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Essays by Amy Sillman and John Yau

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

Anna Leonowens Gallery

The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University

Halifax, Nova Scotia, July 2010



Winter Scene
2009
oil on canvas
64 x 52"

NEVER TRUST A LAURA NEWMAN VERTICAL

Amy Sillman

It might be the edge of a house, the tilt of a glass plane, *or* a door handle; it might be a painting within a painting or it might be a stray power line that is also a skeletal tree trunk that grew in from somewhere, as well as the cord of a wrecking ball. If you scan your eye along any of Newman's verticals or orthogonals, you find continual jump cuts and *double entendres* along the way, disrupting the seeming serenity of Newman's flattish forms and individuated colors. Unreliable narrators abound in her paintings: closeness that is far away, flat planes that might be cut-outs, transparent windows that open out to nothingness, clouds that act as people, wisps of breeze that arise from nowhere. Whole pictures are tilted off-kilter by triangular shims. Newman's work is built out of such displacements, constructed along sightlines that emanate from the mind's eyes and that describe a metaphoric parallax view.

Take, for example, the painting "Winter Scene" from 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 itself is shifted over, not centered, leaving approximately 20% of the left side of the painting as a vertical column of "background." The vertical seam that lies between figure and ground forms the most important spatial axis in the painting, but its seemingly simple binary logic of here vs. there is complicated, rather than clarified, by a perceptual gamesmanship that begins with a vertical line drawn in a stuttering sequence of stops and starts. Newman is an absurdist who deploys pictorial sight gags along with her tricky sightlines, and the ensuing displacements and replacements make for a near-slapstick situation of comic fallibility.

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. It appears to be made of generic 2x4s, but they are attached asymmetrically, one from behind and the other from the front. And 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.

On the surface of the picture (or billboard) in "Winter Scene" are four colors, horizontally arranged in a 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 doing different things and having slightly differ-

ent temperaments, respectively notched, extending lengthwise, billowing slightly, and laying on the ground. Meanwhile, the uncertain boundary of these color-forms is that 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.

Along with the notion of the parallax view comes the notion of the blind spot, and sure enough, at the core of Newman's work is the paradoxical implication of a psychic blind spot. *Seeing* is literally outlined in her work through its many sightlines, vanishing points and vistas, and spatial geometrics. By implication 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, as though located at a vortex of blindness. There is a feeling of silence, immobility, non-inflection, as though the psychic subject of her paintings is a gaze from a void. It is this strangely voided subjectivity in Newman's work that gives her paintings a feeling of serene, almost majestic, anxiety. The qualities of silence, emptiness and flatness seem to stand for seeing itself, and a subject who is nothing more or less than the mind's eye(s). Self as disappearance-- this is a paradoxical 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 just as Newman's work often functions through a dual set of opposing images, like double windows or walls, twin bands of color, or twin sets of

cloud formations, in the same way, the overarching tension in her work is the dynamic opposition of presence vs. void, seeing vs. feeling. It is as though her paintings describe a place located 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.

Glass Wall
2009
oil on canvas
44 x 60"



GEOMETRY AND COLOR

JohnYau

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Pavilion
2009
oil on canvas
44 x 60"



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ARTIST STATEMENT

Laura Newman

Newman's interest in real-life planes, such as glass walls and billboards, is predicated on her determination to get at that part of our experience that is the hardest to express—the potential impact of air, light and color on our exterior lives and our interior weather, the outside and inside of who we are.

