Kirpalani at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne. In this 2020 iteration the work has been fabricated as it was originally drawn to make economic use of standard sized, mass-produced plywood sheeting over a wood skeleton. Both pieces represent the post and lintel structure, one of the earliest forms of engineering, for example seen in the physically bulky, massive form of Stonehenge.

In the writings of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the symbol Π is used in his mathemes to denote 'the real phallus' (possibly from the mathematical symbol for 'intersection') while the second structure \square provides for architectural surrounds to read depending on a person's position. Through giving a title to this work, Newman implicates the structures in language. It now admits conjecture and doubt, and even an element of humour.

Is that a 'No'? elevates what could be a throw-away line into a towering form. It becomes one of the most powerful expressions by Newman in terms of scale and materiality, extending her practice of selecting the smallest utterance or fragment and attributing value to it, thereby magnifying and memorialising it. Sublimation — an idea taken from Lacanian psychoanalysis — works in this way too. In terms borrowed from Belgian psychologist Paul Verhaeghe: 'sublimation: to choose to elevate nothing into something and to enjoy this'.

Big Feeling 2009

Oil and fabric on linen

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Textiles are incorporated into an important group of Newman's works from the later 2000s, though collaging techniques had been used since in the 1990s.

Newman's big fabrics as ready-made colour blocks work in a kind of agreement with paintings that acknowledge Rosalind Krauss's notion of 'The Expanded Field', though strips and irregular rectangles are also tried out against canvas fields.

Big Feeling (2009) is one of Newman's largest painting-collages. The pasting on top of, or covering over, can be read in anthropomorphic ways, like adhesive strips over wounds. The 'big feeling' is such precisely because it is not reduced to a nameable state. Newman also conceives of collage as a kind of cut, because it is a blocking out, a covering or removing from view.

1988 2010, remade 2020

Digital print on paper (original envelope lost), timber

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

A group of works in this exhibition explore the act of 'covering over', or 'concealing'. This is extended with the inclusion of a small work *1988 (2010)*, an unsealed envelope labelled in pencil with the word 'Derrida' positioned upside down. Given that Newman graduated from art school in 1984, one could surmise that the envelope might contain at least a portion of notes on the French philosopher Jacques Derrida synonymous with his theories of literary deconstruction that were so influential in post-conceptual art practice.

The package is left tantalisingly unsealed. In the way that plywood or composite board reveals inside and outside as contiguous, the tree trunk — showing bark exterior and interior growth rings as another surface — makes manifest the idea that we operate in a world of appearances.

Immaterial space isn't necessarily ethically superior (I) and (II) 2012

Four colour offset print on 350gsm paper, each an ed. of 25 (+10 press proofs), signed and numbered by the artist

Private collection

A series of print works from 2012 deploy images of gallery interiors, interrupting their image fields with other photographs. In the finished prints, additions and deletions are tensely related. Newman explains:

It's about cutting out, blocking the thing I don't like. Putting the unrepresentable into an image that is already representable. So adding something real as opposed to the symbolic. ... It's a bit like cutting and pasting what I want, and just kind of adding that.

Immaterial space isn't necessarily ethically superior (2012) (numbered 1 and 2) are colour lithographs printed by Warren Taylor from collages by Newman, which were destroyed in the printing process. These images of art gallery spaces, taken from art magazine pages, are a form of economy or exchange that Newman transposes back to the handmade, with the literal cut and paste, through to expert printmaking, and then once again to abstraction and reproducibility through lithograph translation.

With the covering over of part of a gallery space, Newman usurps and displaces, while never erasing the presence of something unseen, and unwanted.

Untitled 2012

Untitled 2012

Each sheet: pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Newman's two small graphite drawings from 2012, composed in rectangular window-like frames exemplify contradictory approaches to the void.

In the first, a perimeter is inscribed within the edges of the paper sheet, then lines are drawn horizontally within the rectangle, as if it were a ruled notepad waiting for the not-yet written.

The second work fills in a warped rectangle with irregular lines of dense shading, which builds up a dark field of undulating lines.

The writing in this instance is not readable as such, but the two taken together form a kind of empty and full pair of 'pictureless' works, both something and no-thing.

To love is to... 2012

Found metal clothes rack

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

To love is to ... (2012) consists of a metal clothes rack found on a Melbourne roadside. The coat rack is in fair condition, and is banal and unextraordinary. However as Newman applies the Duchampian strategy of naming the ready-made, and designating it art, it becomes linked to the Lacanian notions of lack and desire, incorporated in Newman's own motif of the empty frame.

