

## EUGENE NEWMANN: SELECTIONS: THEN AND NOW

DAVID RICHARD GALLERY  
544 SOUTH GUADALUPE STREET, SANTA FE

### IN HIS LATE SIXTIES, EUGENE NEWMANN READILY BEGAN BARING HIS CONCERN

with the aging body. Almost all of his work refers to a body or bodies, but over the years his interest in the figure as an object of desire developed into an investigation of the body's varied dispositions. His early works were inspired by reclining nudes, which evolved into yogic bodies, and most recently into bodies near death. This current chapter distinctly swaps the female subject for the male as Newmann explores the most iconic dying body from art history—Christ. His recent exhibition at David Richard Gallery, *Selections: Then and Now*, includes over twenty paintings from the past thirty-five years that blur the line between portraiture and everything else. The figure is fairly consistently buried by layers of paint, barely recognizable as a malformed thing upon the surface, and

despite the latent threat of a body emerging amid the dominating ochers, blues, and reds, most of his work is, for all cataloguing purposes, abstract with only a handful of actual gesture drawings.

Newmann was a bit young for the Abstract Expressionist movement, and his contemporaries were those prominent abstract painters living in New Mexico in the seventies—namely Sam Scott and Frank Ettenberg. David Hill, who co-founded Collected Works Bookstore, started buying their (at the time) less conventional paintings, and many of the early works at David Richard Gallery are on loan from Hill's personal collection, namely the *Small Bodies* series, inspired by classical reclining nudes. *Small Bodies #1* is decidedly graphic and out of place amid

the more gestural works in the show but also stands as a threshold for Newmann's architectural elements that randomly hold space elsewhere in his work, reminding us that all these amorphous bodies still need a place to lie down.

Newmann's preoccupation with the yogic body is evinced in *Chakra's On Fire* (2003), not just in title but also in the stretching form whose limbs are literally on fire. From 2013, *Not Quite Out of the Woods Just Yet I* announces a lack of safety while inferring an eventual clearing, its title teetering metaphorically between dark and light. In Sanskrit, "nirvana" literally means "out of the woods," and in keeping with Newmann's interest in Eastern ideas this thirty-by-forty-inch horizontal suggests a humorous approach to old age in which Newmann unabashedly claims he is still whacking through the thicket, expecting to reach nirvana eventually. The painting itself tells a similar narrative. A profile bust in bone-white strangely and crookedly floats like a drowned sculpture haphazardly lodged in green, brown, black, and white brush marks—a brush that butts up against a luminous pale blue world. The earthly meets the heavenly as Newmann gruffly elaborates on this transitory corporeality.

*Falling, Falling, Fallen 3* (2008) references Christ's deposition from the cross, although it takes a hint from the artist to see the comparison. The limp body of Jesus partly or fully propped up as he is taken down from the cross makes the same rectangular bulge as the iconographic sap-green mass in Newmann's account. Beneath the non-representational image is the half-dead body, framed by crimson areas that take on bodily connotations. These complementary colors alone are so notable in Renaissance religious paintings that *Falling, Falling, Fallen 3* suddenly embodies a well-grounded exposition of a ripe mortality.

Newmann conceals the body by literally abstracting the human form and coaxing it elsewhere so that it is often recognizable only as some kind of ghostly landscape. In the New Mexico PBS series *iColores!*, which features Newmann, he recalls how in the sixties and seventies artists were asked to take sides on the issue of abstraction. They had to mount their flag and stay there. Today's freedom to cross-pollinate aesthetic traditions leaves an artist with a very flexible narrative—but a narrative nonetheless. As Newmann continues to bum around in the woods with the rest of us, his delineations seem to probe at this problem of subjectivity. *Selections: Then and Now* is thus a selection of self-portraits groping for the other side.

—HANNAH HOEL



Eugene Newmann, *Falling, Falling, Fallen 3*, oil on canvas, 27¼" x 22", 2008