

Press Release

WHAT ARE WE GONNA PAINT?

Roberto Coda Zabetta, N. Dash, Nick Goss, Ian Kiaer, Jurgen Ots,
Jackie Saccoccio, Gedi Sibony, Lucy Stein, Rezi van Lankveld

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The title of this show is inspired by a famous interview with the American painter Barnett Newman (1905–1970). The relevance of this question resides today, in my opinion, in the following central issues:

First of all, every work of art is a signifier that takes shape/body and can be explained through knowledge. Yet, at the same-time, every work of art embodies something unknown which does not need to be explained and can only be experienced in first person. If we try to explain everything we just “remove ourselves from the experience”.

Secondly, a work of art is not a window leading somewhere else; it does not bring us to conclusions. In a work of art the beginning and the end are present in one.

Lastly, the metaphor used by Barnett Newman to describe this experience is the same as when we meet someone for the first time: when the entire personality of a person enters into contact with that of someone else. What takes place is almost a metaphysical event. It is a total and immediate reaction, which does not need to analyse details of the other’s personality in order to happen.

This does not imply the need for a naïve approach to contemporary art and painting. They have to be seen in relation to the development of art history as much as in their response to conceptual art, the developments of modern technology and the constant visual bombardment of contemporary society. Yet the capacity to recognize the creative-act while looking at an art work is something that develops in a binary relationship between public and art work. The phenomenon that Newman precisely describes is how questioning what an art work represents is still the primary point of access to a painting today.

The extraordinary creative energy that a painting manifests in some ways speaks directly to the viewers. Art works, which are in themselves mute objects, can express much more than words can truly reveal. This is linked to how all the works in the show, even if literally not paintings, seem to question the nature of painting itself.

This show is the first in a series of investigations on the state of contemporary painting. It searches in diverse practices for ways in which painting can still activate reactions and emotions today. It is for all above reasons that the subtitle and the challenge posed by the show can be summarized in a second question: “How Are We Gonna Look?”

Several themes are common in the works. Some pieces explore concepts of the human body and its frailties, or the importance of human touch in the creative process. Others challenge the conformity and standardization that may be imposed by government, religious ritual, or mass culture. Still others focus on subtle details/nuances articulating a critique on advertising, commodity culture, consumption, and mass production.

All of them originate in the precarious balance between serious consciousness of painting as conceptual practice and the never-ending desire to experiment with materials in the process of creating an art work. This magical equilibrium will be the chore of our collective conversations on contemporary painting.

Paola Clerico / art@work