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Margaret Neumann: What Lies Between

Michael Paglia / Feb 13, 2019



What Lies Between is the largest and most significant exhibition of the nearly 50-year painting career of Denver artist Margaret Neumann, who is represented by Rule Gallery. Put together by independent curator Simon Zalkind, the survey fills the enormous main exhibition space at RedLine. Looking back over the several decades' worth of Neumann paintings Zalkind brought together for *What Lies Between*, it was remarkable to notice how fresh and new everything appeared, maybe more so now than ever before.

To say that Neumann's oeuvre is idiosyncratic is almost an understatement. Regardless of the whims of fashion, Neumann has relentlessly followed a singular path of her own forging. And for the most part, as she went along, she was out of step with the predominating trends of her time, aside from the undeniable affinity her work has with 1980s Neo-Expressionism. The thing is, Neumann got there in the 1960s.

It was at that time that Neumann fell in with a group of artists who were students (which is what she was) or faculty at the University of Colorado in Boulder. These artists would go on to change the face of contemporary art in Colorado, and beyond, for decades afterward. The group included hyperrealist sculptor John De Andrea, pattern-painter and Drop City co-founder Clark Richert, ceramicist Betty Woodman, and dozens more. Even in this stylistically diverse collective, Neumann's approach was really out there.

What Lies Between reveals that Neumann's first mature phase appeared in the late 1970s and early '80s with paintings such as "Puppet Master." Her depiction of the female puppet is pointedly crude, looking back to her earlier work, but the silhouettes of the two men rising on the left, in brushy black against a deep red ground, are crisply delineated at the edges, which anticipates where Neumann was to go in the later paintings. A prime example of that

later work would be the striking “Pink Swimmer” (2003), painted just over a decade ago. Basically, the composition is a pair of vertically stacked color fields, pink over orange, divided by a thin stripe of dark yellow. The color fields have been heavily worked with brush-marks, drips and smears, but have been de-emphasized by their complete transformation into mere backgrounds through the introduction of that black silhouette. The shadow figure suggests a drowning man, and floating above, a sketchy outline of his face.

The figures and other representational elements in a Neumann painting define themselves through the implicit (and often disturbing) narrative they suggest—a woman manipulated by men, a man drowning—and that dark quality becomes the

predominant characteristic of each work. This sense of foreboding is also reinforced by Neumann’s moody deep palettes, allowing these narratives to speak to a sense of alienation, despair, or danger. Even though the figurative depictions are typically pared down, as in “Pink Swimmer,” Neumann employs this simplification to push the imagery to the forefront, allowing it to decisively overtake the more abundant abstract content of her paintings. And it is Neumann’s embrace of abstract techniques resulting in her rough and active surfaces that was the biggest revelation of the show, considering she’s been known for decades as a figurative artist.

“Margaret Neumann: What Lies Between,”
Nov.10 - Jan. 6, 2019 at RedLine, 2350 Arapahoe St.
redlineart.org.

Margaret Neumann’s *Pink Swimmer*, 2003 (Provided by Rule Gallery)

