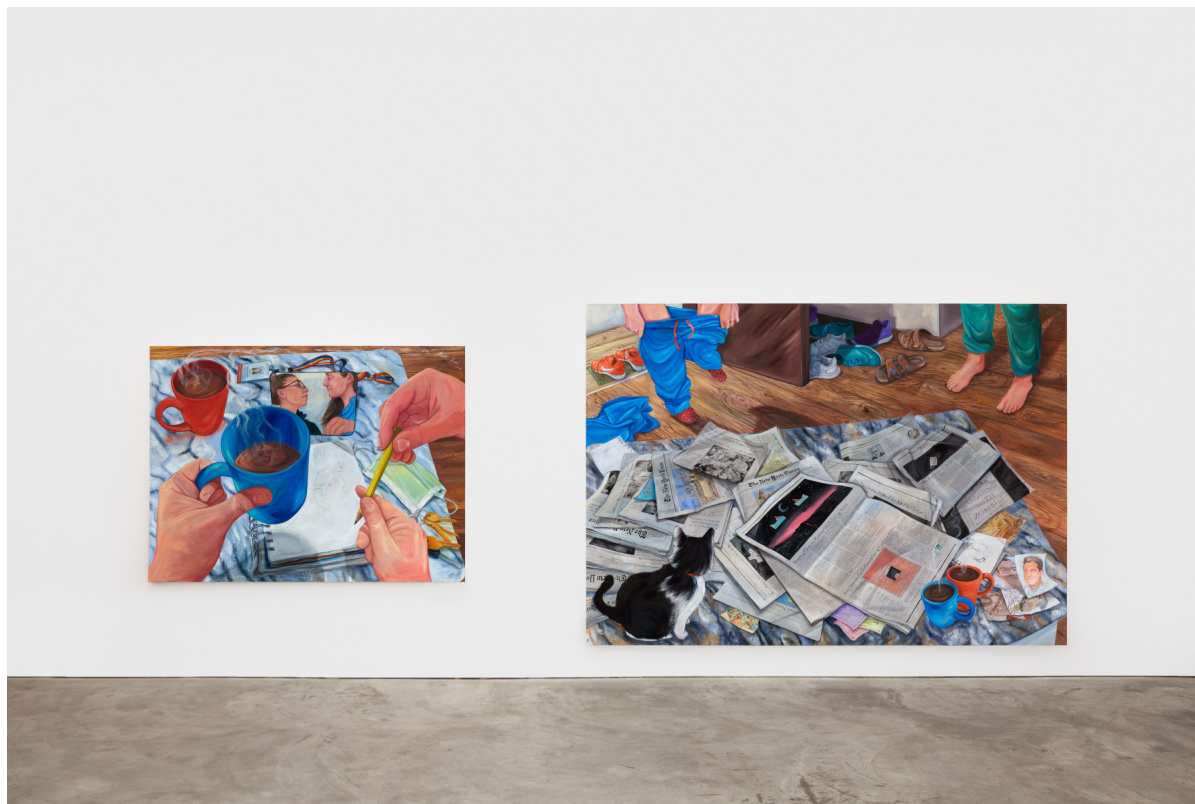


Morgan Presents

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Rebecca Ness: Pieces of Mind



Rebecca Ness: A Romantic Historian

In the exhibition *Pieces of Mind*, Rebecca Ness demonstrates her singularity as a painter best understood as a Romantic historian. These two classifications, while not contradictory, certainly do strike the ear as unfamiliar if not discordant together. Through considering each of these terms in turn, and finally what they mean together, we may reveal Ness' artistic philosophy—ultimately, how she sees the world.

We may understand Ness as a historian in her transcribing of our world, both in her recording of daily life and in her incorporation of documentary source material such as newspapers, clothes and branded paraphernalia. Her inclusion of technology, such as the open laptop in *I See You*, both speaks to an artist's approach in the 21st Century and will also surely serve to date the

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painting as time passes. Yet what does it mean to be a historian? Understanding Ness as a historian ascribes to her an activity, perhaps even a secondary profession, it also suggests that her work is imbued with a factual credibility, if not an outright impartiality. It is with this notion of factual credibility, or even reliability, where the juxtaposition to Ness' Romanticism comes to the fore.

As a Romanticist Ness belongs to a philosophy, an artistic and intellectual movement, as well as a unique understanding of the world; one where nature, objects and even individuals may all become instruments in the perpetual search for a sublime truth, something bigger than the parts themselves. By recognizing Ness' artistic nature as a Romantic historian, we begin to understand the mission of these works: why Ness chose these singular, unspectacular moments to present both a record of our times and to transmit an inherent tenderness, meant to push us as viewers to see beyond the moments themselves.