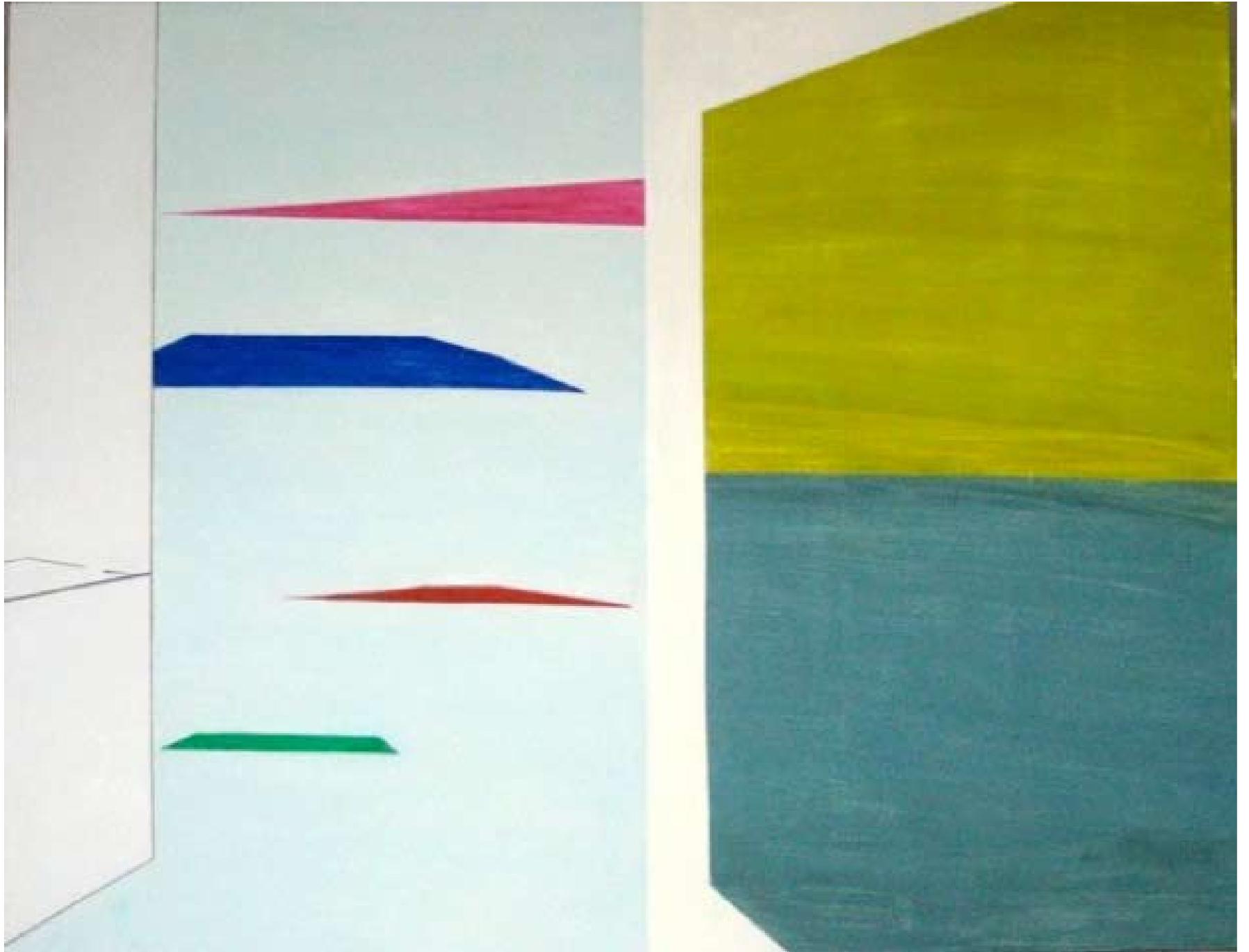
Newman's palette runs the gamut from jarring, high-keyed, hothouse colours to delicate, pale densities, from saturated and hard to muted and soft. Each painting conveys both the particularities of light as well as a hard-to-name state of feeling. The light sources range from the artificial to the natural, with the artist showing no predilection for either. It is not a light she seeks, but one that she finds—the glow of a sickly green light or a pink-orange sky. Although we experience color sensations all the time, they are probably the experience we talk about the least. The reason for our reticence is simple

enough—color sensations often have to do with light, air, and surfaces, with the fleeting. We tend to focus on things rather than the inexpressible.

Color sensations are, of course, central to the history of modern painting. In the latter half of the 19th century, Claude Monet, Georges Seurat, and Paul Cezanne were preoccupied by light and air, finding innovative ways to structure their sensitivity to the constantly changing conditions of their immediate world. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, Henri Matisse, who was central to the Fauvists in 1905, structured color in pioneering ways. Speaking about the geometric abstractions she began making in California in the 1950s, Helen Lundeberg said, "My work has been concerned, in varying modes of pictorial structure and various degrees of representation and abstraction, with the effort to embody, and to evoke, states of mind,

moods, and emotions." In the 1960s, abstract painters such as...

