

# Art

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Sturtevant

Interviewed by Coline Milliard

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Ad Men

Anna Dezeuze

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Designart

Alex Coles

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Afro Modern

Jonathan Harris

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12 BERKELEY STREET  
LONDON W1J 8DT  
T +44 (0) 20 7491 0100  
F +44 (0) 20 7491 0200  
INFO@SIMONLEEGALLERY.COM

SIMON LEE GALLERY LTD  
REGISTERED IN ENGLAND 4316341  
GB 788 061 692

personal and contingent. In many ways the most interesting piece in the exhibition was, rather counter-intuitively, the one that I initially liked the least. In *The Maggie Index*, 2010, singer-songwriter Roy Harper delivers a series of monologues to camera about his work and philosophy, covering a free-wheeling range of topics that spans counter-culture lifestyles, religion, environmentalism, politics and ornithology. I found his tone gratingly self-righteous and his supposedly 'outsider', anti-establishment statements usually no more radical than many an opinion piece in the *Guardian*. However, after the overriding emphasis on moral relativism that pervaded the preceding works, it was a refreshing counterpoint to present a secularist who, nevertheless, still passionately believes in the importance of belief. ■

PRYLE BEHRMAN is a critic and curator.

■ **Bernard Frize: Red, Yellow and Blue**

Simon Lee London 10 February to 24 March

Who's afraid of Barnett Newman? Plenty are, it seems; his series of four paintings from the late 1960s, 'Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue', have been attacked – physically – on several occasions, from a simple battering with museum furniture to one rather involved reworking that saw a creative use of collage. Even the restoration work following a knife attack led to its own high-profile court case. Bernard Frize, however, is not afraid, and has formulated a response to Newman's famously unforgiving artworks with his own set of four paintings: *Rely*, *Pox*, *Ra'im* and *Tara*, the central pieces in this exhibition, all from 2010 and each measuring 2.4m by 2.1m. They consist of a series of vertical and horizontal strokes produced with a wide brush – about the size of a sweeping brush. The portrait-format canvases fit six strokes horizontally, five vertically. Like Newman's series, these paintings use only red, yellow and blue paint. However, unlike Newman's, these are not only red, yellow and blue paintings; the strokes have been applied on top of each other while the paint was wet, so the cleanly loaded brushes quickly pick up and mix the colours into smears, smudges and streaks that initially revel in an expanding palette but ultimately tend towards brown.

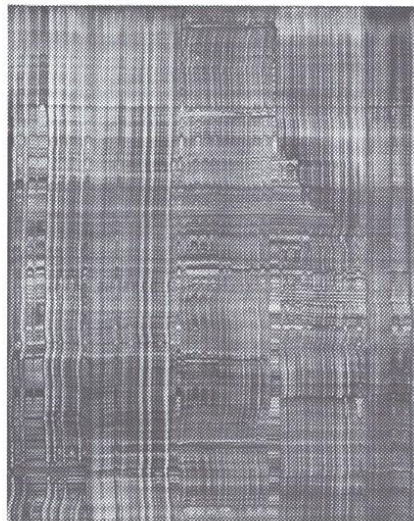
The resulting imagery bears an inevitable resemblance to Gerhard Richter's well-known squeegee paintings, but Frize's works are less about the creative destruction of an existing image, like Richter's, and more about the development of imagery through process. Since the 1970s Frize has focused on rules for producing paintings, even relating early works – which involved letting cans of paint dry and sliding the circular skins from the surface of the paint onto canvas – to the stages involved in developing images through darkroom photography. Over time this interest has evolved into rule-based painting techniques that involve numerous participants working brushes across the canvas simultaneously, which is what has taken place here: a small team have worked together to create single, full-length wipes across the canvas so, rather than the lone performer of mid-1960s action painting, this is the work of a choreographed troupe. The results are minimal in figurative or compositional structures, but complex in form and colour. The rigid high modernism of Newman's shallow colour fields is scrambled through a collective performance, where every wobble and dip remains as evidence of the human hand and the resultant colours speak of chemical processes of organic compound combination rather than the mechanical rules of

abstracted modernist systems or the purity of Newman's archaic spiritualism.

There are six other, smaller works in the show, all from 2009. Four are polka-dotted with fringed circular brush marks that look like jelly fish or artichoke hearts. Either way, they have an organic quality emphasised by the dull magenta colour that hints at the dyes used to mark cells on microscope slides. Another work has a blood red backdrop scattered with rectangular blocks that give away the dimensions of the brush, while the last work, which is actually the first in the exhibition, shows a group of spirals apparently stacked up, with gravity being both emphasised by the arrangement and undercut by the obvious weightlessness of the shapes. Each of these is produced with Frize's usual materials. The canvases are painted white then coated with clear resin, which ensures that when the acrylic paint is applied it retains fluidity as it pours, slips and spreads across the smooth, glass-hard sheen. But the finish is not gloss; the materials leave a matt surface, dulling the Pop Art potential into something restrained, the candy colours muted like a lollipop left exposed to sea air. While Frize's interests and techniques have not shifted greatly over the decades, this material and performative inventiveness within a narrow spectrum ensures that his works rarely feel like mere art fair confections.

These new paintings are, to some degree, exercises in how simple starting conditions can produce complex results. The spiral is a particularly suitable motif: simple curved lines growing progressively larger and more chaotic. The question raised, though, is whether this progression is entropic or chaotic. Is it a tendency towards dissolution and homogeneity or richness and complexity? It feels like both; the initial brush marks flower into all sorts of rich colours, but as the strokes repeat they mix into dowdy earth tones, which suggests that, if the works relate to natural processes, then it is the bell-curve energy of life cycles that they speak of rather than the vastness of physics itself. This, then, is Frize's counterplay to Newman's stridency. Against universalism is presented the temporary agency of the organism, portrayed, in Frize's vocabulary, just at the moment it wilts. ■

DAVID BARRETT is associate editor of *Art Monthly*.



Bernard Frize  
*Pox* 2010