

The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago

Judy Ledgerwood

Cold Days

January 10 – February 21, 1999

Opening Reception:
Sunday, January 10, 4:00 to 7:00 pm

Related Events

Artist Talk

Sunday, January 10 from 5:00 to 6:00 pm led by Judith Russi Kirshner, Dean, College of Architecture and the Arts, University of Illinois at Chicago. This talk will take place in Cobb Hall Room 307, directly below the gallery. This event is free.

Concert

Friday, January 29, 8:00 pm
Vinko Globokar and Harry Sparnaay
with Ensemble Noamnesia

With over 80 compositions to his name, including works for soloists, ensembles, orchestras and choirs, Globokar has become an extraordinarily active force in contemporary music, not only as a composer but also as a musician. For three decades he has been composing works which combine theatricality and unconventional instrumental techniques to produce works which are characterized by a political and emotional poignancy, elegance, and humor. Globokar will be joined by the formidable bass clarinet talent, Harry Sparnaay and Chicago's Ensemble Noamnesia. This concert will feature works for soloists and small ensembles including trombone works performed by Globokar himself. This concert will take place in the gallery. \$15, \$12 members and students.

**The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago**
5811 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60637
Phone: (773) 702-8670
<http://www.renaissancesociety.org>

Museum Hours:

Tuesday–Friday: 10:00 am – 5:00 pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12:00 – 5:00 pm
Closed Mondays

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American Airlines is the official airline of The Renaissance Society's 1998-1999 Season.

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The Weeds of Winter

1998 marked a minor anniversary. Fifty years ago, Barnett Newman completed *Onement I*, his first “zip painting.” A small, vertical canvas with a warm, saturated umber field and a bright orange, painterly zip down its center, *Onement I* has aged gracefully. It bears no traces of the intellectual tumult evident in Newman’s writings of the period which are riddled with an anxious chauvinism. Not only did Newman consider *Onement I* a breakthrough with respect to his own artistic trajectory, the zip paintings were put forth as examples of a distinctly American strain of abstraction. Despite Europe having been decimated by World War II, based on Newman’s writings, it was with some skepticism that even the most sympathetic American artists would negotiate inheriting the mantle of Europe’s avant-garde painting tradition. In this respect, abstract expressionism was not so much an invention as it was a restless resolution of various strains of European modernism. Newman and his abstract expressionist colleagues were catalysts in distilling such styles and movements as cubism, abstraction, and surrealism into what was to become an American high modernism. For Newman, however, the distinction between European modernism and an American high modernism was more than simply a question of degree. In *The Sublime is Now*, an essay written shortly after he completed *Onement I*, Newman credits the “new American painting” with “completely denying that art has any concern with the problem of beauty and where to find it.” For Newman, the new American painting, unlike its European counterparts, had forsaken beauty with which it was at odds. In art historical hindsight, the “zip” in *Onement I* represents Newman’s attempt to sever abstraction’s ties with a European romantic tradition making *Onement I* the unwitting victim of a repressed beauty complex.

For the past decade, Judy Ledgerwood has produced a body of large-scale paintings which reassemble abstraction’s relationship with romanticism. Based on her work, Newman’s seemingly radical departure was actually a sustained effort lasting no more than two generations. This is not to say that Newman was unsuccessful. Although within a decade of *Onement I* abstract expressionism became a mannered artistic sensibility, the movement was successful in rewriting painting’s history on modernist terms – a fate about which Ledgerwood has no qualms. The scale, compositional devices, use of color and integrity to the flat picture plane that Ledgerwood exhibits in her paintings reveal her to be an unabashed high modernist. From her early, landscape-based abstractions to her later color-field works, Ledgerwood’s investigation into abstraction’s romantic roots and its repressed relationship to beauty is in no way contrary to the formal strategies developed by Newman and the New York School. But Ledgerwood’s work begins with much of what a figure such as Newman would deny. Ledgerwood’s work questions the extent to which beauty and high modernism were ever mutually exclusive. If they were, it was a temporary agreement. For Ledgerwood, what is ultimately at work behind abstract painting’s formalist aspirations, despite Newman’s proclamation, is visual pleasure.

For her exhibition at The Society, Ledgerwood has produced five new paintings based on winter light. In keeping with his statement on beauty, Newman placed a prohibition on nature-based abstraction. But again, Ledgerwood’s work serves to reinforce rather than contradict high modernism by relieving it of its anxiety over being considered beautiful. This means welcoming nature/beauty references, something she has done with open arms by making the paintings not simply beautiful but glamorous. The new works consist of a lilac-tone palette of subtly modulating fields of blue, green and brown all extremely muted so as to convey the sense of a pale winter light. In two of the paintings, Ledgerwood eliminates any remaining depth through the use of an iridescent paint which bathes the surface in a cold shimmering light. These paintings, however, are not color-field paintings in the truest sense in that Ledgerwood has incorporated the dot and circle motif she has been using for the past several years. The grid arrangement of the dots and circles, in conjunction with the subtle color modulations produces an effect reminiscent of watching the formation and zip of bubbles in a glass of champagne. Not only are these paintings iridescent they are also effervescent, adding elegance to their sense of glamour. Fifty years later, few would deny that Newman’s *Onement I* was anything but beautiful. Newman would be flattered with the way this painting has withstood its brief bout with history. It would force him to give beauty more credit as opposed to thinking of it as a cut flower whose life had expired. According to Ledgerwood’s logic, no self-respecting high modernist would ever think of beauty as a flower. On modernity’s terms, beauty is more akin to a weed sprouting in the playing field of arguments long since abandoned.

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US Postage
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Judy Ledgerwood
Freddy, detail
1998
oil on canvas
96 by 108 inches

back:
Judy Ledgerwood
Flamenco Sketches, detail
1998
oil on canvas
96 by 108 inches