The truncated sentence in the title suggests an old adage, and the deletion of its punchline or resolution keeps the options open. The phrase is taken from Lacan who talks about love or desire in terms of lack, 'To love is to give what one lacks'. As Rex Butler writes in 'Elizabeth Newman: Staging Desire', the aim of analysis to 'introduce a certain lack in things, somebody who says no. It is to make us desire again, and indeed make us desire something we cannot have.' Butler describes how art also has this desire-inducing capacity' and a 'deictic capacity' to put things on stage, and that Newman's art does this – '...it at once causes us to desire and stages that desire'.

No 2015

Oil on cotton duck

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

The title of this work, when compared with the decisively 'Untitled' red painting by Newman is striking. Perhaps we should ask 'Why the difference?'

The difference, in part, lies in the declarative content, in which language becomes a 'frock coat', as the French writer Georges Bataille would say, over an abstract image.

With roiling colour that is evocative of the inchoate, the form of the painting might be read as an expression of intuitive, emotional or psychological states. The 'No' of the title, however, might more usefully be read as a parallel to the wordless picture — by saying 'no' you can be permitted to avoid subjects that are unutterable, or unrepresentable.

Untitled 2016

Oil and tape on linen

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Untitled (2016) presents the most recent example of Newman using a stated negation or disavowal in her work. *Untitled* was first shown in Newman's solo exhibition *The effect that is propagated is not from the communication of speech but from the displacement of discourse*, held in 2016 at Neon Parc, Melbourne. It is an example of what Francis Plagne calls the 'multi-form' paintings, given that they combine motifs of abstraction and text.

The unfinished sentence 'ceci n'est pas', occupies the lower third of the composition, as it did in Belgian Surrealist René Magritte's *La Trahison des images (Treachery of Images)* (1929), which stated 'This is not a pipe', underneath a painted representation of a pipe.

Interested in the relationships between the discipline of semiotics and pictorial representation, Magritte drew upon the ideas of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), to explore the arbitrariness of the relationship of words to things. This freeing of images from words served Magritte's search for mystery in art, and Newman here emphasises how an awareness of the method of agreement in language can assist us to more knowingly link, and purposefully dissociate, meaning.

Something found 2017

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Arrangements of floating and untethered shapes play within surfaces or suspensions to the point at which the painting becomes *Something Found* (2017). Created after Newman's Paris residency, this painting explores transitions of whites, temperatures of grey, or small zones of colour floating in non-schematised canvases, a no-place of no-things.

Untitled 2017

Oil on linen

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Following her 2016 Australia Council Cité Internationale des Arts residency in Paris, Newman returned to using oil on canvas, and has experimented with some of her most 'minimal', 'close to nothing', paintings to date.

The primary structures of frame and plane are explored in *Untitled* (2017), where the facing surface of the canvas is painted in monochromatic grey on grey. The paint holds gestures and variations in thicknesses and tones, while the crimson edge reveals the presence of an effaced underpainting, highlighting the importance of the edge, and treating both equivalently.

With *Something Found* (2017) also presented in this exhibition, Newman continues to explore how to edge up to a particular moment in a work, where it can qualify or be recognised as art.

What makes this poem beautiful? 2017

Gouache and watercolour on paper

Private collection

What makes this poem beautiful? (2017) asks an open-ended question that speculates on how beauty is formulated in a specific work of art. As in other works, Newman quotes directly from the work of another artist, extending her forms of homage, as well as demonstrating her interest in what constitutes originality.

The 'beauty' question is really one about affect, and the conventional schism between the work of art and its reception. Here Newman quotes from Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow* (2002), where the protagonist's lover asks this question.

The work was first shown at Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, in the solo exhibition *So many lights and so much darkness*. Newman has featured this text in several works on paper, and this example includes a colour palette she frequently uses — red, emerald, gold, tangerine, and mid grey — suggestive of a strain of German non-objective abstraction (Imi Knoebel, Blinky Palermo, and Günther Förg, as examples).

Untitled 2019

Oil on linen

Courtesy of the artist, Neon Parc, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Untitled (2019) is the most recent work in the exhibition, first shown at Neon Parc, Melbourne in 2019. Newman's painting transforms the outer perimeter of the composition into a frame, its interior filled with rows of looping lines of scribble, like a language, or a text that might have been obscured.

Newman writes:

Those rectangles are like the number 1. A first mark. A kind of mythical moment of entry into being. The first form of representation.

That makes the more scribbly, painterly marks representations of the inchoate/as yet unformed subject.

The little black painting that is the rectangle with the scribbles inside it is like a comic version of the human subject (me.) The 'marks of being' corralled into an acceptable structure or format...

In 2019, Newman explained:

I still say 'No' to a lot of things. So the collages, where there's a thing covering up something is like an 'I don't want to see what's under there'. Also the fact of the 'Untitled' and just the rectangle – it's a refusal of a sort isn't it, because I'm refusing to say something, and the work is about silence rather than chatter. So it kind of is a 'No'.