

Morgan Presents

Essay published in the artist's monograph,
alongside an essay by critic Martin Herbert.
January 2023, pp.



Rebecca Ness & The Anatomy of Painting

All paintings hold secrets. Some paintings, like some individuals, are loose-lipped, while others hold their own against centuries of persistent inquisition. There is little doubt that, even five hundred years later, a number of Italian Renaissance masterpieces still maintain their confidences. Rebecca Ness' paintings possess a confounding alchemy of transparency and illegibility. Her paintings serve as witnesses to history and records of our times, physically transcribing everyday artifacts such as newspapers, clothes and foodstuffs, as they simultaneously convey communal sentiments of the zeitgeist.

Morgan Presents

Ness is interested in the anatomy of painting, of the sinews and tendons that pull the muscles under the surface, of the architectural logic of composition and the chemical structure of paint, and how a historical medium such as oil-on-linen can be pushed to its contemporary limits. Just as independent biological systems—skeletal, muscular, lymph—coordinate to animate the human body, Ness' compositions consider the interaction of visual systems: from how an oil paint's chemical structure relates to color theory, to how light and reflection can be employed in the context of her image and subject matter.

Substantiating this anatomical understanding of Ness' paintings is our knowledge that the artist has observed surgeries from inside the operating theater at Yale New Haven Hospital, and maintains close relationships with numerous surgeons. Each Ness painting provides a snapshot of daily life, closer in nature to an X-ray of the forearm than a whole body scan. Despite their epic scale, Ness' paintings maintain a local concern, her focus on details driven by a fascination with how past experiences shape our character—asserting that a scar tells more about us than an open wound.

Much like scars, Ness' paintings are fragmented records of larger societal and individual identities. Her pictures involve themselves in the very histories they are recording, and while they can function as factual repositories—archiving the objects and text they depict—they relish their partial position and are by no means unbiased. Ness is acutely aware that the details she chooses to include or ignore represent a subjective judgment call made with imperfect information: as the author of an image can never know what may read as essential or trivial from the perspective of a future viewer. The works rarely convey an explicit agenda, political or otherwise, rather the activity of documentation itself becomes central to their purview. Ness recognizes that we are all biased witnesses to our own times, and one struggles to disentangle this impulse toward documentation from her Jewish upbringing and identity—which brings with it a profound cognizance of how any recorded detail might open up a world of future insights.

For Ness, the stakes of this exploration are essential. The primary purpose of her paintings is to draw us in as viewers, with the canvas' signature grand

Morgan Presents

scale playfully imbued with the potential for discovery while offering moments of reprieve in the varied textures across the skin of her figures. Our reading or takeaway is of secondary importance to Ness—getting us to care is primary.

—Morgan Aguiar-Lucander