Shards
2010
oil on canvas
56 x 72"



Out There
2009
oil on canvas
60 x 76"



Bloom
2009
acrylic and
oil on canvas
56 x 72"



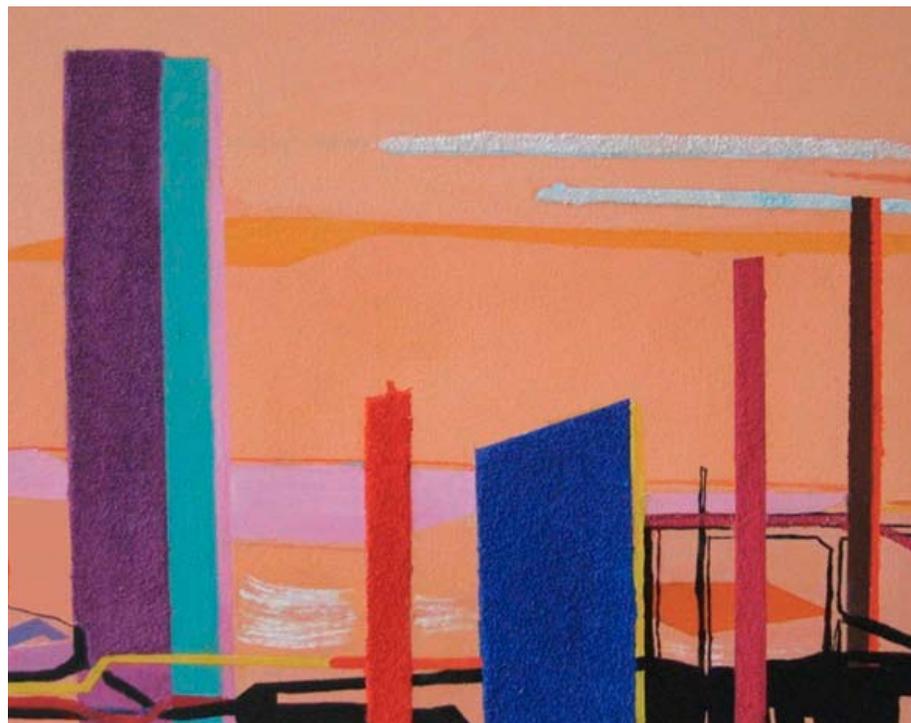
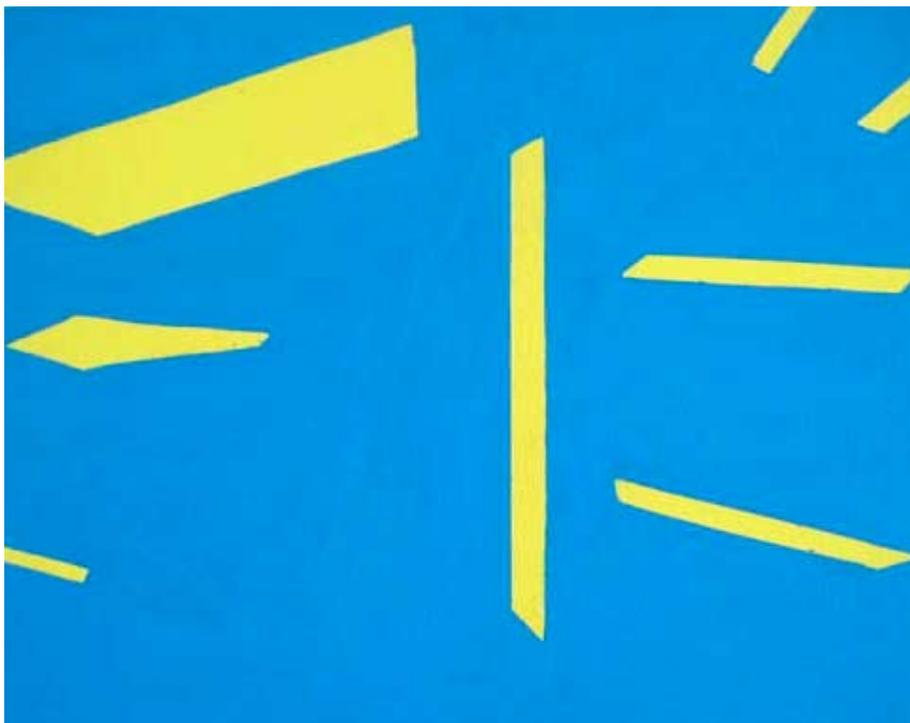
Jello Combat
2010
acrylic and
oil on canvas
56 x 72"





