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Never Trust a Laura Newman Vertical

by Amy Sillman

This essay, first posted at artcritical September 2010 in conjunction with a show in Nova Scotia, is A TOPICAL PICK FROM THE ARCHIVES in recognition of Laura Newman: Recent Paintings at Jen Bekman Gallery, 6 Spring Street, between Bowery and Elizabeth, through October 14th.

A version of this essay appeared in the catalog for the July 2010 exhibition, Laura Newman: Glass Walls and Billboards at the Anna Leonowens Gallery, The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.



Laura Newman, *Billboard II*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 22 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the Artist

Never trust a Laura Newman vertical. It might be the edge of a house, the tilt of a glass plane, or a door handle; it might indicate a painting within a painting, or a skeletal tree trunk that grew in from somewhere, and, oh, by the way, it also doubles as the cord of a wrecking ball *and* a stray power line. Newman's verticals and orthogonals function like unreliable narrators: they fool the eye and throw basic spatial frameworks into question. In her work, closeness looks far away, flat planes might be cut-outs, transparent windows open out to nothingness, clouds act as people, wisps of breeze arise from nowhere, and whole pictures are tilted off-kilter by triangular shims lurking in eccentric corners.

Technically speaking, *the parallax view* is the apparent displacement or difference in the position of an object when it is viewed along the two different lines of sight. Newman pictures the world as a correspondingly parallax place. Newman never settles for a monocular kind of vision or a singular kind of meaning. If you scan your eye down any of her sightlines, you will find recurrent jump cuts and *double entendres* all along the way. Her images are everyday ones, portrayed in a manner of seeming benevolence or almost cartoonish serenity – houses, walls, fences, windows, horizons – but they are rendered with intentional spatial implausibility and absurdity. This is a world seen from the mind's eyes, and I say the mind's "eyes," plural, on purpose, to propose the metaphoric parallax of Newman's paintings, with their purposefully displaced or different way of being.

Take, for example, the painting *Winter Scene* (2009). Here we are confronted with a large empty picture plane, either a painting on an easel or an in-your-face billboard. Fair enough: a picture within a picture. But the flat image that nearly fills the painting is shifted over, not centered, leaving approximately 20% of the left side of the painting as a rather eccentric vertical column of "background." The vertical spine that lies between the figure and its "background" is therefore the most important spatial axis in the painting, but in place of a simple vertical line drawn along this border, Newman has sketched a stuttering line with stops and starts, and that complicate, rather than clarify, what would ordinarily be a simple binary space. The ensuing complications of *here vs. there* make for a kind of pictorial sight gag. Newman's paintings are rife with such slapstick spaces and objects, where you might literally bump into a glass door or try to walk through a wall. As unreliable as the space itself is the wooden-looking structure that holds the billboard, which seems to have been built by a carpenter as illogical as the space she lives in. This billboard appears to be made from generic 2x4s, but they are attached

asymmetrically, one from behind and the other from the front. And, by the way, what time of day is it? The sun, as capricious as the things it shines on, illuminates some of the surfaces of the 2x4s and not others, while the rest of the painting lives on in a placidly motionless white light.

The picture (or billboard) in *Winter Scene* has four colors that are arranged in a horizontally descending sequence that reads like a list: leaf green, maritime blue, baby blue, bright red. These colors seem almost indifferent to each other; they do not mingle into each other or interact precisely, but settle tolerantly near each other, each color with its own slightly different temperament or action, by turns notched, extended, billowing, and reclining. Meanwhile, the uncertain boundary of these color-forms is the vertical strip on the left side of the billboard, along which different things happen to different colors: mossy green lies adjacent to leafy green, two blues transmogrify into two different blues, and red comes to a concrete end.



Laura Newman, *Winter Scene*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 64 x 52 inches. Courtesy of the Artist

If one considers the notion of the parallax view as a function of this work, one quickly arrives at the flipside of the parallax coin: the blind spot. Sure enough, though *seeing* is key to Newman's work, at its core is the implication of a psychic blind spot. The emphasis on sight, through the many vistas, vanishing points and spatial geometries, implies that there must be some witness, some beholder, some subject at the heart of the action, a gaze that must proceed from SOMEWHERE. But this spot goes undescribed, and is located only at a vortex of blindness. There is at the center of Newman's work a sense of silence, of immobility or non-inflection, as though the psychic subject of her paintings is a gaze from a void. It is this strangely voided subjectivity in the work that gives Newman's paintings their feeling of serene, almost majestic, anxiety. The qualities of emptiness and flatness seem to stand for seeing itself, and a subject who has, to a certain extent, disappeared. This self is therefore equivalent to the mind's eye(s): paradoxical, interior.

Self as disappearance is a contradictory effect in a kind of painting with such strong ties to subjectivity and embodiment as Newman's. Her work owes much to a tradition of muscular painterly gestures and the trial-and-error procedures of expressionism. But as Newman's work often functions through its dualities – its sets of opposing images, like double windows or walls, twin bands of color, or twin sets of cloud formations – by extension, this is not a simplistic kind of expressionism. The overarching tension in her paintings is located in a dynamic opposition of presence vs. void, seeing vs. feeling. It is as though her paintings describe a place between forces or events, like a big optical hug, where two arms come to hug you and yet never quite cross over each other to exert any physical pressure or weight. A Lacanian would have a field day with this voided location; a Freudian would go to town with these dynamics of parent and child; a Zen monk would love the underlying implication of emptiness; a slapstick director would go crazy for the way everything is on the verge of falling apart. Newman is a little bit of all of these.