Ness presents a series of paintings whose subject matter is ostensibly remarkably unremarkable. The works depict moments from Ness' everyday life, but beyond that, she has chosen quiet, private moments that border on the mundane: a morning coffee; newspapers spread out over the kitchen island; a series of cropped action paintings, polishing glasses and twirling a pencil. This strand of documentation in Ness' practice, of providing an impartial transcript without any judgment of what may or may not hold relevancy to viewers through time, showcases her approach as a historian. Yet as academia has made clear, there is no such thing as impartial history; what we choose to record, in varying degrees of detail, all carry an implicit judgment statement that these things are worth transcribing. If Ness' sole ambition was to provide a document for posterity, it would only be natural to ask: Why these moments?

One answer can be found precisely in their domesticity, or their seeming ordinariness. These paintings serve as time capsules on both the micro and macro level. Yes they catalogue and record Ness' life in detail, from moments of tender everyday intimacy with her girlfriend Holly, to showing her possessions scattered across a tabletop, such as lanyards and art

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monographs. This series of paintings showcases her creative process: the painstakingly handmade artisan-like relationship Ness has with her work, something that comes through strongly in her inclusion of scrap sketches and discarded gouaches in the composition, and is further encapsulated in the application of the medium itself—with skin lines carved out of paint expanses using a delicate enamel nib.

By presenting this series of paintings of everyday moments, which together exists as a larger mosaic record of our times, Ness injects a sense of much needed nuance into our cultural dialogue. In the painting *Holly Coming Home*, Ness recreates and transcribes a number of newspaper articles from the *New York Times*; the headlines that stand out to us include ‘Staying Close to Partner While Living Apart’ (published April 30th 2020), ‘Lesbian Bars Still Thrive, at Least on TV’ (published May 7th 2020), ‘Pandemics End With a Bang, or a Whimper’ (published May 10th 2020). In a time where news, facts, and ultimately even a basic account of ‘what happened’ have become weaponized in the pursuit of partisan politics, Ness reasserts an inherent value in truth. By presenting all these headlines, ranging from discussions of the Coronavirus pandemic to television settings, Ness removes any explicit analysis and leaves this to the viewer; as if to say: Who knows what parts of this will seem essential to you in a month or a decade, but here is my world.

It is in this presupposition of a viewer, and Ness’ requiring of that viewer to engage and do the work to complete the painting, that reveals her fundamental Romantic nature. To misunderstand Ness’ ambition as solely a historian, tells only half the story. Ness’ artistic philosophy of revived Romanticism re-centers the act of creation as primal once again. Yes, Ness records these objects in her paintings, but they are only actualized by our engagement with them: we have to peer into these works to read the text on the newspapers and unlock their content; we have to search to find if a discarded sketch in a painting matches another painting in the show; we have to read the coffee cup on her desk in *I See You* to reveal the words “Connecticut: Still Revolutionary.” Ness invites us to see her creative process everywhere from the kitchen countertop to the studio floor, but not as observers, rather she involves us as participants. From the floor of her studio

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she looks back at us, not as an intruder or a distanced flâneur, but rather as a critic involved in the creative process, where our commentary and discourse might change the direction and evolution of the works on the walls before us. Ness involves us in the creative process of these paintings beyond our role as viewers. In engaging with the paintings, be it through reading newspaper text or hunting for visual clues, we activate these works and finalize their form.

This Romantic artistic philosophy is related directly to Ness' use of scale. At eighty-five by one hundred and twenty inches (215.9 x 304.8 cm) works such as *Holly Coming Home* and *I See You* are, on a domestic scale, enormous. Having said this, the size of these canvases does not impose upon us, but rather serves to invite us in. The paintings present a world unto themselves, allowing the viewer to read text and spot clues hidden in Ness' treasure trove of visual riches. That Ness has selected this epic scale speaks implicitly to what she believes is at stake: not the subject matter or the scene itself—but rather our experiential reality. Suffering and love are everyday experiences, not undergone on a mountaintop in solitude as imagined by Romantic painter Casper David Friedrich, but rather felt and lived in our homes, at our own kitchen countertops.

Rebecca Ness is an architect of scenes, spaces and ultimately emotions. Ness remains committed to her pursuit as a Romantic historian: recording our times, both in print and through the objects we live with, carries an importance beyond the object itself and seeks a larger truth. Ness gives us nuanced and affectionate everyday moments, on an epic scale, providing both a record of our times and yet leaving us to actualize these works through our engagement with them.

—Morgan Aguiar-Lucander