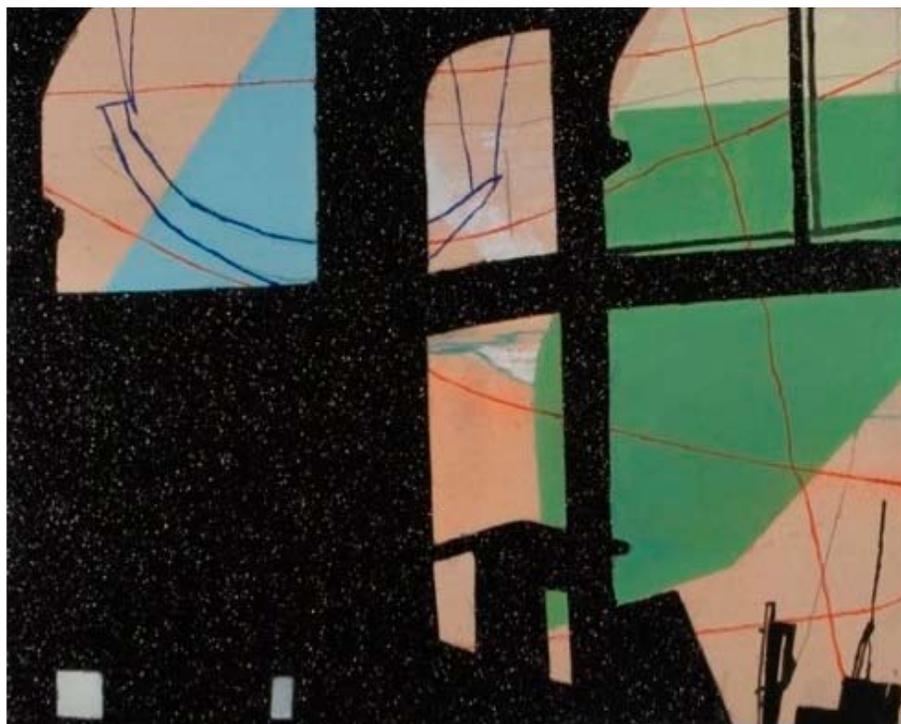
LEFT
Five Marks
2009
flashe on panel
14 x 18"

RIGHT
Cranes
2009
mixed media
on panel
16 x 20"



LEFT
Yellow Planes
2009
flashe on panel
14 x 18"

RIGHT
Orange Sky
2009
mixed media
on panel
14 x 18"



LEFT
**Mirrored
Building**
2010
oil on panel
20 x 16"

RIGHT
Black Glitter
2009
mixed media
on panel
16 x 20"



LEFT
Web
2010
flashe on panel
14 x 18"

RIGHT
Sci Fi
2010
oil on panel
14 x 18"

Billboard I
2008
oil on canvas
22 x 30"





Billboard II
2009
oil on canvas
22 x 30"

Swoosh
2009
acrylic on panel
21 x 26"



