So many lights and so much darkness.

These paintings and others that Elizabeth Newman has made in the last couple of years can be distinguished from much of what she has produced since the mid-1980s in a way that is both simple and intangible: they are the real thing. Newman's body of work has mainly occupied a position at one remove from the traditions of modernist abstract painting to which it has seemed to belong. Whether quite literally through making paintings that depict other paintings, or more subtly through an insistently modest, even self-deprecating, presentation, much of Newman's work has appeared to question abstract painting's continuing ability to embody the profound ideals of many of its great modernist practitioners.

Although they retain her characteristically un-virtuosic mark, the paintings on display here, in their generous size and at times lush surfaces, are absent of any sign that they should be viewed as second order, as paintings about paintings; they simply are abstract paintings. In this, they are resistant to certain forms of discourse and interpretation. This is most true of the compositions 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, which we might call 'multiform', to bring out the similarity that exists between them and certain 1948-49 works by Mark Rothko.

The monochrome, a form in which Newman has worked throughout her career, is comparatively easier to integrate into the conceptually-grounded, non-aesthetic terms that have defined art criticism since the postmodern period. Precisely because it offers so little to the eye yet insistently occupies the position of the most broadly culturally sanctioned form of art (easel painting), the monochrome can be easier to integrate into our discourse and correspondingly harder to see. It slips easily from the object itself into an idea: of reduction, simplicity, even, somewhat paradoxically, the idea of a resistance to ideas. It is in danger of being received as a gesture rather than the object of an aesthetic experience.

This is why, perhaps counter-intuitively, the 'multiform' paintings displayed here are in some sense more 'difficult' than Newman's monochromes. With neither any cue that they should be read as ironic metapainting nor with the provocative quality of the monochromes, they belong to an order of experience quite foreign to much of our discourse on contemporary art. What, indeed, can we say about such paintings and the experiences, both of the artist and the viewer, that belong to them? Many of the artists of the Abstract Expressionist period whom Newman admires—quite unlike their voluble European predecessors, who had been happy to offer extended metaphysical, religious, or social-political interpretations of their own work (think of Kandinsky, Malevich, or Mondrian)—were loath to explain their work, to translate it into discourse. The poet John Ashbery concisely expressed a belief that was probably shared by many of his painter contemporaries: 'In fact, the worse your art is the easier it is to talk about it'.

One thing these artists did talk about, when asked about it by sympathetic interviewers, was starting and stopping. In the absence of a subject to represent and even of the classical compositional principles that these artists often derided their European forerunners for still abiding by, how to begin a work and how to determine when it was finished? Beginning a work was often described as an activity undertaken with no fixed goal in mind but requiring a sort of heightened mental preparedness. Sometimes special techniques were needed to get things started and defeat the blankness of the canvas, like Willem de Kooning's habit of beginning by copying forms from earlier pieces of his own. The subject of when to stop occasioned attempts to describe the feeling of 'formal rightness' that announced a work was complete. John Chamberlain, known for his sculptures made from twisted and welded fragments of cars, called the desirable outcome 'fit', stressing its intuitive quality. De Kooning was more laconic, implying that at a certain point he simply gave up on his paintings: 'Oh I really…I just stop, you know'. These faltering responses are enlightening in their own way, as they show us that these artists saw the creative process as an activity, in Richard Shiff's words, with 'no standard to guide it' (or at least that they *wanted* it to be like that).

Within the discursive frameworks that define progressive 'critical' art practice, this oddly indescribable model of art-making tends to appear merely subjective, a retreat from the exigencies of the broader social world. For Newman, however, the subjective dimension of her work is bound up with what is most vital within it, with what makes it possible for the experience of an artwork to be an encounter that interrupts the everyday. To quote from a recent text by the artist: 'Art is not an object that serves the mainstream discourse (Art with a capital A) but the product of a transformation that takes place within the subject. This means that it is unique and idiosyncratic and cannot be known beforehand'. Without a calculative goal in mind and without a pre-existing standard to aspire to, the artist makes real decisions, real because of each of them could have been made otherwise. Looking at these paintings, we see the result of decisions made intuitively, in the moment of painterly improvisation. (This quality announces itself particularly in Newman's occasional use of materials other than paint—pencil, a piece of masking tape—which strike us as the result of a search for some ad hoc way to achieve a desirable resolution of the image).

Looking at the paintings in this light can help us to keep alive the experimentation and uncertainty inherent in their making. They appear to us as both resolved formal unities and composites of individual decisions, each of which can be imagined otherwise; they barely achieve the quality of finish yet nonetheless possess this quality definitively. And this appears to be what Newman aims at, what compels her at a certain moment to stop. She wants to invest her objects with aura, that sense of infinite yet intangible distance from quotidian objects that defines the traditional work of art. But Newman wants, it seems, to bring her work only barely over the threshold of the achievement of this quality. The unfinished edges and often scrappy quality of her marks can be understood through this desire to achieve an auratic sense of presence for the work without crossing the line beyond which we experience only the finished form, not the insistent presence of its facture. Perhaps somewhat impossibly, she wants her work to strike us not merely as an instance of a type (abstract painting) but as one term within a subjective encounter beyond discourse: the almost nothing that is just enough.

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