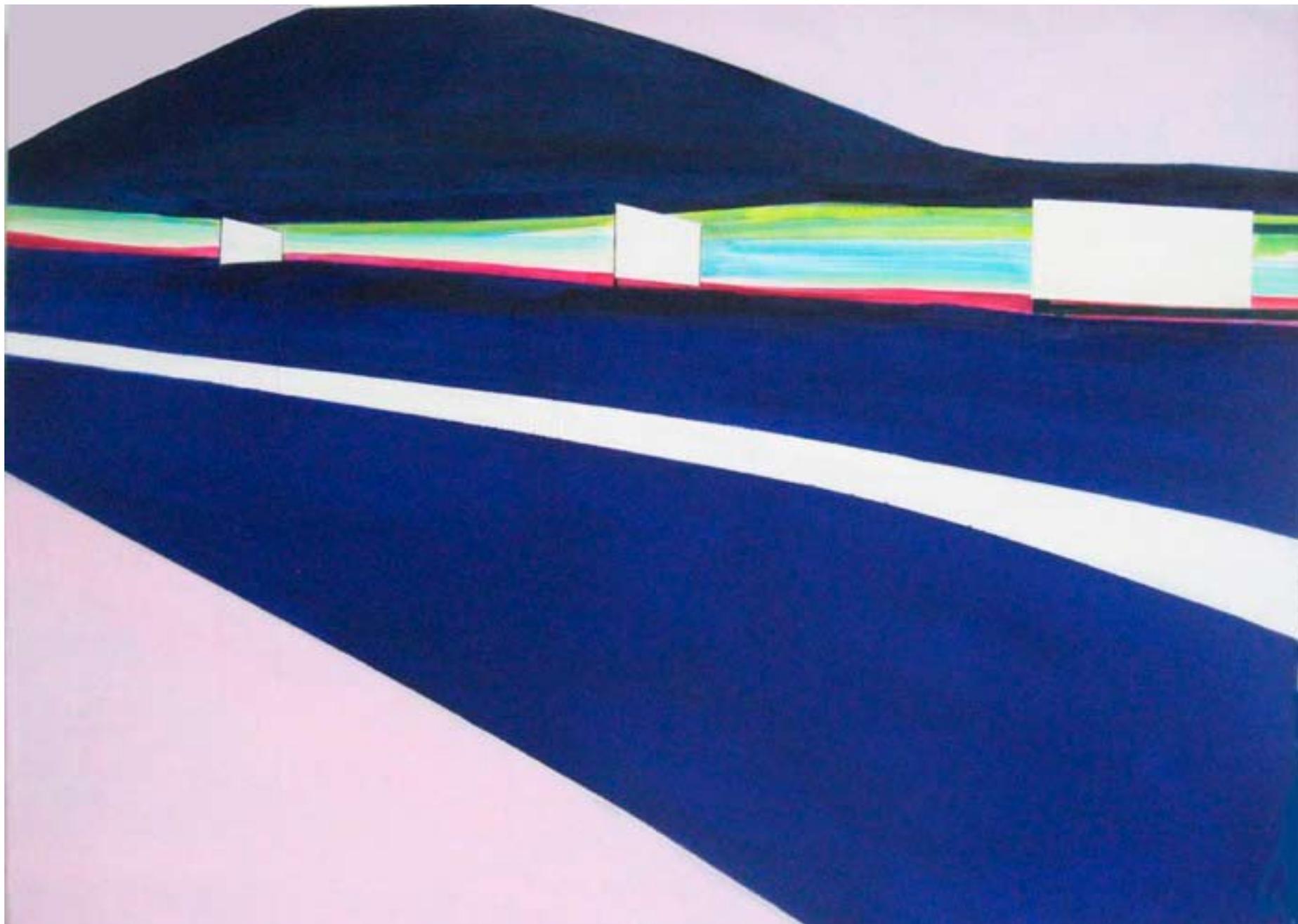


Cellophane
2009
oil on canvas
18 x 24"

Ferry House
2009
oil on canvas
30 x 40"



High Beams
2010
oil on canvas
32 x 42"



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LAURA NEWMAN has had solo exhibitions of her work at Lesley Heller Gallery, Bellwether Gallery, Tenri Gallery, Victoria Munroe Gallery, Vassar College and Randolph Macon College, and been included in many group exhibitions, at the National Academy of Art, the New Museum, the Weatherspoon Museum of Art, the Elizabeth Foundation Gallery, Exit Art, Jim Kempner Fine Art, Monya Rowe Gallery, Elizabeth Harris Gallery, among others, and most recently, at Big Small/Casual Gallery in Long Island City, and Janet Kurnatowski Gallery in Brooklyn.

Her work has been reviewed in *Artforum Magazine*, *The New York Times*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, and *Bomb Magazine*.

Newman has received fellowships and awards from the American Academy in Rome, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and the New York Foundation for the Arts.

She was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and educated at Cooper Union, the California Institute of the Arts, and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University. She teaches painting and drawing at Vassar College.



